AN UNACCOUNTABLE MASS: BOTHERSOME MATTER
AND THE HUMOROUS LIFE OF FORMS

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Fig 1.
AN UNACCOUNTABLE MASS:
BOTHERSOME MATTER AND THE HUMOROUS LIFE OF FORMS

ABSTRACT SUMMARY

This PhD articulates a range of strategies for engaging with sculptural processes, materials and philosophical concepts that address notions of intuition, not-knowing, excess, and humour. It approaches matter as vital and dynamic through the terms of the practice in which recuperated materials transform, agglomerate and de-form in order to bring about that which is unforseen. Large, mutating and small clustering sculptures – caught in a stage of intensification that appears as arrested development – came together for the exhibition the inexplicable magnetism of an alien object, with a series of photo-images tracking the variations of form as snapshot views that picture transition. Immersion in processes of making and unmaking produce an encounter with materials which effectively positions knowledge-production as a process which is fluid. There is an associated and inherently ethical dimension to this PhD which not only encompasses the notion of the studio and practice as ecosystems, but also demonstrates an ethics of not-knowing. This is manifest through a practice that refuses mastery over objects and materials and understands matter as always already situated within a series of processes and contexts. The thesis' contribution to knowledge is to reclaim and reposition an intuitive approach to sculptural practice to include other strategies and processes that are responsive to the provocations of materials and the temporal qualities of form.
THE ABSTRACT

This PhD is concerned with sculptural practice as an ongoing engagement with processes, materials and philosophical concepts that address the notions of excess, not-knowing and humour. The research sets out to develop a methodology and framework for practice that engages intuitive, open-ended, non-masterful, materials-led processes that bring about the unforeseen. One of the central questions that has emerged has been: how does the liveliness of matter inflect an approach to art practice that is material, durational and responsive to the provocations of excess?

The research was conducted through a studio-based sculptural practice which engaged matter as vital and dynamic and in which recuperated materials transformed, agglomerated and de-formed, pausing and intensifying into the exhibition the inexplicable magnetism of an alien object. Mutating clusters of sculptures were exhibited, renovated or recombined in an open-ended process in which no materials were wasted. A series of photo-images tracked the variations of form as snapshot views that picture transition. The theoretical research that was addressed related to: not-knowing and intuition and the unaccountability of process in art practice; mass as an excess and as that which is unaccountable or inexplicable; the capacity of materials to be bothersome in their affects to both the artist and the viewer; the aspects of art practice that attend to duration and the provocations of matter as something lively; humour, incongruity and slapstick as they contribute to a disruptive attitude to making and positioning art; the life of forms as they manifest through serial photographic imagery and multiple overlapping sculptural processes.

The various outcomes of this PhD project include: a recognition of the value of unresolved, enigmatic works that are resistant to the explication of meaning for their capacity to be continually bothersome; a deeper understanding of the operations of humour as it arises from the potential disruption of thought which is contingent upon an encounter (variously between the maker, the work and the viewer) with the unknown or unpredictable; the situation of practice within a broader theoretical space in which matter is conceived as indeterminate, dynamic and as always already situated within a process (linked to contemporary developments in ideas around ‘new materialism’); an understanding of
form as a snapshot of transition in process which never ends and only appears to be at rest leading to a more temporal appreciation of form as it emerges through practice; the development of an artistic methodology in which the provocation for practice comes from materials and their trajectories, combined with an underlying slapstick attitude inflected with ethical principles; the framing of the studio, and the open-ended practice that is embedded within it, as production of an eco system.

Immersion in processes of making and unmaking produce an encounter with materials that effectively positions knowledge-production as a process which is fluid. This contributes to an inherently political and ethical dimension of this project. The nature of this encompasses an artistic responsibility to: attend to the forces of the body and life that erupt as excess; to resist containment through instrumentalising categories of thought seeking to fix knowledge; to embrace the notion of the studio as ecosystem through a practice deeply implicated with the trajectories of all materials. Making art ethically can manifest through a practice that refuses mastery over objects and materials and understands matter as always already situated within a series of processes and contexts.

This PhD extends the field of sculptural practice and theory by discussing and synthesising a number of case studies examining artistic methodologies that are sympathetic to my argument for an indeterminate approach. This is further achieved by drawing on and utilising concepts from theories related to ‘new materialism’ to provide a new framework positioned as distinct from modernist or postmodernist discourses. This framework is underpinned by the imperatives to disrupt habitual reasoning; to think through materiality differently and to discern the potential for dynamism and unpredictability inherent in matter. An expanded understanding of an intuitive approach to practice (of working solely with feeling and self-expression) has arisen from the above-mentioned framework which positions the artist not at the masterful centre, but in the midst of a network of relations. Here intuition has been repositioned to include other strategies and processes that are responsive to the provocations of unpredictability, matter, excess, duration. This new understanding emerged through a vital synthesis of making and thinking coaxing each other into being.
DECLARATION

This is to certify that:

i  the thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD except where indicated in the Preface

ii  due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used

iii the thesis is fewer than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices or the thesis is [number of words] as approved by the RHD Committee.

Signature:

Sarah Jane crowEST
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All photographs of the exhibition the inexplicable magnetism of an alien object made by Andrew Curtis. Copyright: Sarah crowEST.
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INTRODUCTION

introduction to the title

an unaccountable mass: bothersome matter and the humorous life of forms is a thesis concerned with material, excess, not knowing, and humour. The title succinctly encompasses the entire project. It is concerned precisely with vital materiality, curious agglomerations and an absurdity that resists direct translation, in short, that which cannot be accounted for entirely. However, whenever I announce it people tend to look bewildered. This collection of words seems to quiver. There is the suggestion of substance, maybe something dense and solid but at the same time fugitive and irresponsible. There is the promise of a collapsing down into laughter in connection with absurd items, objects or shapes with a life or force of things vibrant in their materiality. Can I define the terms in a generous expansive way but still retain some of their delicious ambiguity and slippery potential for humour? These might better be described as in-definitions with simultaneous, oscillating meanings which serve to create a force-field around themselves delivering something which makes sense but teeters on the edge of other senses or no sense at all. Each chapter takes a word or phrase from the thesis title as the chapter title and opens with an exploration of the term. The words in the title, an unaccountable mass: bothersome matter and the humorous life of forms, although contributing to the formation of the structure via the chapter headings were, in fact, chosen as a group of words for their poetic insistence throughout the Phd. The enduring resonance of this collection of words is due to their capacity to carry fluctuating meanings casting shadows that threaten to undermine sense and increase uncertainty.

the structure of the dissertation

The most pressing concerns evoked in the title are concretised and expanded in the six chapters: unaccountable, mass, bothersome, matter, humour and life of forms. The six chapters are connected via the ideas and works that are manifest through the studio practice providing
multiple links that work to form a whole. For example humour is addressed in depth in chapter five but occurs across multiple sites in this research and could be said to emerge most noticeably within the art production and thereby constitute another, sometimes elusive, strand woven throughout the entire PhD. Similarly, this dissertation allows for a process of reflection on a selection of the works produced for the PhD exhibition the inexplicable magnetism of an alien object to arise in multiple locations through the text where there is a connection to the ideas under discussion. The exhibition was presented as a framework for temporary stasis or intensification of an open-ended and ongoing approach to making.

The six chapters, as follows, are set between this introduction and the conclusion. The preceding opening paragraph introduced the title with its compound words and signposts the way in which the terms are set to work in this dissertation. Each chapter begins with an introductory guide (chapter guide) and an expanded definition before proceeding to lay out a proposition, contextualisation and an argument using case studies of my work or that of other artists and theorists to ground the discussion. So the ‘definition – proposition – contextualisation – argument’ sequence ostensibly provides a tight structure, a ‘rigging’ on which to hang, or with which to corral the contents of each chapter. In practice, this attempt at throwing an evenly spaced net over the knowledge that has transpired has been disrupted by ‘shrinkages’ and emergent ‘bulges’ in unexpected places (the humour chapter kept bulging inexplicably even as I slashed and burned). From within this attempt at diligent containment something inevitably spilled over as a residue or remainder which the configuration could not quite accommodate and occasionally a category was eliminated or a proposition didn’t quite materialise in the anticipated form. The rigorous intention is there but such waywardness is inherent in this practice-led methodology which attempts to resonate with the tactics in operation throughout the project in which knowledge is not proscribed in advance. At the same time as I attempt to comply with the traditional way of constructing a dissertation I put this into question as I resist and struggle to erect what Gilles Deleuze disparagingly describes as “…propositions capable as serving as answers” or solutions. Rather than write myself off as too eccentric for the job I proceed regardless.

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1 It is always open to question, based on subjective analysis, where the humour lies within this project or if it
The overriding argument is for a particular kind of methodology for practice characterised by disruption, not-knowing and sustainability. There is an associated and inherently political, ethical and ecological dimension to this methodology which runs like a thread through the chapters. As such, the ethical imperatives have not formed a focal point in terms of theory but have developed like a gentle, but continuously disquieting, back-beat to production. These concerns involve a care about the trajectories and effects of materials and the importance of disrupting entrenched ways of thinking. Habitual modes of thought can lock us into patterns of making and using materials that are governed by what we have already learnt about them and what they are usually used for. This can close our experiments down into a series of set procedures for producing art. I hope to activate a curiosity about matter’s potential and a flexible way of working with it as one thing becomes another. This involves cultivating an unorthodox approach to the kinds of materials that might be brought into relationship with one another and a disregard for function most of the time.

the chapters

Here I will briefly lay out the concerns of each chapter. Chapter one, unaccountable, addresses the notions of not-knowing and unaccountability as intrinsic to process in art practice. These ideas are contextualised through Gertrud Sandqvist’s theories on intuition and the centre experience and an interview with the artist and Lacanian psychoanalyst Elizabeth Newman. The interview with Newman addresses intuition, minimal processes, the unconscious, not-thinking, jouissance, unknown knowledge, materials, ethics and trusting the process. In arguing for a materials-led methodology engendering the unforseen I

Deleuze sees this as common to the classic image of western thought which he puts into question because “…as long as the critique has not been carried to the heart of that image it is difficult to conceive of thought as encompassing those problems which point beyond the propositional mode; or as involving encounters which escape all recognition; or as confronting its true enemies, which are quite different from thought; or as attaining that which tears thought from its natural torpor and notorious bad will, and forces us to think.”


3 Through undertaking this PhD research and deeply questioning my motives at every turn, I have come to realise that through my teenage years as a punk rocker and art student in London in the 1970s I absorbed a critical, underground attitude towards authority, convention, and mainstream tastes. I have been operating for several years under the impression that most contemporary artists shared a desire to question and break down habitual structures. I was wrong. Addressing these concerns in depth is beyond the scope of this PhD but my perspective inflects my methods and inevitably seeps through into my writing and making. It has been pointed out to me that it manifests as a negativity towards the art world and I admit I am highly critical of its conventions but relish making things so much that I continue to engage with it, if somewhat idiosyncratically.
discuss processes and approaches to production that lead to the exhibition the inexplicable magnetism of an alien object.

Chapter two, mass, oscillates around a notion of mass as it comes to be modified by the verb ‘unaccountable’ and the contexts where mass is figured as an excess demanding attention. The contexts of an artwork by Guillermo Faivovich and Nicholas Goldberg based around a meteorite fragment called el taco and the notion of ‘uncontrolled shaping’ as explored by the artists Giraud and Siboni are addressed. ‘Trash art’ is briefly considered followed by a case study of my work my dead dad’s reminders and remains. The practice of the artist Tal R is then examined for its excessively vertiginous mass of influences and materials leading to an appraisal of recycling and ‘never-endism’ in the practice of Masato Takasaka where works are continuously unmade and the elements reconfigured.

Chapter three, bothersome, attends to the capacity of materials and art works to be bothersome or insistent in their affects. The undecidability surrounding bothering is contextualised through three case studies on the practice of the artist Gedi Sibony, on my work titled Channeling Gedi Sibony and on my informal exhibition titled the things they are unbothered.

Chapter four, matter, foregrounds a conscious and responsive relationship to matter and materials as they exist within a large web of forces. An approach to art practice that is material, durational and responsive to the provocations of excess and the ecological is considered in relation to the philosophy of Elizabeth Grosz. Notions of excess as they relate to becoming artistic and becoming other are explored before a brief explication of Henri Bergson’s concept of philosophical intuition and its rigours. Duration and becoming are addressed in relation to practice and then, in contextualising the importance of materials to this PhD, the process of use and reuse are articulated via studio procedure as production of ecosystem.

Chapter five, humour, emphasises the difficulty of pinning anything down in the vast and incommensurable field of ideas surrounding humour. To further our understanding of the sense in which the term humour has been used in this PhD, humour and irony are deconflated. Incongruity is contextualised in relation to my work 17 nasty little brown things
and 16 beautiful little browns things. Humour, as it is figured through slapstick is addressed drawing on the texts of Jörg Heiser and Brian Dillon. Slapstick is then considered for its potential to contribute to an artistic methodology through a case study of my work mound activity.

Chapter six, life of forms, advances the concept of sculptural form as lively and always mobile. Fishli and Weiss’ photographic series Stiller Nachmittag is briefly addressed with Henri Focillon’s text The Life of Forms in Art, for their formative contribution to the direction of this PhD. The focus then turns to my photographic series transformations of matter followed by a study of the sculptor Phyllida Barlow attending to the life of forms as they emanate through process. Connections are forged between my own and Barlow’s open-ended working practices that involve: not-knowing, instability, excess, re-use of materials and sculptural elements, intermittent extra-rapid construction and thinking, the subversion of the monumental, ephemerality, duration in materiality, hands-on and hands-off approaches to production, the humorous encounter and the potential absurdity of practice.

introduction to the dissertation

Writing this dissertation was analogous to trying to hit a moving target. Despite resolute intentions and genuine attempts to exercise extreme rigour and sharpen the focus (using words) on discreet points arising from practice – it was the practice that continually led me towards those things hovering at the very edges of the quantifiable and qualifiable. In recognising the tensions inherent in grappling with these divergent forces I cultivated an approach which allowed the positions of working in an intuitive and open-ended way and the emergent strategies for framing such a practice to seep through the text which is by turns lucid and obfuscating in nature. I then proceeded to flag these positions as they arose.

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This PhD is comprised of a practice-led (that may be more accurately described as materials-led\(^5\)) engagement informed by a theoretical investigation. It stages an introduction of time into matter, not-knowing into process and humour and life into forms. Its principle aims have been to develop and articulate a particular kind of methodology for a material practice that is ethical, contingent, open-ended and not predetermined.

The project is contextualised as sculptural\(^6\) having transpired through an emergent concentration on materiality in my practice throughout this PhD and indeed the project is sculptural in the sense that it does involve the appearance of material and objects in time and space. Placing materiality as a central concern of the practice whilst refusing a masterful position over materials, as I do in this PhD, might once have been conceived as a challenge to an older, traditional idea of sculpture which involved pre-determined processes of carving and casting to form or shape materials. However, mastering materials is no longer the predominant treatment in the medium-specific field of sculpture and this allows me to position my practice within the multiplicity of contemporary approaches to sculpture\(^7\). In refusing mastery over materials I am not positioning my role as an artist as entirely passive and lacking agency. Rather a gentler more watchful approach has emerged that tends to matter over time without predetermined outcomes. These sculptural contexts will be expanded in chapter two mass, chapter four matter and chapter six life of forms in this dissertation.

On a practical level the project has been concerned with the idea of relinquishing a particular form of pre-planned control over particular materials and over their transformation and movement as it emerges through process. I am experimenting with the

\(^5\) I use the term 'materials-led' to highlight the fact that, as the PhD progressed (and I gave myself entirely over to proceeding without knowing what I was doing), the works increasingly evolved in response to the materials that accumulated almost inadvertently in my studio.

\(^6\) My practice, previous to this PhD, avoided medium-specificity and ranged freely across categories and media using painting, textiles, performance, film, video, photography and 3-d object production. This situated the practice in a broad-based field of contemporary art operating with a 'by any means necessary' approach to realising ideas. Situating this PhD in the field of sculptural practice has raised many questions related to medium specificity and my avoidance of it on the one hand and then how I embrace it on the other. These questions are beyond the scope of this dissertation.

position an artist can take in relationship to process and sculptural production where the form and structure is not something imposed from outside on inert matter but teased into shape by allowing the material forces to emerge. Decisions are being made all the time but from an open position of being ‘in the middle’\(^8\) of, and from being responsive to the directions that proliferate in the process.

**background for this practice**

Let me begin with the foundation and impetus for the project and then proceed to explain what has transpired over the course of the PhD. My art practice has always involved process-intensive object making emanating from dark psychological spaces redolent with anxiety about the human condition and the global environmental crisis. (I am pessimistic about the situation regarding climate change and the implications for the health of the earth and I am prone to becoming despondent from the weight of the ethical burden we collectively carry to care and act.) Weaving through the artistic output that followed suit, there had been a pervasive but unacknowledged element of absurdity masking a more serious intent. I began the PhD by questioning audience responses to my exhibited offerings. Why are they laughing? Where does this humour come from, how does it work and what is it good for? What function does humour have in dealing with pressing and burdensome ethical and ecological issues?\(^9\) How is humour practiced through art and where does my work fit in this context? For me, the humour arose or erupted in my work through an intuitive almost non-thinking process resulting in scant awareness on my part of how it operates. The pertinent parts of the early research of this PhD concerning humour will be laid out in the dissertation chapter five humour with an emphasis on discerning a particular notion of humour which is distinct from irony and on slapstick which is acknowledged as an important underlying contributing factor to my practice and

\(^8\) This is a Deleuzian concept that comes from his rhizomatic image of thought as opposed to the arborescent image. The “rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo” Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (1988) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, (London, Athlone Press) p 25

\(^9\) The vast amount of research (potentially another PhD!) undertaken to address these questions will not be presented in its entirety in this dissertation but a focus is retained in the chapter humour on those aspects that impacted most on the practical output. Research ranged from Freud and Bataille’s writing on humour to philosophical theories concerning superiority, release and incongruity to humour from an art historical perspective such as to be found in Dada and Surrealism to humour’s increasing manifestations in contemporary art. See bibliography.
life view. Slapstick is conceived as an abiding response to the fact that life is physical and therefore has some bearing on my sculptural output. This is expanded in chapter five humour in the section slapstick.

As I set out to explore the creative potential of humour and disquiet through outlandish objects, my studio experiments taught me that I was barking up the wrong tree by focussing too intently only on the theme of humour. An interim project title the humorous life of forms: scenes and encounters with bothersome matter began to track the shift of attention to the energy of materials within the practice, and the emerging emphasis on that which might be considered bothersome. This occurred both in the sense of bothersome material excess and presence, and that which is unquantifiable and not knowable. It also comes at a time of increasing interest in what is currently being described as the ‘New Materialism’ and the agency of matter. Theorists such as Jane Bennett, Elizabeth Grosz, Manuel De Landa and Gilles Deleuze have been influential on my thinking in this area.  

Humour proved resistant to strategic enquiry (conceptual mastery) through practice. It had been something essentially unruly, emerging unbidden in unexpected places, and needed to remain so to retain the crucial element of surprise, and to operate like a short circuit for both myself as producer and for the viewer. Therefore the PhD research moved to working with the indeterminate and embracing not-knowing as a strategy whilst immersing myself in flows of matter. These approaches to production and their theoretical contexts will be addressed in the dissertation chapters one unaccountable and three bothersome. In coming to understand matter as something insistently provocative in its dynamism (an

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Although it should be noted that in this last publication Grosz stated that, in exploring a framework that looks beyond human constructs of culture and language to one in which natural and animal geographies and temporalities provide the context, she does not position her project as ‘new materialism’. Rather, Grosz prefers to “…understand life and matter in terms of their temporal and durational entwinements. Matter and life become, and become undone. They transform and are transformed. This is less a new kind of materialism than it is a new understanding of the forces, both material and immaterial, that direct us to the future.” p 5

11 An attempt to clarify a strand of humour, as it hovers in my imagination and resists definition, is undertaken in chapter five humour through a process of deconflating humour and irony.
idea which has been informed by my theoretical investigations into the aforementioned New Materialist philosophies) I tended to take a non-dominant, co-active role with materials accepting and recuperating the ‘stuff’ that came my way. This methodology is expanded and contextualised further in the dissertation chapter four matter and chapter five life of forms.

Despite being shifted off centre, the aforementioned chapter humour maintains a substantial presence in the dissertation because it builds on a body of knowledge gained via preliminary research that, although now rejected as the key theme that orients the project as a whole, provided so many points of encounter to think and move into the ‘zone of not knowing’. At times this large chapter seemed somewhat anomalous and therefore bothersome which in turn, in the context of my dissertation, validated hanging on to it. In tackling case studies of my own work through the lenses of humour theories of incongruity and slapstick, I have come to value its disruptive and productive place in my PhD. A strong connection is maintained via the idea that laughter can often arise at that towards which we have little understanding or find difficult to confront.

The pull and push of the often divergent research interests arising from the studio practice and the theory provided endless thought-provoking confusion. However, the disparate elements connect up in multiple ways via the studio practice as evidenced through the exhibition and documentation of work.

Why has this PhD transpired or emerged? In addition to the aforementioned early quest to understand the operations of humour arising in my work I advance the insistent provocations of matter arising through my materials-led practice with its potential congruence with New Materialist philosophies as an important motivation. Two divergent forces arising from practice and from the desire to position the practice and it outcomes (through conduits for reception such as exhibitions, proposals and statements) provided the engine for the research to move forward and grow. The first provocative force came in the form of an energetic, almost unceasing delight in immersive processes of making by bringing together matter-at-hand in an open-ended, experimental and playful way. This reflected a desire to just make work intuitively and in an entirely unaccountable way. The other bothersome force compelling the drive towards new knowledge occurred through a
dissatisfaction with positioning my artistic output as uniquely expressive (as in an ‘inspired’
genius mode). There arose a productive tension between, on the one hand wanting to
embrace the freedom of not-knowing what I was doing to follow the energetic flows, and
on the other, resisting the position of ignorance or a non-reflective approach to practice. A
new understanding was sought whereby a practice might be positioned in a different kind
of relationship to knowledge where the emphasis is on embodiment, engagement and
hapticity. This new understanding endeavoured to move away from imposing a constricting
representational logic onto form and towards sharing something about those things that
hover on the edge of knowledge or beneath consciousness.
Fig. 3, 26 things tending towards white, 2012
CHAPTER ONE: UNACCOUNTABLE

chapter guide:

I begin with a fluid definition of the differing ways in which the word ‘unaccountable’ has come to be used in this dissertation. Whilst unaccountability can be employed to discuss mass, material, objects, forms and persons these are drawn out elsewhere in the dissertation, in this chapter, it is the unaccountability of process that is addressed. The proposition here is loose and directed towards opening up a space for the discussion of not-knowing and unaccountability as intrinsic to process in art practice. This is then contextualised through Gertrud Sandqvist’s theories on intuition and the centre experience (as an alternative to the ‘inspired’ position of the unknowing artist/genius) followed by a case study comprised of an extensive interview with the Melbourne artist and Lacanian psychoanalyst Elizabeth Newman. The sculptor Phyllida Barlow is briefly introduced into the discussion signalling her importance to the PhD which is expanded in chapter six life of forms. The interview with Newman addresses intuition, minimal processes, the unconscious, not-thinking, jouissance, unknown knowledge, materials, ethics and trusting the process. In arguing for a practice-led methodology engendering the unforseen I present a case study, focussing on the processes and approaches to production that lead to my PhD exhibition the inexplicable magnetism of an alien object. This unfolding of my immersive studio-based processes reveals the ways in which elements of uncertainty and the unknown are embraced by fostering the emergence and generation of unexpected connections between things. The chapter concludes with the recognition of the value to be found in working in ways that are difficult to account for and the pressing necessity to articulate a framework for such a practice.

definition:

That which we describe as ‘unaccountable’ is difficult in terms of how we might know it or predict its behaviour. The difficulty might lie in its strangeness and resistance to categorisation or in its very irresponsibility and refusal to be subordinated to a net of controlling ideas. In relation to the noun ‘mass’ in the title of this PhD, the adjective
‘unaccountable’ is used to describe that which “cannot be accounted for or explained; inexplicable”\(^{12}\).

Unaccountable can also be used “…of persons: Difficult to account for or make out; of a strange or puzzling disposition”.\(^{13}\) At risk of anthropomorphising matter, (which I will avoid for the time being\(^{14}\)), I bring that definition of unaccountable to bear in relation to mass and material that may include the inorganic and definitely non-human. This connects to an engagement with material that foregrounds vitality and the notion of agential matter (or matter/energy) as proposed in chapter four \textit{matter}. This will become clearer in the unfolding of this dissertation.

There is also another sense of ‘unaccountable’ of interest and that is, “not liable to be called to account; irresponsible”.\(^{15}\) The dictionary definition states that this can apply to persons not responsible for results or consequences. In choosing to blur the lines between living and allegedly ‘inert’ non-human things, we might again risk ascribing human attributes to non-human things by perceiving that the qualities and behaviours of, for example, both a woman and a rock are similarly unpredictable and therefore might appear reckless. This definition (in addition to its usefulness in describing the vagaries of matter and things) resonates with the position of the artist regarding accountability which inflects this chapter. Unaccountable retains its modifying potential when combined with a word such as ‘mass’ but in addition when applied to humans this sense of unaccountability connects to ideas weaving through this dissertation (but not foregrounded) concerned with artistic autonomy and freedom\(^{16}\). The unaccountable is figured here as something which, through practice and production resists the pinning down of meaning, resolving and finishing by choosing to remain in a loop of open-endedness.

\(^{13}\) ibid.
\(^{14}\) This is addressed further in chapter six \textit{life of forms} in the section \textit{definition: life}
\(^{15}\) ibid.
\(^{16}\) Over the last decade I observe that artists have been increasingly required to become more accountable as expectations of professionalism have increased. Whilst I think it is very important for artists to develop their voice and own their ideas in general, the pressures of making, installing and producing texts can snowball around an exhibition event necessitating a forcing of a verbal or written statement to be delivered without time for reflection. This constitutes a pressure that I find problematic. In turn, this contributes to my desire to research frameworks for articulating an open-ended, unresolved artistic process without being ungenerous.
**proposition:**

Working intuitively from the middle, through experimentation without pre-determined outcomes opens up a space for the unaccountable as part of an open-ended approach to production.

A position of unaccountability with regard to making and meaning is not only an important ethical stance but also one that is intrinsic to my work. There are techniques and methods of discussing the inexplicable aspects of artistic process and its outcomes that allow unaccountability to remain in play, and the exploration of these are discussed in this chapter.

**contextualisation:**

In this section about practice and the unaccountable (in its many forms) I reflect on approaches involving intuition and *the centre experience* through Gertrud Sandqvist (with which I find congruence to my own approach to practice). In addition, the conceptual framework of the artist Elizabeth Newman is examined with an emphasis on questions of knowing/not-knowing and resistance in terms of divulgence and explication. The practice of the British sculptor Phyllida Barlow is briefly introduced and will be further addressed in chapter six *life of forms*.

**intuition or silent knowledge**

Sometimes I think my work just doesn’t have a meaning. It just is. It is a collection of actions and maybe those actions begin to have meaning at some point but I never know where that point is.17

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Phyllida Barlow has a practice firmly rooted in process, touch and a profound relationship to making. Although she is productive and proceeds with much energy, she is unable to comprehend or articulate much about the works significance. Is this kind of ‘not knowing’ whilst practising with seeming intent something that can be described as an intuitive approach to art making?

Many artists speak of working according to ‘intuition’ which can seem to be both a subtle and a powerful guiding force. Decisions based on instinct or gut feeling often lead to the artist being unable to articulate what is going on within particular works or entire practices. When pressed, an artist might disavow conscious intent, perhaps instead privileging notions of embodiment in making artwork. This appearance of not-knowing might be characterised as ignorance but can also be understood as a different kind of knowing.

Gertrud Sandqvist offers an explanation of intuition that has been formulated with a deep awareness of a broad range of artistic practices acquired as an experienced art educator and writer.

Accumulated experience that is not immediately accessible to language, but which does affect our consciousness, is usually called intuition. An intuitive choice is thus as conscious as a considered choice, it simply uses aspects of consciousness that are not accessible to language. It cannot say, but it can show.

Whenever any form of knowledge that has been acquired through means other than language is to be assessed or applied to something else, this is done, I think, by making intuitive choices. Another term for it could be 'silent knowledge'. I believe these intuitive choices are crucial to what the artist sees, and thus to the question/problem/possibility that he or she wants to address in the artwork. It then becomes inappropriate to ask a variety of questions, because they cannot be explored in a relevant way within the context of the work. Without the hand’s familiarity with the material that has always played a crucial role in people's ability to replace dream images with factual skills, these choices cannot be made.

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18 Gertrud Sandqvist, professor in the theory and history of ideas of visual art at Lund University, Sweden, was an influential teacher during my studies at Maumaus, Escola des Artes Visuais, Lisbon, Portugal 2007 to 2008

Sandqvist refers here to the artist’s experience and proficiency with materials which allows a certain freedom to work fluidly in a way that requires little concentration on technique. This deliverance can thereby allow the artist greater freedom to access liminal spaces and bring forth unforeseen images or forms. This is also worth considering in the light of many contemporary practices that are consciously de-skilled and tend towards the inexpertly made. The ‘skills’ bought into play, in such cases might consist of a highly developed and acute ability to notice subtle differences.

When a visual artist claims that he or she does not think, this very rarely implies some form of somnambulant state. It means that he or she uses experiences that are not accessible to language other than through a reconstruction of a course of events. Understood in this way, intuition becomes a composite term for an active, demanding way of experiencing and reworking reality.

If experience produces or engenders intuition, and it is a short cut to some already acquired knowledge, then perhaps I could counter-argue, it is not to be entirely trusted in an artistic practice because of its potential to hinder experimentation. Intuition as that which we know deeply as a kind of embodied knowledge might lead the artist to become more deeply entrenched in habitual movements. Even as I argue in favour of an intuitive approach to practice I recognise we must be alert to the possibilities of the habitual in the intuitive when using it as a catch-all explanation for unaccountable activities.

For me, and perhaps for a sculptor such as Phyllida Barlow, intuition seems to offer an explanation or excuse for when one is lost for words about what one has made. A term to be utilised when one is surprised by the experience of what Barlow describes as “…stalking something that is not there, or something that is there, but is unknown, and then, when it is there, still not knowing.” Barlow once stated:

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20 I have many skills particularly in the textile and pattern making area that I deliberately try to undo or subvert to avoid tight and highly crafted output in favour of a rougher aesthetic.
It is not knowing that makes me a compulsive liar. I do not know where my work comes from. I can only guess that it is some sort of play with something out there; visible and in there; invisible. Whether this is true or not I do not know and I do not care.\textsuperscript{23}

The ‘compulsive lying’ is something I learnt to do as an undergraduate art student (in artist statements) as a foil to exempt myself from the pressure to explicate or fulfill requirements whilst I continued to experiment with open-ended possibilities. This could be described as a dissembling strategy that arises when one is required to be accountable in some way but lack the capacity to position one’s activities in all their glorious unaccountability. This PhD attempts to negotiate this space and Elizabeth Newman offers us some insight into how this might occur the following section of this chapter. Becoming adept at concocting plausible back-stories or indulging in post-intentionality can facilitate a smooth ride through art school. Lying is a strong word for this behaviour and I’ve always thought of it as a benign form of resistance. That resistance doesn’t come from a place of wanting to deceive but from not knowing quite what to say and being reluctant to pin it down with words that are inadequate.

Is relying on somewhat unquantifiable terms, like intuition and inspiration to account for the work we make unknowingly akin to the operations of an artistic ‘genius’? In her quest to avoid such a singular condition Sandqvist has explored an alternative framework.

\textit{the centre experience}

Whilst recognising that romantic (and questionable) notions of the genius artist can be linked to the intuitive approach, I detect that something about this ‘special’ state remains useful and attractive to many artists. It helps in avoiding self-criticism as the ‘inspired’ artistic genius doesn’t ‘know’ anything (as opposed to genius in other areas such as science which require exceptional intellectual and creative powers). Although it is generally recognised today that the idea of the brilliant artist-as-genius is an outmoded construct it can form a desirable position for an artist allowing great freedom from accountability (even if adopted with an inflection of irony) – an autonomous agency. Sandqvist explains, art from the last 25 years “has more or less been understood and investigated through filters

\textsuperscript{23} ibid. p 85
provided by post-colonial, feminist or postmodern theory”[24]. Sandqvist draws our attention to an increasing number of important art projects that do not sit so easily within these safe frameworks of understanding. Observing that this applies increasingly to much contemporary work and particularly that of many younger artists, Sandqvist discerns that “In every major edifice of understanding there is something that spills over, a residue that remains impenetrable in relation specifically to that structure”. [25] Sandqvist alights upon the term the centre experience to frame an artistic position that cannot easily explain itself (that none-the-less might seem genius-like in its reliance on unaccountable inspiration and intuition). The centre experience offers an alternative to the extraordinary state of ‘the genius’ for those artists “who assert their right to work and to be understood independent of genres and categories”[26] but don’t frame their experience as exceptional. Sandqvist’s argument is not pointed against the entire notion of the artist as inspired and unaccountable genius but in recognising the flaws in this construct she is attempting to define a position for the artist that does not fully know what they are doing beyond such a category.

Sandqvist derives the term via descriptions by two unconnected artists writing 40 years apart that I re-quote below. The first is from Eva Hesse who, somewhat awkwardly, tended to be lumped in with the minimalists that formed her milieu despite something of the unknown, connected to desire, that seeped into her work.

Art is an essence, a centre. I am interested in solving an unknown factor of art and an unknown factor of life. My life and art have not been separated. They have been together. [27]

The second is from Hanna Paulin’s masters program essay from Malmo Art Academy (2008) where Sandqvist teaches.

I could not think forward. I could not think backwards. My mind was blurred, out of focus, but at the same time completely clear. I was cut off from the surroundings. Closed to impressions and expressions. I was in the middle of a kind of centre of existence. The feeling

25 ibid. p 21
26 ibid. p 26
was very clear, and very distinct. I was in an indeterminable place, a place which does not exist on any maps, and does not exist in any country. There were no countries. At the same time, I was fully aware that I was obviously, physically located in a specific, geographical place. The same place that I had been at half an hour ago, and that I would be at half an hour later.28

Sandqvist’s centre experience is posited as an alternative condition to the exceptional state of the artist as someone special, as ‘genius’ or shaman. A counter-argument could highlight that the use of the term ‘centre’ brings with it an unintended residual attachment to the individual, isolated masters of the past existing at the centre of their/the world. It’s easy to conflate Sandqvist’s observations and resulting terminology with ideas of artistic autonomy and the central, lone figure of the artist. However the experience of being at ‘a centre’ described above also suggests being in a zone or midst of a moving current which can be connected to a more fluid way of thinking offered by Deleuze and Guattari29 whereby the subject enters into the flow, asserts multiplicity and welcomes encounter. Sandqvist has expanded on her idea of the centre experience as involving a fecundity and knowledge about how to make a creative work grow, something haptic, unpredictable and fruitful that is close to immanence.30 This approach offers the potential to expand an idea from the middle, through experimentation, opening up to multiple possibilities and open-ended forces, unfettered by convention and cliché. This is a position with which I find congruity.

waiting for inspiration

Phyllida Barlow (and I would place myself alongside her in this approach) describes a process of pushing through with the making, proceeding with actions that are almost always more than seems to be required (this is discussed further in chapter six life of forms). There is perhaps something compulsive going on here that revels in the repetition and hard work of making and doing rather than watching and waiting for inspiration. Barlow, like me, assembles her sculptures intuitively and that intuition is developed through processes that engender the unforeseen.

30 This discussion occurred in a seminar context at Maumaus, Lisbon, Portugal during 2008
Let us now turn to the practice of Melbourne-based artist Elizabeth Newman. Like Newman I place great value on proceeding in art practice with awareness but also with not-knowing. Unlike Barlow and myself, Newman does not ‘stalk’ her work via processes of excessive making but hangs back in watchful anticipation for the right time for it to emerge.

**case study # 1 not-knowing and the practice of Elizabeth Newman**

I concluded my 2007 masters thesis with following quote from Newman which still resonates strongly with me today and inflects this dissertation with regard to artistic motivation: “…conscious intention, as we know, is only part of the process. No matter what an artist says their work is about, that’s not it.” This offered me reassurance that I am not entirely foolish for not knowing what I know and for vigorously engaging in art practice in a seemingly non-thinking way.

Newman’s practice is grounded in painting but is expanded to include both a materiality that is often sculptural and the presentation of objects as installation. References to the tropes of painting abound in wall-based works that variously consist of soft, geometric hangings and remnant fabrics combined with stretched, canvas formats. In experiencing Newman’s work I find I can say very little about it but it surprises and affects me as I respond to its material charge achieved with an unpretentious economy of means. The lightness of touch combined with a warm intelligence and gentle humour emanate through the choice of materials and arrangements. There is a sense of irresolution and resistance to neat, commercially attractive presentation alongside a joy and pleasure to be found in makeshift materials. Zara Stanhope writes that Newman falls into a group of artists…

…who both embrace visual art and at the same time are responsible for its ‘breakdown’, who contribute to the collapsing of the relationships between customary or comfortable forms of

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art and the meanings they may signify. Or, in other words, they stimulate thought on what is considered to be art, where art is found and what ‘art’ might mean in an environment where design and visual art have become almost indistinguishable in the economies of global mass markets.33

I find here, in Stanhope’s overview of where such a practice resides in relation to more conventional practices, a connection to the ethical approach I am arguing for that involves questioning habitual formats of presentation to open up space for the unaccountable.

Based on an ‘artist’ talk about her practice delivered at the Victorian College of the Arts in 2011, I had observed that Newman took a side-step around what’s expected by refusing to explicate her practice and talk about her work. I found this to be somewhat radical, political and resistant to patriarchy, not by taking an oppositional stance but in a way that is productive, affirmative and generous. Newman had the ability to be articulate about her practice without succumbing to gauche explanations on meaning or didactic explication of research processes. This is something I admire.

Through an email discussion with Newman, recorded below, I examine her approach with an emphasis on questions of knowing, not-knowing, and resistance in terms of divulgence and explication. These issues are addressed from her view as both a practising artist and as a Lacanian psychoanalyst. For this case study I present the entire interview with Newman.

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unedited because I feel the necessary reflection and analysis is contained within the exchange. I then proceed to draw out several points that connect to my practice.

**interview/discussion with Elizabeth Newman**

1. **What part does intuition or silent knowledge play in your approach to practice?**

   Newman: I would have to say that intuition or silent knowledge plays the *only* part, or if not that, then the most part in my practice. That I approach making art that way says a lot about the assumptions that underlie that approach: for instance, I must believe that art is something 'beyond' the everyday, that it comes from an inspired place, that it's not something that one just 'thinks up'. As I've said before, I guess this is a nineteenth century model of the artist and of creativity as something inspired, and beyond the ego of the individual. I can't help it: it's a way of thinking that comes from my childhood and adolescence, and it was essentially the way I was formed in art school in the early 80s (because one is always about 20 years behind most intellectual shifts and developments! Well I am).

   If I try to make art in a more conscious, directed way I make really stupid, awful things... which tells me that there is something much more knowledgeable in me than me. That is, my unconscious is way ahead of anything I can think up as a conscious ego. That's the silent knowledge we're referring to.
2. What does following your intuition allow you in terms of an art practice? For example, is there a kind of freedom in trusting it or an autonomous agency?

Newman: yes, I suppose so.... freedom, autonomy... but actually my first thought was that it was in fact a restriction, and a limitation (that I willingly submit to). The other way, the contemporary way, is to do anything you can think of..... I, in fact, wait until something happens to me, or limit myself to certain minimal processes from which something might develop. I avoid doing 'anything one might think of'. Yes, I would say it is a limitation that I impose upon myself - to work only in this way in order to create a certain consistency and quality in the work.

3. You write of limiting yourself to 'certain minimal processes', can you expand on that?

Newman: Certain minimal processes.... yes, I might limit myself to just using one colour, or one format (portrait, for example). I decide not to add any drawing or mark-making.... I choose just to use the rectangle and no organic shapes. I'm not sure why I do this - but perhaps it's to counteract the real possibility that one in fact could do anything, as we said. I think that with restrictions comes freedom - that's an old paradox that everyone knows. In the past I might limit myself to found materials, or cheap materials... to what I have already etc. These are some of the 'processes'.

Would it be right to say that you use your intuition to decide on a sense of rightness or what 'works' thereby creating consistency based on an already established aesthetic or set of preferences?

Newman: Yes, I use my intuition or a sense of recognition to recognise that a work is made, ready, finished.... and of course this sense of what is 'right' is a very personal and idiosyncratic one, and therefore a very limited one. In fact it's the same thing over and over again: the same moment in different versions.
It's a moment of subjective recognition - where I recognize myself (paradoxically) as an old and familiar, and new and surprising, subject.

4. As I understand it, you position the subject, working with the subconscious, at the centre of the process of art production. To what extent do you concern yourself with how your work is received in the public domain in the sense of what the work effects or motivates?

Newman: yes, I rely on the unconscious. (Sub-conscious is not the same thing... it's just things you're not thinking of 'right now' but that could be thought of... the unconscious on the other hand is what is radically repressed).

But equally I am concerned about public reception. I think that being recognised by a public (even if it's only other artists) is part of what makes something art or not: that it is recognised by the Other is part of art's definition. It's not a private form of enjoyment. Rather, it's a discourse, and a discourse is a social bond. Having said that I never really know how it affects others, what it produces... I think the answer to that can only be 'one-by-one'. That is, it affects people one by one in an idiosyncratic way - it's not a 'mass discourse', it's not mass-media. It may speak to some One, and not to another. But my concern is always to make something serious... to relate what I do to the discourse of Art and to art history and to other artists... and to have an effect in that domain. Whether I do or not is arguable of course.

5. In your artist talk at the VCA, 2011, you spoke about making art by not thinking, allowing the unplanned to emerge. You said, 'there's something else in me making better art than me.' You have learned that the decisions, choices and active interventions led by the ego always lead to much more inferior work than those determined by the unconscious. (I experience a similar kind of recognition of the value of acting without knowing in art practice and also of the pervasive pressure in a highly bureaucratised and professionalised art world to reveal intentions and articulate things that are entirely resistant to verbalisation.) Can you say something
about the similarities and distinctions between recognising something previously repressed and held in the unconscious through analysis and that which might come to the surface through art practice?

Newman: that's a really difficult question and involves lots of theory and debate about different psychoanalytic concepts that I certainly don't have 'at hand' and don't know a lot about. I think the first thing is that the two instances you mention are quite different: an analysis of a 'formation of the unconscious' (such as a dream, slip of the tongue, bungled action etc) is really an analysis of signifiers. Someone says $x$ when they meant to say $y$, and so we know that $y$ is repressed for some reason, and they substitute $x$ instead (also for particular reasons). This can be analysed within an analysis. I don't think it works the same way with artworks (and certainly not with artists). It's not possible to analyse the artist via the artwork. Freud thought this pretty much, and said that psychoanalysis had nothing to teach art, but that art could show something to psychoanalysis.

The other theoretical issue is the difference between repression (which is what forms dreams, slips, symptoms) and sublimation, which is another process that is supposed to be what is involved in art. Lacan gives a definition of sublimation\footnote{I understand sublimation as to modify or divert an impulse or instinctive behaviour into a more socially acceptable activity or towards aims that are considered more elevated in a cultural sense. Freud emphasised sublimation as the process by which sexual energy was channelled into more creative or intellectual outlets whilst Lacan emphasised the idea of drives or desires being predicated upon transgression which are diverted towards shared social values. Unknown (2012a) *Encyclopedia of Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Sublimation*. Available online at: http://nosubject.com/index.php?title=Sublimation (accessed 20/08/2012)\footnote{Lacan’s concept of the ‘Thing’ was that it was unknowable and beyond symbolisation. He wrote "The Thing is characterised by the fact that it is impossible for us to imagine it." Lacan, J. (1992) *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*, (1st American edn) (New York, Norton)} that is: to elevate an object to the dignity of the Thing\footnote{Lacan’s concept of the ‘Thing’ was that it was unknowable and beyond symbolisation. He wrote "The Thing is characterised by the fact that it is impossible for us to imagine it." Lacan, J. (1992) *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*, (1st American edn) (New York, Norton)}. One writer whose name escapes me right now (Paul Verhoeven) interprets that phrase this way: 'to elevate nothing into something and to enjoy doing that.' I can relate to this description of sublimation: I think that I find a little something that is valueless (but not to me, of course), and by transposing it into Art, it becomes something of some value. Also the concept of enjoyment that this writer mentions is obviously important in art and psychoanalysis. I

34 I understand sublimation as to modify or divert an impulse or instinctive behaviour into a more socially acceptable activity or towards aims that are considered more elevated in a cultural sense. Freud emphasised sublimation as the process by which sexual energy was channelled into more creative or intellectual outlets whilst Lacan emphasised the idea of drives or desires being predicated upon transgression which are diverted towards shared social values. Unknown (2012a) *Encyclopedia of Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Sublimation*. Available online at: http://nosubject.com/index.php?title=Sublimation (accessed 20/08/2012)

think that perhaps your question is pointing to the presence of jouissance\textsuperscript{36} or enjoyment - the fact that one finds ways to enjoy libidinally, and that making art is a socially acceptable way to do this. I think this libidinal enjoyment is manifest in my art practice, and in all the practices that I like. It's this quality of jouissance that is precisely unspeakable, unsignified, and so cannot be spoken about, or only with difficulty.

There's probably more to say on this issue, but as you can see it's quite complex. Even for psychoanalysts the analysis of the signifier is only half the practice of psychoanalysis - there always remains the question of the drive/jouissance and what to do with it....

6. Ah yes! I appreciate that quality of jouissance in your work, particularly your 2011 show at Neon Parc. I recognise the links to modernism and its formalism but your lightness of touch with materials both in terms of process and signification allow for something undecidable and indeterminable that is tantalising in its openness. I find something pleasurable in remaining on the cusp of not knowing and knowing.

This brings me to your essay Everybody Knows! for the exhibition Increase Your Uncertainty by A Constructed World at ACCA in 2007. With regard to the position one might take in relation to the concept of knowledge, you describe those who feel they never know enough but never-the-less want and hope to know more and those who recognise there is much they don’t know but they are unable to countenance such a lack and prefer not to acknowledge it. Then there are the paranoics who suffer from a surfeit of certainty about what they know. So... thinking about unknown knowledge... I feel there is something very useful, even attractive in operating in its milieu as an artist. This might involve, as you say, increasing one’s uncertainty. What

\textsuperscript{36} “Jouissance, and the corresponding verb, jouir, refer to an extreme pleasure. It is not possible to translate this French word, jouissance, precisely. Sometimes it is translated as 'enjoyment', but enjoyment has a reference to pleasure, and jouissance is an enjoyment that always has a deadly reference, a paradoxical pleasure, reaching an almost intolerable level of excitation. Due to the specificity of the French term, it is usually left untranslated.” Unknown (2012b) The Encyclopedia of Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Jouissance. Available online at: http://nosubject.com/index.php?title=Jouissance#Enjoyment).
do you think about lingering in that zone or consciously orchestrating strategies that might involve not delving deeply for answers or facts?

Might this unknown knowledge have something to do with the qualities of jouissance that you describe as unspeakable and unsignified?

Newman: Yes, I think in that essay I was trying to hint at and imply that there is a certain ethical position in one's relation to knowledge.... how one positions oneself in relation to lack of it. So yes, in that way I see art - true art making- as something fundamentally ethical. This is the status that Lacan gives to the unconscious - an ethical status. You can be responsible for who you are as a subject, or not - and that involves a 'wanting-to-know' or a 'not wanting to know'. So being in that relation of knowledge to oneself and one's art is important for me. From what I've just said you can see that I'm not pushing an argument for ignorance - quite the opposite. Not-knowing is not 'not knowing anything'! Paradoxically it's about knowing a particular kind of knowledge, one that is increasingly absent from our lives and social structures. I think that place is fundamental to art-making. I guess the surrealists tried to do it, and the expressionists too. However I don't think about it... I don't consciously orchestrate anything: but it means I have to be patient, and not anxious. I have to tolerate the fact that it's not always happening for me. I'm used to it being this way now. Often I just try to do something in the studio without really intending anything and something happens. People might call this a childlike attitude, and I guess that's possibly a fair description. When you look at the great artists you see a sort of lack of inhibition and a deep integrated knowledge about who they are, and the way they enjoy.

Which brings us to jouissance - your second question. The unconscious and jouissance have a connection: the signifiers one 'has' in one's unconscious are there precisely because they contain jouissance. So, to be accurate, *something* can be said about this knowledge, these signifiers, but only half-said - there's always something left-over or unsymbolised. Lacan says the truth can only ever be
half-said: that language can never fully account for our experience. Making art is a way of showing something of this experience, I guess - but what that experience is, I cannot say. (That's what Lacan says about feminine jouissance - he says they (women) have it and know it, but cannot say anything about it.)

(Psychoanalysis is such a great realm of knowledge... without it you wouldn't be able to speak of jouissance, and you wouldn't know what it is that assails you, enrathes you, makes you enjoy etc. That is, it allows us to speak about this Thing that is really impossible to speak about, and yet is always part of our being alive.) So yes, I think you could say that the presence of jouissance, this manifestation of jouissance in the work is connected with not-knowing, in the sense that it is something essentially unsignified - and yet one knows it! I hope that makes sense and doesn't sound like a contradiction. (But paradox is good: it means 'against dogma'!) Your questions are getting harder.

And

I'm not sure how I answered this last time, but I think I didn't quite answer it to my satisfaction! Perhaps I'm repeating myself, but to put it bluntly, and given what I wrote in that essay, I think there's an ethical requirement for artists to inhabit that zone of unknown knowledge and to make something of it. For this reason I'm completely opposed to the new-style art schools and the University discourse that incorporates them. I think if you can tell someone 'how to do it', then it's not art. What we see now in the world of art is objects made by the creative classes - and these products are, to my way of thinking, equivalent to advertising, various forms of design, including IT...

And the second part of your question is the bit where I get stumped, because I don't really know! But I suppose this quality and manifestation of something real (that is, 'of the real', in the realm of jouissance) is also something both known and unknown in that it is something one experiences, but cannot say anything about.
7. Your thoughts that there is “an ethical requirement for artists to inhabit that zone of unknown knowledge and to make something of it” resonate strongly with me. I feel the same thing but without the psychoanalytic tools you have it’s even more of a struggle to articulate. I’m working on a chapter about resisting the pressure to perform and in my mind I link that with your ideas about not talking directly about your work\textsuperscript{37}. It is also political and ethical to resist the imperative to explicate and divulge.

When you write about Jouissance it makes me think of Elizabeth Grosz’s views (after Deleuze) of art being what is most animal in us and not the most rational force, something noble in its celebration of the forces of the body and the forces of life. She speaks about excess and intensification rather than the pragmatism attached to that instrumentalisation of art for liberal society that comes through those creative classes you mention. Grosz said (and I agree with her on this) “Art resists instrumentalisation because excess is such that, although capitalism or democracy or liberalism might be able to harness it, it always carries with it too much; it always carries with it this other bodily kick that isn’t readily consumable by capitalism. That’s why I think art is highly political; that’s why art is still worth fighting over and talking about because it’s the place where we contest the possibilities of the future.”\textsuperscript{38} Her concept of art is very abstract but helps me bring Deleuze into my understanding of what’s at stake in a ‘meta’ sense.

Shall we talk about materials? I am interested in the pleasure you find in elevating or recuperating materials into art and what it is you respond to in what you gather together. How much conscious awareness do you place on the ‘social’ life or history

\textsuperscript{37} This dissertation does not include the research I was undertaking around ‘resisting the pressure to perform’ which was positioned as resisting fulfilling the expectations of others, institutional imperatives encountered as pressure or unfulfillable demands. These ideas threatened to undermine the PhD in a deliciously dangerous way. The ideas of Jan Verwoert were influential here and can be found in chapter one Exhaustion and Exuberance: ways to defy the pressure to perform in: Verwoert, J. (2010) Tell Me What You Want, What You Really, Really Want, (Berlin, Sternberg Press/ Piet Zwart Institute)

of the materials? Is the non-human force or agency that comes from things a
consideration?

Newman: Yes, I find something, I come upon it.... I guess you could call it an
encounter, like falling in love with someone. It cannot be predicted or
premeditated.... it happens. I guess you fall in love (with a thing, or a person)
partly because of some trait that points to this unsymbolizable Thing that is
your Thing, but partly because of certain signifiers connected with that person
or thing (eg. they are an artist, they drive a car, wear glasses, whatever). So once
again there's something symbolizable or representable, and something
unrepresentable in that choice (the look they give you). I don't think about it
consciously, but I guess that I choose one material rather than another for
both these aspects. I chose the polar fleece fabric because it seemed to have a
certain 'moodiness' or soulfulness to it, something warm and alive (which is
how Winnicott speaks of the child's transitional object). In fact all the fabrics
have a warmth that refers to the human being, their subjectivity or their body.
But they also have certain signifying traits: for instance, I can hook it into the
history of art, or it points to a social history, or something like that. So these
materials and found objects speak to me in a deep way. It can't be just any
object or material, and that's why I have to wait until I find the right thing. I
can't just decide to make a work and decide what material to use... it comes
from a much deeper place, which is the place of contingency and chance: that's
the place of the Real. So once again we are back to this 'non-rational force', to
jouissance: this something that Grosz refers to as life force.

8. Do you surprise yourself, either through the material encounters that end up being
productive or the works that transpire? If yes can you elaborate on that?

Newman: Yes, I often surprise myself and really, that's when I make the best
work. That's why I talk about relying on the unconscious to do the work. It's
when I make something that I couldn't have thought of myself... and
something happens by virtue of me 'not thinking'. It's about being open to
materials and processes, I suppose. Often the work is finished before I realize it. It happens in a second or two, and I guess there is an experienced knowledge in knowing when to stop and leave something. If I left it up to my ego (or the superego demands Do More! Be Better!) then I would ruin it and lose it. What is 'it'? Something from the real unconscious.

9. Is the ‘ethical requirement’ of artists (that you referred to regarding inhabitation of a zone of unknown knowledge) something that you extend to choice of materials, modes of exhibition production and other public forms of presentation? I’m intrigued by those aspects of your style of practice that you would frame as ethical or political.

Newman: I think that the unknowing knowingness is sometimes there in relation to materials... for instance, I just come across something that suddenly manifests itself as being a possible material for art; there's nothing planned in it, it only occurs in the encounter with the material. But as to the other aspects, exhibition and presentation, I guess not. I find your question really interesting because I suppose I have neglected to think about those aspects in that way, and maybe there could be more interesting ways of doing these things. Perhaps I can partially answer that question by thinking about the places I have really enjoyed exhibiting... artist-run venues like CLUBSproject and Dudespace, Ocular Lab and TCB and MIR11... which of course are temporary manifestations and no longer exist, but exist in the relations between people at a particular moment in history. I loved showing in those spaces because there is a real sense of liberty in what you can do there, in how you can communicate and participate and connect with people. The audience is small but it exists in a way that it doesn't in the grown-up professional art world. One of my greatest pleasures in being an artist has been to meet with other artists: you know you can go to another country or city and meet another artist and feel connected to them because you're working in the same sphere, trying to do similar things. It's reciprocal recognition: a true moment of recognising each other as subjects. I suppose that's what's lacking once you enter into a bigger, more
anonymous world of commerce and public relations, where one is really just an object for the others, and they are objects for you. It's not so satisfying.

10. I am thinking about intuition again and how you connected it to a 19th century model of the artist implying that to speak of creative inspiration is old fashioned. It interests me how we might, in our times, again speak of intuition and expressivity and its place in art practices. There is an emerging current of contemporary artists presenting work that freely hovers in indeterminate zones that resist categorisation, for example, between presentation in a rigorous conceptual framework and content which is idiosyncratic and seemingly odd and personal. Works can be both/between abstraction and figuration, signifying and asignifying. I detect this in your practice in the sense that there is a modernist formalism underlying something irrepressibly wayward and sensuous and these things are so hard to articulate that I cannot even frame the question! What I'm getting at is that intuitive approaches are very present but, perhaps in order to avoid the pitfalls of 'anything goes', strategies that are restrictive are employed which are then somehow subverted. I am going to hand this over to you for comment..... before I become enmeshed in even more of a scriggle.

Newman: Your questions are incredibly articulate... I often feel that there's nothing I can add, only to say 'Yes, that's right!'

So yes, what is the difference between intuition, or unconscious knowledge, and 'anything goes'? I think Freud asked the same thing of psychoanalysis. He asks the patient to free associate, sure in his knowledge that it will not just be *bla bla* (anything goes), but that it will have a logic of it's own and be deeply determined by unconscious chains of signifiers. In other words, he relies on the knowledge of the unconscious to speak through the patient's speech. So I guess it's the same for me: trusting the unconscious to say something because there is a knowledge there. It's a different conception from the popularised one of the unconscious as a cauldron of raw emotions and childish passions.
I think also that there are always restrictions: you can't avoid them if you are trying to make art. Just using a stretcher, a piece of linen, one colour.... these things come already-signifying, so you are already in the realm of signifying restriction, or of constructs if you like. I think in my work there is a sort of emphasis or self-consciousness about these constructs of art: it's like I want to explore or question the structures that make art Art, and not something else. So, really, it's a mystery, isn't it, how one individual can make something that 'speaks' to others...I think it's contingent and lucky, it's random...it's not something you can plan to have or be, or even practice, I imagine.

unconscious knowledge

Newman, here in her final answer, expands my thinking with regard to the situation I have found myself questioning throughout this PhD: what is going on when I simultaneously don’t know what I’m doing but am able to proceed with making ‘something’ with sure-footed alacrity? It must be acknowledged that both Newman and I are not untrained artists and have been practicing for several years. I imagine our prior experience contributes towards the formation of a vast bank of unconscious knowledge. Newman’s “…trusting the unconscious to say something because there is a knowledge there” that, as she paraphrases Freud “will have a logic of it’s own and be deeply determined by unconscious chains of signifiers” is a way to accept those unaccountable actions that might seem, at the time, mysteriously empty of intention or meaning as part of the way things go. Newman generously articulates a position and working method that clearly sets up the conditions for the unaccountable to come into play. We both consciously take a position of unaccountability. There are several points of connection between my approach to practice in this PhD and that of Newman, most notably: the use of intuition, silent knowledge and as Newman would describe it a reliance on the unconscious; an ethical relation to a particular kind of knowing that lies at the edges of contemporary life and its structures; the interest in

39 I will, for example, stop worrying about why my distant dad often pops up unbidden in my work.
surprising ourselves through an openness to materials and process. A remarkable point of difference lies in our responses to already established aesthetic preferences which Newman uses to recognise when a work is ‘right’ and I (whilst admitting this is a part of my process) continuously move against these kind of recognitions. I tend to use them as cues to take another direction.40

Like Elizabeth Newman I recognise and embrace an ethical responsibility of the artist to not-know what she is doing as a strategy, and espouse the artistic imperative to inhabit a zone of unknown knowledge. As Newman describes it, just as Lacan gives the unconscious an ethical status, there is something fundamentally ethical about making art and allowing the bringing about of something that might appear to be of no use and that is in excess to any known requirements. I found Newman’s answer to question six regarding intuition, freedom and autonomy one of the most interesting and surprising. The idea that only using intuition, waiting for it to work, serves as a limitation for her and this creates quality and consistency in her output contrasts with the continuous, immersive (over) making that I have undertaken throughout this PhD. I expand on my somewhat panic-stricken approach through my case study on Phyllida Barlow in chapter six life of forms in the section hard work. Newman’s working model, in foregrounding the unconscious as a guide, offers a gentler, alternative way of framing and further sustaining an art practice that is non-prescriptive and open to the contingent.

argument using my own work to ground the discussion:

I now proceed to address the processes and approaches to my own production in which works frequently found to be in excess to any known requirements or expectations suggest that a space is opened up for an unconscious knowledge to emerge. Newman considered this space fundamental to art-making and increasingly absent from our lives and social structures (see question 6 above) and I concur.

40 This makes for a practice that is continuously interesting and energising for me as the maker but contributes to something of a failure where consistency is seen as a virtue such as in the realm of commerce and art.
My argument is for an embodied studio-based, materials-led methodology that, in engendering the unforeseen and embracing the unknown, seeks to encounter materials and therefore knowledge as something fluid, not fixed and often unspeakable.

case study # 2: Sarah crowEST - process

In this case study I expand on the intuitive processes involved in the production of work and the exhibition in an attempt to elucidate how this occurred when I was quite unable to account for the outcomes in advance. The individual works are not discussed in detail as the aim here is to contextualise the exhibition within a process.

the exhibition: the inexplicable magnetism of an alien object

The exhibition is positioned as evidence of a research process and as a framework for the presentation and articulation of that process in temporary stasis or intensification. In an attempt to “reintroduce awareness of time as a constituent element of objects and our surroundings…” as Olafur Eliasson has written “Everything is situated within a process – everything is in motion.” 41 The objects exhibited exist in a continuous mode of making and unmaking with open possibilities for mutable contextualisation. This movement is only hinted at in the outwardly still and formal gallery display. Some things teeter slightly.

Artist, colleague, friend and occasional collaborator, Akira Akira, took on the role of curator and creative collaborator with me during the installation of the exhibition. I moved my artefacts into the gallery space, pointed out those works that were integral to the PhD and then allowed Akira free-reign to choose or reject the works to be foregrounded in the exhibition. (I parked the remainder behind the wall in a visible ‘storage area’). New mutations of works and arrangements of elements emerged and Akira brought a restraint that would not have occurred without his involvement. Whilst I mostly work alone, the agency that emerges as an effect of ad-hoc negotiations and activities – surprising configurations of human and non-human forces – is considered vital to the process.

A crucial aspect of my broader practice (extending beyond this PhD project) involves my desire to apprehend art works (and therefore my aspirations for the viewer’s apprehension of these art works) involves wonder at enigma. For me an arousal of curiosity toward that which is not known or recognisable and therefore un-nameable can produce an enjoyable frisson. Like a humorous response I cannot ensure this will occur for the viewer but it hovers in the vicinity.

**processes and approaches to production**

The group of processually emergent artefacts came together in the Margaret Lawrence Gallery, VCA, for three weeks as part of a somewhat absurd attempt to make an account of inexplicable forces that are intrinsically resistant to accountability.

In choosing to resist exerting mastery over materials, I rather ‘tend to’ the incipient qualities and variable intensive affects that actively reside in the materials. The studio practice evolves out of watching and responding to gleaned materials and arranging acquired or altered objects that are to-hand. This introduces elements of chance and randomness. A slow wadding together and agglomerating of matter and paint allows for a gradual process of mutating addition and growth.

From these open-ended and often process-intensive experiments forms emerge which are often put aside, retained as a store of elements to be re-configured or re-purposed later. They, in their turn, become ready-to-hand or to use a term coined by Masato Takaska ‘alreadymades’ poised for incorporation into sculptural arrangements or activities. This opens up a space for the chance apprehending anew of what one already has including a re-encounter with that which has already been made (by the artist). Some interesting questions are raised in the article – Miles, C. (2002) Mark Grotjahn: Working Variables, Switching Games. *Artext*, 78, p 48 such as “What is a ready-made, and can you make one? How can you find what you have already made? Wherin lies the creative act, and what point and why do objects become compelling? What are the implications of self-appropriation?” The work undertaken for this PhD project

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42 For me, to ‘tend’ to materials means to care for and to look after and work with their qualities but I also feel this behaviour is inflected with another definition of the verb ‘tend’ which describes having or leaning towards a certain characteristic or to regularly behave in a particular way. In my art practice this manifests as a somewhat uncertain tending towards some kind of unforeseen output.

43 Some interesting questions are raised in the article – Miles, C. (2002) Mark Grotjahn: Working Variables, Switching Games. *Artext*, 78, p 48 such as “What is a ready-made, and can you make one? How can you find what you have already made? Wherin lies the creative act, and what point and why do objects become compelling? What are the implications of self-appropriation?” The work undertaken for this PhD project
sculptures are often reworked or reconfigured and this relates to the idea of an ecology of the studio which is expanded in chapter four matter in the section studio ecosystem. This sets up potential for lively, rapid arrangements. These insouciant placements seek to circumvent laborious decision-making processes or overworking ideas and allow for flashes of extra-rapid thinking. These ways of working constitute some of the new outcomes from this project.

Overworking versus leaving when making has emerged as an important area of interest and tension within this research in the sense that spontaneity, speed and not ‘bothering’ materials too much can lead to a lightness and beauty which is at odds with the clumpy, mute lumps that I mostly produce and am irresistibly drawn to. This is discussed further in chapter three bothersome in relation to the sensibility of Gedi Sibony. The appearance of heaviness in the work is often somewhat illusionistic with many of the large boulder and mound like forms consisting of discarded, air infused, polystyrene scraps and packing. The work untitled (honey buttock) is heavier than most with its light interior smothered with a thick layer of plaster. This kind of over-working of a form is typically the result my approach of feeling my way without predetermined outcomes. Unsatisfying shapes are bothered accretively until a sense of rightness emerges. This rightness, just as Newman pointed out is very personal and idiosyncratic.

Fig. 6
Fig. 7 untitled (honey buttock)

comes into being in an area of contemporary art practice already well-versed in the discourses of the ready-made as configured from Duchamp onwards. These questions tantalise but I am not going to enter that discussion other than above.

44 I first learnt this term from reading about Martin Kippenberger and his all-embracing strategy of speed in art making. Kippenberger is said to have espoused the raising of the absurd to the highest level of thought through 'extra rapid thinking' and his prolific sense of production. Hunt, A. (2010) Humour vs Ironic. Art Monthly, October (340) and Garnett, R. (2010b) Abstract Humour, Humorous Abstraction, (Edinborough University Press)
A relaxed, differently paced and open approach to assemblage could be described as three-dimensional doodling. This kind of improvisation seeks to use ‘soft eyes’ and notice accidental or incidental arrangements that might arise during these phases of blind-making and embodied thinking (or expanded, multi-pointed, unfocussed thinking). I first learnt this term ‘soft eyes’ from the HBO television series *The Wire*\(^{45}\) where it is used to describe the way a detective should use their eyes to scan an entire crime scene without looking hard and staring at particularities. It involves seeing with awareness and using peripheral vision to see the whole with an open mind. This concept also contributes to the new outcomes that have transpired through the PhD.

So, back in the studio, there are the slower passages of time where a putting and placing, ordering and arranging might evolve over weeks, months or years. Things are allowed to gestate in their own time. Watchfulness and attention to viewer response becomes part of the creative process towards a stranger transformation evoking material taxonomies to enable the noticing of things anew.

The notion of using ‘soft eyes’ might simultaneously be used to tap into an intuitive sense of ‘rightness’ (as in the case of Newman) or ‘wrongness’ (as in the case of the detective) and open out to vision’s wider frame. By this I mean a de-centering of vision from the standpoint of the subject placed at the centre of the world (as inherited from Cartesian logic). In order to expand this idea further I introduce here the concept of ‘Śūnyatā’\(^{46}\) as put forward by Keiji Nishitani (1900-1990, a Kyoto school philosopher of Zen) and contextualised by Norman Bryson in his essay *The Gaze in the Expanded Field*\(^{47}\). Here Nishitani translates Śūnyatā as ‘emptiness’, ‘radical impermanence’, ‘blankness’ and ‘nihility’\(^{48}\). The Cartesian subject, feeling itself to be at a universal centre, is ‘surrounded by the stable plenitude of an object world. Both the subject and object exist in a state of mutual confirmation and fixity’\(^{49}\). From the subject’s central position amongst the things of the world there is a view over its objects and, like the subject’s, these are perceived as

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\(^{46}\) Dear reader, I apologise for this disturbing flip into Times New Roman for the word Śūnyatā but Garamond (the typeface I am using) will not accommodate the accents.


\(^{48}\) ibid. p 97

\(^{49}\) ibid. p 96
separate entities in stable locations, existing independently in permanent form. Bryson explains Nishitani’s critique:

The entity, as a conceptual category, is found unable to withstand the critique of Śūnyatā, and transposed to the field of Śūnyatā both the subject-entity and the object entity literally break up. Stabilizing the entity as fixed Form, with a bounded outline, is possible only if the universe surrounding the entity is screened out and the entity withdrawn from the universal field of transformations. The concept of the entity can be preserved only by an optic that casts around each entity a perceptual frame that makes a cut within the static framework. But as soon as that frame is withdrawn, the object is found to exist as part of a mobile continuum that cannot be cut anywhere. If the object is, say, a flower, its existence is only as a phase of incremental transformations between seed and dust, in a continuous exfoliation or perturbation of matter: at no point does the object come under an arrest that would immobilize it as Form…

The conception of the object field as a continuous mobility also includes the viewer as ‘…a being that exists through the existence of everything else in the universal field…’ and not just as a viewer at the end of a view-finder. In dissolving the idea of a viewing framework composing a series of static shots as a subject centred way of seeing, Nishitani places the object on the expanded field of blankness or Śūnyatā where the narrow viewing angle ‘… is found to be enveloped on all sides by a surround of invisibility’. Once the segment is disframed it is found to be ‘constituted within the invisible, the dark or unmarked remainder that extends beyond the edge of peripheral vision into the space that wraps its way round behind the spectator’s head and behind the eyes’. This points to a situation where the slice of what can be seen is underpinned and interpenetrated by those obscured things beyond or outside sight. That ‘slice’ of vision is engulfed by blindness and Nishitani understands the condition for seeing as the nothing or emptiness surrounding it.

I am drawing a connection here between the notion of ‘soft eyes’ and a kind of mental withdrawal. This emptying of the mind to a state of blankness circumvents the kind of thinking that follows familiar patterns that might jump too readily to extrapolate meaning from the known. (As an aside, the ideas expressed here concerning the destabilising of

50 ibid. p 97
51 ibid. p100
52 ibid. p 101
53 ibid. p 101
fixed form and its shifting existence as part of a mobile continuum connect to the broader position taken in this dissertation regarding matter and form as never static but alive.) Through this process of emptying the mind we might apprehend the presence of that which is currently unaccountable (the unseen or the unconscious) that may remain obscured or come to light, as something emerging from the world as we do not yet know it. These connections between softening the gaze and opening up to the darkness that interpenetrates seeing contribute a crucial facet to my understanding of the driving force to make art.

**summary:**

In this chapter ‘unaccountable’ is defined in such a way that allows options to remain open for differing utilisation. Unaccountable has been applied to a variety of related entities that resist explanation such as the vagaries of matter, artistic output and the position of artist as one who aspires to inhabit a zone of unaccountability in order to practice without constraining imperatives connected to predictable, explicable and resolved output. The emphasis was placed on the unaccountability of artistic process.

In proposing a materials-led approach to research, the possibility of experimenting with a strategy for not-knowing is introduced. This is explored through the lenses of intuition, Gertrud Sandqvist’s *centre experience* and the idea of embracing silent knowledge and trusting the unconscious as experienced through the practice of Elizabeth Newman. Newman’s comment that there is an “…ethical requirement for artists to inhabit the zone of unknown knowledge and to make something of it” taps into something that lies at the very heart of this PhD. This is the view that working as an artist offers a place and a privileged opportunity to explore that which is not already discernable and describable. These are those things that Newman describes as ‘left over’ and ‘unsymbolisable’ from a language that can never fully account for our experience. I have endeavored to foreground this aspect of experience through a practice that attends to the vagaries of matter in time and space. The exhibition, *the inexplicable magnetism of an alien object* grounds the discussion through an explication of the processes and approach to production that engenders the unforeseen and embraces the unknown as a strategic aspect of methodology. Here the
outcomes of allowing materials to lead the way and the removal of laboured and conscious thought produces a layered and embodied response to working intuitively from the centre of an endless accumulation of the past and the present.

By producing knowledge in a way that is not prescribed in advance I find myself struggling to account for most of my seemingly highly driven behaviours in the realm of art production. Through an examination of the above mentioned perspectives in relation to the unaccountable I have come to understand this position as valuable because it reflects a desire to shift away from proscribed contexts and the difficulties of conforming to them. These contexts might involve tight planning and a pinning down of ideas allowing little room for the emergence of unexpected movements and connections between things such as materials, thoughts and contexts.

However in proposing working intuitively from the middle, through experimentation without pre-determined outcomes to open up a space for the unaccountable I conclude that it is worthwhile for a practicing artist to construct a framework or back story in which to situate such an approach because the demand is not going away. The reason for this is that the pressure to explicate involved in proposing, contextualising, exhibiting, promoting, discussing and funding art work demands a level of accountability in order to function at all. In *the centre experience* Sandqvist offers us a more grounded, nuanced orientation than that of the dumb ‘genius’ and Newman beautifully articulates a position that involves psychoanalytic theory to mark out a space in which to make art that cannot be accounted for with conscious thought. Both of these schemes tap into experiences not entirely accessible to language but are generous in their attempts to share the terrain.

Alternatives to bowing to the pressure (placed on the professional artist and sometimes even the ‘articulate’ student) to deliver digestible sound bites on demand could involve positioning oneself as a craftsperson and speaking only of the provocations of process and material whilst letting the embodied political and psychological nuances hover unremarked. This ‘diversion’ makes possible or seemingly legitimises a space for those enigmatic works with something unresolved that cannot be expressed in words – those works that seem to exist without clear sense. These are the works I long to encounter and aspire to produce but prove the most difficult to frame.
I must confess here that this drive to transgress the boundaries of the sensible complicate my capacity to devise neat propositions and deliver synthetic conclusions at this point. However just as I advocate an emphasis on the temporal encounter with a work of art as important for the space of reception I advance the idea that further reading of the dissertation will bring the overall scheme in to clearer focus.

In the next chapter, *Mass*, I wonder about the unaccountable massed forms that recur throughout the practice of this PhD and consider mass in relation to the inexplicable and to excess.
Fig. 8 untitled (coffee asteroid) 2012
CHAPTER TWO: MASS

chapter guide:

This chapter begins with another oscillating definition and a slippery proposition that opts for an incoherent approach that activates a state of uncertainty. This expands the space opened up in chapter one unaccountable for embracing the unknown or the partly known in the generation of connections and responses through art making. Two directions advancing from divergent notions of mass are taken. The first direction revolves around the notion of mass as it comes to be modified by the verb ‘unaccountable’ and the second proceeds to contexts where mass is figured as a vast amount of something that manifests as an excess and requires attention.

Contextualising an unaccountable mass begins with a case study of an artwork by Guillermo Faivovich and Nicholas Goldberg based first around a meteorite leading to a brief consideration of the notion of ‘uncontrolled shaping’ as explored by the artists Giraud and Siboni in relation to space junk. ‘Trash Art’ is briefly considered as a context for this PhD practice, followed by a case study of a work from my PhD exhibition that utilised my dead father’s mass of reminder notes. The input and output of the artist Tal R is then examined focussing on his practice as it resides at the centre of a vertiginous mass of influences and an excess of materials. The chapter concludes with a case study of Melbourne artist Masato Takasaka addressing his take on dealing with re-use of materials through art practice. Through processes of recycling that connect to my notion of the studio as eco system Takasaka exemplifies an energetically proliferating approach that involves a wider eco system where works are continuously unmade and reconfigured.

Through the examination of a disparate group of artists and projects gathered around the expressive phrase ‘unaccountable mass’, we come across forces and excesses which waver on the edges of understanding. These excesses include those that centre on processes that are beyond culture, human mind and words (or the anthropocentric sphere) and are manifest through nature, matter, bodies and things. In addition there are those
incommensurable excesses of material culture that increasingly confound with multiple intersections and potential connections threatening to transcend our capacity to comprehend more than mere fragments.

**definition:**

Broadly speaking in sculptural terms ‘mass’ is used to describe a body of matter. Traditional sculpture, where objects were dug out or carved from a singular mass of rock, marble or wood worked with the parameters of weight, gravitation, stability, equilibrium, materiality and form. These classic parameters of mass and space still come into play when considering the production of objects emergent during this PhD but it is the introduction of the parameter of duration that inflects, even resists fixed procedures and finished outcomes. Yoking the noun ‘mass’ with the verb ‘unaccountable’ in the title inflects the idea of a coherent (in the sense of united or forming a whole) body of matter (mass) with the possibility of incoherence allowing that it might be something fluid and ever-changing. Despite its density, or dense appearance, it might be light and float, alternatively heavy and more clearly subject to gravitational forces or its weight might be an entirely incalculable quality and I do not discount the possibility of a mass being an optical effect.

Similarly, the definition “A coherent body of matter of unspecified or indeterminate shape, and usually of relatively large bulk; a solid and distinct object occupying space” could apply but I iterate that a mass, as it can be utilised in an art practice, may appear solid but yet, on examination, prove to have the atmospheric qualities of a dense nebula. In this sense, I wish to find an understanding of mass that shifts away from literal, physical property. I wish to characterise mass as excess, resistant to the clean orderliness we desire; vast, abject unknowable. A vague vision of this kind of mass figured as the unknown or the unquantifiable shadows the practice of this PhD and being something indiscernible will hover over proceedings without much discussion. My hope is that its presence will be

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activated through the entirety of the exhibition and dissertation and be felt as something lying at the edges of these utterances here.

So ‘mass’ is figured somewhat vaguely here but definitely emerges, along with duration as a central concern of this sculptural practice. It is the unspecified nature, the indeterminate shape or density and the inchoate quality of mass that emerges as the initial focus of this chapter.

This definition then opens out to further include a process “…to form or gather into a mass; to collect, arrange, or bring together in masses; to amass;” 55 This allows the word mass to be aligned in this PhD with a collection of notes, information, trash and an overwhelming quantity of artistic influences and materials.

**proposition:**

I struggle here to construct a convincing proposition yet have to concede that the phrase ‘unaccountable mass’ holds (and has held throughout this PhD) an attraction I am unable to shake off. Every attempt to analyse why this particular phrase exerts such a pull, such magnetism leads me to exclaim ‘I don’t know’. I enjoy the mystery the phrase evokes for me in all its idiosyncrasy. It is something there, out of focus, a sensed atmosphere.

Unforseen forces can bring things, objects and materials into relation or assemblage with one another manifesting as a substantial visible presence. Not only can ‘mass’ be understood as a bewildering abundance resulting from random production of excess, it is also something that sculpture addresses. The notion of matter as that which exerts a presence, an inexplicable magnetism is central to this project. This encounter with something that is there but is not discernable or fully knowable activates the potential for noticing of things anew, a bristling at finding something odd.

I propose an idea of sculpture as process, a working with material mass that suggests accumulation over time that although very present remains indistinct in the realm of

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55 ibid. Available online (accessed 22/05/2012)
signification or rather, its signification is unaccountable. As a somewhat humorous aside: I propose that this chapter appear as the primary sight for incoherence within the dissertation interspersed with insights and connections to the artefacts in the exhibition.

**contextualisation:**

Two directions will be explored in advancing the proposed relevance of mass to this project. One addresses the inexplicable and the magnetic via the meteorite fragment ‘El Taco’ as it figures in the work of Guillermo Faivovich and Nicholas Goldberg. The other direction begins by acknowledging the place of waste as material for art making and briefly considers an existing field of trash, junk and recycling art. This leads (via my dead dad’s reminders and remains) to a case study of the artist Tal R examining how entropy and overload figure in his practice. This is followed by a case study of Masato Takasaka who cycles ephemeral materials such as packaging, into artworks that, from a potential mass of art residue, are recycled into a series of dynamic constructions again and again in a practice of what has been called ‘never-endism’.56

**case study # 3: the meteorite El Taco**

Several aspects of Faivovich and Goldberg’s meteorite-focussed art project connect to concerns at large here. Principally the phrase “the inexplicable magnetism of an alien object”, which first came to my attention via an e-flux (announcing the Meteorit “El Taco” presentation at Portikus, Frankfurt in 2010) which then became the title of my PhD exhibition. The combination of words jumped out to encapsulate a sense, emerging through my practice, that had hitherto evaded articulation. This sense of wonder connected to the idea of an unaccountable mass, something present with undeniable raw power that

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56 Helen Hughes coined the term ‘never-endism’ to describe the limitless, cyclical nature of this work. Hughes suggests it in the context of appropriation theory and I have used it in relation to materials which is also characteristic of Takasaka’s practice. Hughes wrote: “If modernism was a reflection of life, and postmodernism a mirror held up to this reflection, then viewing Takasaka’s work feels at times like the equivalent of entering a third mirror into this equation: a reflection of a reflection of a reflection. (Never-endism?) With this in mind, then, perhaps it is not that Takasaka is applying or resuscitating ideas related to postmodern appropriation, but rather that he is appropriating appropriation theory itself.” Hughes, H. (2010) Masato Takaska, Never-Endism. un Magazine, 3.2, p 24
teeters on the edge of comprehension. As Amanda Coulson writes of meteorites “...the magnetic pull of the masses themselves is something beyond poetry, gesture or even reason; to touch an object older than the Earth itself is something unfathomable”. An extra-terrestrial phenomenon, the *El Taco* meteorite fragments at Portikus are described by Coulson as “...a miraculous event whose every recorded step and scientific or logistical explanation makes it not less so but more so”.58

In summary, the *El Taco* part of Faivovich and Goldberg’s project comprises a book59 of collected data and archival material and the Portikus exhibition of the two re-united halves of the meteorite. Faivovich and Goldberg were initially intrigued by a cleanly-sliced half of the meteorite *El Taco*. It had languished since the 1970s on a rough-cast slab of concrete in a rather neglected state outside the planetarium in their hometown of Buenos Aires. In their ensuing search for the missing half they eventually discovered it was in deep storage at the Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of Natural History, Washington, DC, which also housed two slim slices of *El Taco*. The book documents a history incorporating the 2000 BC Campo del Cielo (Field of the Sky) meteorite field (known to the pre-Columbian inhabitants of the region and to the Spanish in the late sixteenth century), the re-discovery of *El Taco* in the 1960s, the cutting of the meteorite in Mainz, Germany in 1965-66, to its divergent return in halves to the US and Argentina. *El Taco*, weighing 1998 kg before

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58 ibid. (available online)


60 ibid.
cutting, is a fragment of an 800-ton iron mass, in the world but older than the world, coming from the asteroid belt located between Mars and Jupiter.

The issues surrounding the fragment, such as patrimony, institutional responsibilities and national value systems are allowed to unfold in a largely unmediated way but with the artists appearing in the narrative looking for answers. In bringing the two halves of the meteorite together, side-by-side at Portikus, the differing trajectories and condition of the pieces was made clear emphasising the disparity between the museological procedures and budgets of the US and Argentina. Despite the various treatments and understandings of the materiality of the meteorite, an undeniable magnetic pull is exerted by the very presence of such an object on earth. “It is transcendent and immanent at once. And it is in such an impossible condition because it has gone through trauma, when it got pulled into our orbit, and was shattered.”61 writes Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev.

Meteorites, the fragments of asteroids are pulled into earth’s orbit, subjected to many forces and then smashed into many pieces. Until humans reached the moon and collected samples meteorites were the very first contact with materials from outer space. Meteorites are made of stone (silicate material), iron or stony-iron the very same materials that constitute our planet. As a sculptor, attempting to conceive of working with materials without masterfully controlling and imposing form on them, observing the effects of powerful and chaotic non-human forces is awe-inspiring. Forces of atmosphere lead to the hard surfaces of meteorites becoming ablated where parts are lost through melting or evaporation caused by friction. This, combined with the forces of collision with the ground, lead to the formation of unforeseen shapes and surfaces with no predetermined facets and constitutes an extreme example of transformation of matter by non-human forces.

In 1961 the Argentine researcher Luisa M. Villar, in a matter-of-fact letter to a scientist interested in the craters at Campo del Cielo, mentioned that “All the peasants have meteorite fragments in their homes…”62 The images this simple statement conjures up link to the durational and relational strand running through this PhD that is expanded in

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61 ibid. p 4
62 ibid. p 27
chapter six life of forms. I am compelled to digress from ‘mass’ a little here to address a fundamental aspect of the appearance of material in time and space that activates wonder, arouses curiosity and may or may not be categorised as sculpture. Pieces of meteorite, having been subject to untold cataclysmic forces finding a resting spot on a domestic mantelpiece is but one version (and one segment) of a life of a form as it enters into a flow of transformations occurring across time.

The relationships between objects and context, objects and other objects resonate strongly for me when touching on something entirely ‘other’ located in a domestic environment such as the meteorite fragments mentioned above. That which is unaccountably strange, bothersome and possibly ungracious casually lurking on the mantelpiece affords a quiet pleasure that is hard to recreate in the art gallery. During the 1990s Phyllida Barlow documented her series Objects for… where sculptures, made for a particular placement such as Object for a piano, Object for an ironing board, and Object for a street grit bin, were recorded cohabiting with home or street furniture. For Jon Wood this series is “…some of the best work Barlow has made. They are so alive and say so much about her take on things and on the relationship between making sculpture and the studio-home environment…The companions and friends she makes for things range from the absurd, to the comic, to the quietly and clumsily sinister.”

Fig. 10

Fig. 11 Phyllida Barlow, Objects for…

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63 The word ‘uncanny’ springs to mind to refer to this phenomenon as in Freud’s ‘unheimlich’ which describes something that is strange and oddly familiar creating a cognitive dissonance.

Whilst musing on the meteorites in the homes of the Argentinian peasants I contemplate the possibility of acquiring one for myself. Via the internet I am welcomed to Aesthetic Meteorites™ who claim to “provide the finest quality, aesthetic meteorites to Museums, Educational Institutions and discriminating Private Collectors around the World.” In fact, from another online store, I could even procure one from the very same ‘field of the sky’ as El Taco for US $1,500!

This specimen from the Campo del Cielo meteorite is a unique piece of outer space. The iron meteorite gets its name from its landing site in Argentina, where Europeans first discovered the meteorites in the 1500's. Each specimen is different, making this Campo del Cielo meteorite a truly unique gift for yourself or some other special person.

This diverting anecdote serves to bring us back around to mass. We have access to an unprecedented mass of information on the internet. This constitutes a vast and rich resource which can also feel capacious enough to clog up our mental space with its potential for trivia. There is a mass of junk on the internet that remains mostly unbothersome because we need not click on it. It doesn’t clutter up our physical space or trip us up. But what if some actual junk should fall from the sky to inhabit our physical realm?

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65 http://www.meteorites-for-sale-meteorite-sales.com/ (accessed 18/04/2012)
66 PhD fellow Lynn Thompson likens this to buying a chunk of the Berlin wall.
space junk

The exhibition *Les choses qui tombent* (sometimes they fall)\(^{68}\) warrants a mention before providing an elegant segue to the consideration of this project in the context of trash art. This 2009 installation at Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces by the French artists Fabien Giraud and Raphaël Siboni explores the estimated 110,000 pieces of space debris currently orbiting the earth.

The fact that “Over a number of years, the US Space Command has compiled a list of these man-made objects that are loose in the great beyond”\(^{69}\) provides an astonishing insight into the mass of detritus at large. “…this ever-growing inventory includes astronauts’ gloves, cameras, frozen pee, screwdrivers, plastic bags and solar shields.”\(^{70}\).

Contrasting NASA’s customary procedure of contriving a ‘controlled re-entry’ into the earth’s atmosphere to destroy objects, such as satellites, with what they term ‘uncontrolled re-entry’ Giraud and Siboni decided on their starting point for this exhibition.\(^{71}\)

Uncontrolled shaping as an aspect of those rare pieces of space junk that don’t get pulverised into dust through the force of the atmosphere led them to devise this installation about those things which fall that have been exposed to forming forces that are in no way connected to the hand of a person. I have introduced this idea of ‘uncontrolled

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\(^{68}\) *Les choses qui tombent* was an exhibition at Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces as part of Melbourne International Arts Festival, 2009. Thank you Simon Maidment for drawing my attention to this work.  
\(^{70}\) ibid. (available online)  
shaping’ into the discussion as an extreme example of how objects might transform, evolve and become subject to forces over time. This iterates the example of the meteorite and is useful in the context of this PhD to clarify what exactly a transforming process that avoids human mastery might look like.

In amassing the elements to produce the large coffee encrusted *untitled (coffee asteroid)* lump I attempted a process of engendering ‘uncontrolled’ shaping so that the final form depended on the random shapes of existing polystyrene off-cuts (residue from another student’s artwork), cobbled together rapidly as each piece came to hand. The arbitrary shapes, both rounded and hard edged, and the cultivated lack of awareness about how they came together simulated conditions of chance regarding the shape and surface texture of the form. The gaps were filled and bonded with papier-mâché and expandable foam and the surface homogenised with a layer of coffee grouts. Needless to say, the bothersome presence of all the materials in my studio activated the compulsion to agglomerate them together.

**trash**

Because I incorporate cast off and recycled items and materials (that may be construed as rubbish or trash) into sculpture through my practice, I will briefly address the issue of trash
art\textsuperscript{72} as a context. There is an overwhelmingly insistent mass of waste in world and that which is produced within my immediate environment I tend to shoulder as an ethical burden to be tackled (cleaned up or recycled) through my process. It is not something I choose to make overt or foreground conceptually and therefore I am not seeking to position my work within the area of ‘trash’ or ‘junk art’ here but rather to briefly acknowledge its exponents and some connections and differences.

Prominent artistic examples in the history of twentieth century art are: Kurt Schwitter’s collages with remnants of material culture and Merzbau, Arman’s amassed objects or ‘accumulations’, John Chamberlain’s car metal sculptures and Tony Cragg’s assemblages of found, plastic bits and bobs. These examples are all somehow contained and controlled into artist formats or installations.

\textsuperscript{72} Trash is not a word that usually enters my vocabulary being now a US term for rubbish but ‘Trash Art’ is conceived as being a genre of art practice in some circles. See Whiteley, G. (2010) Junk: Art and the Politics of Trash, (London, I. B. Tauris) for a comprehensive overview.
Schwitters works were included in *Trash into Art*, a Tate Modern room display in 2003 exhibiting collages and sculptures made from everyday waste that introduced real life objects and ephemera into art. Tony Godfrey suggests that “The room’s title implies a kind of alchemical transformation...”\(^7^3\) In comparison Godfrey, in discussing the work of sculptor Phyllida Barlow, highlights her non-redemptive use of discarded materials in comparison to those practices mentioned above and to be found in the Tate room display. Barlow and I share a resistance to such magical interpretations of intent preferring to cite expediency as the principle motivation.\(^7^4\) Godfrey continues his assessment of Barlow’s relation to trash in which “...trash was mere matter, not a raw material to be cleverly transformed, nor a material repository of memory. Rubbish was readily available, and cheap.”\(^7^5\). Expediency and the ready-to-hand that contribute to both Barlow’s and my own process are explicated further in chapter six *Life of Forms*.

There is a link between waste and the strands of humour that ran through the early stages of this project and that revolves around the notion that waste (and most especially bodily waste) can be conceived of as ludicrous. It has been observed that there is a scatological dimension to some of my sculptures. *Large Disagreeable Object*\(^7^6\) of 2009 a coffee brown sausage-like form aggrandised atop a clunky, pseudo-wood, domestically-scaled stand exemplifies such potential.

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\(^7^4\) Phyllida Barlow is an artist with whom I sense a kinship with regards to process and use of materials and this will be expanded in chapter 6, *Life of Forms*.


\(^7^6\) The title of this work references Alberto Giacometti’s sculpture titled *Large Disagreeable Object to be Thrown Away* 1931.
This sculpture was re-positioned in the exhibition the inexplicable magnetism of an alien object by being lowered onto the floor and pushed aside against the wall in the back gallery. Any inherent humour to be found in this object may well reside in the oscillation that occurs when our attention is drawn to its everyday familiarity and simultaneously, to its peculiarities of surface, presentation and scale. Funnily enough we are all confronted with brown lumps on a regular basis. Simon Critchley draws our attention to how humour is activated through a shift in our apprehension of the mundane:

The extraordinary thing about humour is that it returns us to common sense by distancing us from it, humour familiarises us with a common world through its miniature strategies of defamiliarisation. If humour recalls us to sensus communis, then it does this by momentarily pulling us out of common sense, where jokes function as moments of what we might call dissensus communis, uncommon sense. 77

Whilst pondering the residues of the common everyday world via an unaccountable mass in the form of a disagreeable object, let us move in closer to the everyday life of one particular man who, in my view, remains particularly unaccountable.

case study # 4: my dead dad’s reminders and remains

In this work there is a black, slightly glossy looking mound, a small dark mass that appears alongside an array of rectangular notes pinned to the wall in an orderly grid.

The mass of little notes that my (now deceased) father used as daily reminders to keep his life on track might well have ended up in the dustbin. Instead I’ve treasured the bundle as a rich and resonant memento of his life and eccentricity. These notes, alongside the suggestive black mound, have since been reconfigured into several versions of the work my dead dad’s reminders and remains. The proliferation of responses to this particular work compared to all my others leads me to consider it my most ‘affective’ offering. 78 The words

78 From amongst all the works exhibited during the candidature of this PhD my dead dad’s reminders and remains is the one most frequently addressed for comment, discussion or questions by viewers. I name all works that I place into the public domain ‘offerings’. This is because I offer them to viewers to engage with or ignore not with mercantile aspirations but to see what happens.
draw us into a common, everyday world suggesting a relentlessly mundane life but made strange by its fixing into the odd, recycled, note form.

Fig. 18 my dead dad’s reminders and remains, 2009

Ever since I can remember my dad wrote reminders to himself and instructions for others on the same-sized paper (the back of Frigidaire fridge price-lists residual to his job as a travelling salesman) and kept them, ready-to-hand, in a neat pile in the kitchen. Whereas most people would write a list of the things they need to do or get, my dad would select the required words or phrases from his pile and lay them out in an orderly grid on the kitchen table usually before bedtime. For example, if he needed to get ‘maggots’ for fishing or remember to "remove sack from engine" before he drove off in his car, those notes would be utilised. Similarly, various permutations of instructions for the milkman or the paperboy were contrived as needed and saved for re-use. When my dad died that pile of notes was my first choice for a keepsake. I see the most detailed, humdrum aspects of his whole life residing in those worn and stained rectangles of paper interspersed with suggestions of struggle and celebration. The notes, in no particular order, read as follows:

HOLLY... SHOES... PLEASE SWITCH THE COOKER OFF (after use)... EGGS...
BREAD (superlatively palatable)... TELEPHONE OFFICE... CLOSE WINDOWS...
ELECTRIC BLANKET... BIRTHDAY CARD... TYRE PRESSURES... BATH...
REMOVE SACK FROM ENGINE... 12 eggs please... 5 lb POTATOES PLEASE...
SEND IN TIME SHEET... WASHING... PETROL... CHECK OIL AND WATER...
WASHING MACHINE... ALBERT DUNGATE - UNIGATE PLEASE KNOCK...
MILK (superlatively palatable)... CAKE (superlatively palatable)... WATER PLANTS...
I sense his frustration with the milkman’s inability to follow his directions! I recognise my own lack of ability to remember things. Recently, old school friends (who I would no longer remain in touch with if they didn’t pop up on Facebook after 30 years) saw the work my dead dad’s reminders and remains on the web. This spurred them to recollect and remind me that my eccentric father would take secateurs on a normal walk and chop bits off other people’s hedges as we went along and would pick fluff off the jumpers of strangers. The embarrassment floods back. I thought this was a cool work with its neatly gridded arrangement and the glossy, gloopy black mound a brave and humorous confrontation with his death and what that might look like after a cremation. (I flew to the UK for the funeral straight from a new years eve party in remote country NSW, didn’t get to view his corpse and in my jet-lagged state thought I heard him knocking on the side of the coffin as it went through the curtain to be burnt). It was left to my imagination what remained...
The notes indicate an individual’s attempt to negotiate the minutiae of everyday life providing a hint of the human endeavour involved in casting a controlling net over impending chaos. These notes invoke the idea of a pre-digital version of the predictive text messages we can program into our mobile phones when repetition is needed\textsuperscript{79}. The case study of \textit{my dead dad’s reminders and remains} is located in this chapter for it relation to (\textit{an unaccountable}) mass (the mass of notes displaying too many tasks to remember and the black massed mound standing in for a corpse. However it makes another contribution to this PhD which resides in its accentuation of a strategy for dealing or living well with not-knowing exactly what is going on in one’s immediate world most of the time. In not using up his memory space for such banalities my father was free to be deeply immersed in whatever he was engaged with at the time. I perceive something perversely heroic in this strand of non-knowing in the face of too much information and detail. I will now turn to a case study of an artist who takes a more open approach by embracing the mass of stuff that comes his way.

\textbf{case study \# 5: Tal R}

This case study considers the practice of the painter and sculptor Tal R and is positioned here in the dissertation for the way it addresses the idea of mass as an overwhelming presence. Tal R embraces a mass of images, information and matter the like of which threatened to submerge someone like my father if he let it. It will become clear that it connects to several concerns expressed elsewhere in the dissertation.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Fig. 19, Tal R, Lords of Kolbojnik, 2002-2003}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{79} I owe this observation to fellow PhD candidate Lynn Thompson.
Via his high-energy practice Tal R generates, sometimes with a phalanx of up to twelve assistants, an enormous amount of quickly and wildly produced paintings, drawings, etchings, collages, videos and sculptures. Tal R recycles imagery gleaned from high and low cultural sources, books, cinema, magazines, advertising, cartoons and doodles. Appearing to be immersed in a maelstrom of sources, Tal R digests and excretes, from an over-abundance of visual culture, an artistic output that has characteristics of Outsider Art or Art Brut. However, Tal R, as Juan Francisco Rueda describes him, is not an amateur and “… does not create on the periphery of society or of art institutions”\(^{80}\) contrary to this “his work is a densification of their resources”\(^{81}\). Although Rueda recognises that Tal R’s “complex classification, his practice of using remains… the concurrence of a fantastic, symbolic imaginary, his closeness to an aesthetic of ugliness, the presence of hybrid beings and a deformed and denigrated figuration”\(^{82}\) do converge with many features of Outsider Art, there are high-literary, theoretical and aesthetic concepts to be found. Glossing Rueda, Tal R’s work is enriched, densified and overloaded with sophisticated references and resources from the self-referential to the art historical.\(^{83}\)

Tal R describes a differently inflected sense of being at the centre to the centre experience which Sandqvist outlines in chapter one unaccountable. He refers to taking a position at the centre of many influences and practices of painting:

> The monster of painting absorbs you with lightening speed; the great, embracing and possessive mother of painting. Even street art is roped in – for better or worse. And in there you will meet all the others, all the other artists that you thought you rebelled against. You will meet all the old cousins, all the old arseholes and ghosts. It is a scary place, and it is here, in the centre, that The Battle takes place. But it is here you should be. You will end up as a diehard if you try to stay on the periphery. The challenge is to be in the centre where the others are sitting.\(^{84}\)

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\(^{80}\) Francisco Rueda, J. (2010) *Tal R: Teenager Beach*, (CAC Malaga) p 113
\(^{81}\) ibid. p 113
\(^{82}\) ibid. p 113
\(^{83}\) ibid. p 114
\(^{84}\) Petersen, A. R., Bogh, M., Christensen, H. D. & Larsen, P. N. *Contemporary Painting in Context*, (Copenhagen, Museum Tusculanum Press, University of Copenhagen) p 9 (This is a re-quote from Tal R from an interview in *Politiken*, 1 September, 2007)
Tal R’s hyperbolic version, in which he dwells in the company of all other painters across time exemplifies the mass of precedents with which artists (his statement could refer equally to the monster sculpture or even the monster theory) can grapple. Images and information for this grappling can be accessed with ever-increasing ease via the internet. Artist/researchers interested in the edges and its utterances rather than the overstated canons of art history can find an overwhelming abundance of material.

Tal R’s immersion in a non-hierarchical, heterogeneous flow or overflow of materials, motifs and the aforementioned ‘community’ of painters dead and alive provide a maelstrom of resources. This contributes to the processual and accretive nature of his paintings as they proliferate. Tal R’s practice demonstrates a joyful approach that revels in the excess of matter which might otherwise be conceived as bothersome and anxiety inducing.

Rueda reflects on the idea that Tal R’s “…attitude of dealing with multiple resources of visual culture is but a metaphor. In Western societies of over-abundance, over-production, inflation and massive consumption and recycling processes of all the entropic material generated, the artist deals equally with this over-abundance by developing recycling practices in art.” This connects to a concern running throughout this PhD, generating a great deal of humour (at least in the studio!) due to the paradoxical nature of my overwhelming generation and proliferation of artefacts whilst lamenting the profligacy of consumer culture. There is something unstoppable that is too much. The question always hovers around the artist and the stuff, the things, ‘to bother or not to bother?’ Or to put it another way, what should be left as it is and what should be left where it is, what should be taken up and utilised or fiddled with? What will happen if I do or don’t? These questions are also considered further, particularly in relationship to the practice of Gedi Sibony, in chapter three bothersome.

85 The internet allows us to access the contributions and ideas of a mass of contemporary artists and practices from far flung areas of the world. The recently launched ‘art.sy’ website offers to speed up and streamline this process further. Self-described art.sy is “powered by The Art Genome Project, an ongoing study of the characteristics that distinguish and connect works of art. Art.sy evaluates artworks across 800+ characteristics (we call them genes)—such as art-historical movements, subject matter, and formal qualities—to create a powerful search experience that reflects the multifaceted aspects of works of art.” Available online at: http://art.sy (download 06/08/2012)
86 Francisco Rueda, J. (2010) Tal R: Teenager Beach, (CAC Malaga) p 112
case study # 6: Masato Takasaka

Artists, such as myself, energetically concerned with materiality and making often inhabit studio spaces where accumulations of materials threaten to engulf them. I am interested in how artists can deal with this very abundance and excess of stuff within their practice. One example can be found in the practice of Melbourne based artist Masato Takasaka who arranges and rearranges old and new work combined with studio detritus and found items such as commercial and fast food packaging into (often) vertiginous and precariously balanced structures. The things that recur in multiple configurations from exhibition to exhibition consist of parts of previously made projects such as the highly recognisable sections of white board with perforated holes and large blue polka dots.

Fig. 20 Masato Takasaka, *Smile! Bauhaus babushka sundae boogie woogie* 1999-2007

Takasaka has stated that, ‘Art needs Art to make Art.’ This statement clearly illustrates his studio activity; his process of grabbing whatever is close to hand, and using it in inventive ways to make something ‘new’. And after the frenetic process of construction is complete, and the hard-edge ‘riff-a-rama’ mini-city is a reality, what remains is an idea remade, a differing configuration of a similar thing, and extension of the same principles.87

The circuitous activity of perpetually reusing and rearranging extends from the materials described to texts and titles that surround the works. This process, when viewed across exhibition contexts compounds its self-referentiality which Helen Hughes describes as

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“...not the visualisation of a feedback loop, but rather of a snowball effect”. 88 Hughes expands upon what she finds most significant here:

...Takasaka repeats or copies images, ideas and text from his own visual and written repertoires. He frequently recycles phrase from emails, materials from previous sculptures and compositions from existing drawings when creating new work. One physical by-product of this compulsive and reflexive recycling is the sense of a constantly evolving, organic retrospective gesture in Takasaka’s art: a surreal synthesis of time through the material distillation of past and present.89

I find a parallel here to my above mentioned undertaking of moving, placing, noticing and being within a cluster of tenses in the studio and the bringing of the earlier works and materials into play with the new. Takasaka opens the whole process out and visibly shares the evolution and revolution of his ‘stuff’ with a public over a series of many exhibitions making it possible to observe the movements and mutations.

Takasaka does not typically re-stage a work he has made before in the sense of self-appropriation, rather as Hughes describes it “his practice pivots around the recycling of a readymade contextualised object in terms of a specific use-value that is progression”90. The result is a series of iterations of his accumulative, open-ended, retrospective sculptural project EVERYTHING ALWAYS ALREADY-MADE STUDIO MASATOTECTURES MUSEUM OF FOUND REFRACTIONS (1994-ongoing).

Takasaka’s practice expands the notion of the studio as eco system to encompass a wider practice as an eco system that incorporates a perpetual cycling through of materials and reconfiguring of existing works through exhibition contexts. Takasaka’s practice centres around self-appropriation and involves arranging and rearranging rather than making as such. The work proliferates energetically and generously whilst resting lightly on the earth.

In discussing Takasaka’s practice I have focussed on the material aspects which connect it to the position taken in this PhD that embraces a use and reuse of materials and elements

89 ibid. p 24
90 ibid. p 23
in which nothing is discarded. Not unlike that of Tal R, Takasaka’s practice involves much more than pure materiality in its breadth of interests and references (to, for example in Takasaka’s case, guitar music and related ephemera), and its re-working of the concept of the ready-made. A critical point connecting the practices of Tal R, Takasaka and myself rests on our awareness of visual arts discourse which legitimates our situation within an art context which differentiates it from outsider art or from madness.

**summary:**

In troubling the idea of ‘mass’ from several angles via case studies we followed: emergent mass (a meteorite) as something pulled into that form by extraordinary forces; inexplicable massed forms that turn up in unexpected places; the shaping of forms uncontrolled by humans; waste and art; chaos and our attempts to maintain order within in (exemplified by my father’s valiant effort) or embrace and immersion as an artistic strategy as with Tal R; and recycling as self appropriation through Masato Takasaka. The artists in this chapter could be described as revelling in and energetically working with excess as a strategy for dealing with its potential to be bothersome. This propensity of matter to be troublesome is addressed in chapter three *bothersome* where it is further integrated into aspects of artistic practice.

Faivovich and Goldberg’s *El Taco* project and Giraud and Siboni’s extrapolation of non-human forces and formations demonstrate transformations of matter that produce an encounter for the viewer with extreme or substance altering actions. My ‘dead dad’ popped up somewhat unaccountably. The emergence of sculptural mass can be apprehended as a movement. As such the focus on sculptural form or mass is less concerned with the material residue but rather with the process which has enabled the mass to be pulled into the form over time. This is the process – the becoming.

This divergent group of artists and projects draw our attention, under the poetic banner ‘unaccountable mass’, to excesses which are beyond comprehension. There are those excesses, on the one hand, that revolve around processes that are beyond culture, human mind and words (or the anthropocentric sphere) and are manifest through nature, matter,
bodies and things. On the other hand there are those incommensurable excesses of material culture that provide too many nodes of potential connection that exceed the limit of our cognitive capacity.

This chapter touched on an ethical dimension to art practice. ‘Ethics’ is used in this PhD to describe a non-moralist sense of values which operates according to the dictates of conscience. In this chapter the ethical dimension is concerned with an expanded awareness of materials and their embedded energy leading to a sustainable approach. This involves framing the studio and the practice in a wider context as eco system which constitutes an enduring theme for my practice (and one which I will reinforce beyond this PhD). This notion has been invaluable in developing no-waste procedures that are sustainable not only in considering impacts on the environment but also in terms of maintaining a practice over the long term that can weather financial contingencies and constraints. These concerns are central to the ethical imperatives embedded in such a practice.

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91 The ethical dimension was not included at the outset of this PhD as one of the areas for research but it has arisen through practice at every turn and underpinned many of the directions taken. I have considered writing a list or code of ethics but because I view the ethical inflections as somewhat fluid and shifting and contingent upon circumstances they are therefore not conducive to the strictures of a fixed condition.

92 I’ve thought (somewhat vaguely based on experiences of the 1970s) for a long time, that artists and art students probably mostly all shared my concern for the global environment, sustainable solutions, the necessity to recycle or take responsibility for the trajectories of residue. I have been horrified to countenance the waste and careless use of materials and toxic substances that actually occurs with many artists and art students. This has forced me to reflect very deeply on my own procedures and animated my ethical bent throughout the PhD candidature.
Fig. 21 mounds stored behind the gallery wall in the inexplicable magnetism of an alien object
CHAPTER THREE: BOTHERSOME

chapter guide:

This chapter again begins with an open and wavering definition. Four connected but slightly shifting versions of how bothersome has come to be used in this PhD are defined. It will become evident that there are tensions inherent between an artistic position that remains open to the possibilities of the artist, the materials, the viewer and exhibited works to be bothered and to be bothersome in multiple directions. The questions arising from this uncertainty are most deeply inflected by the capacity of the materials themselves to be bothersome or insistent in their affects and the proposition concentrates on this aspect. The undecidability surrounding bothering is contextualised through three short case studies. The first is on the practice of the American artist Gedi Sibony which is notable for its thought provoking relationship to materials and exhibition tactics. The second is on my work titled Channeling Gedi Sibony which activates a responsive and embodied approach to an intriguing artistic practice and its surrounding commentary. The third case study concerns the movement of sculptures from studio to gallery to assess their potential in an informal exhibition titled the things they are unbothered by Sarah crowEST. The summary picks up on the unknown or indefinable in relation to established frameworks for seeing and considers what resisting that might activate in the viewer seeking to ascribe identity and meaning to it. That which is bothersome, as it relates to people encountering the work, is disruptive and demands an engagement with knowledge formation that is non-teleological, in process and unfolds over time.
definition:

The adjective ‘bothersome’ is used to describe that which is “Troublesome, annoying.”93 How and why is matter figured as something bothersome within this PhD? There are four ways this occurs, one is entirely pragmatic and connected to the excess materials produced at home, in the studio and the world at large. This is the stuff that gets in the way, must be dealt with somehow and its future trajectory taken on as a responsibility by me. This excess material constitutes a bothersome ethical burden relating to responsibilities of space and environment which runs like a current through my practice.

The second is linked to those ‘things’, objects and ideas that lurk but cannot quite be placed or categorised and here bothersome is figured in relation to the viewer’s encounter with the work. Within this dissertation, this sense of bothersome can be used interchangeably with the word unaccountable. This version links to my aspirations to produce and view work that has the potential to activate a tantalising state of not-knowing or suspended knowing.

The third bothersome niggle is connected to the first two and rests upon the notion that material has agency and therefore the possibility for perceived mischief.94 This anthropomorphisation could be conceived as having potential for humour and is addressed in chapter six the life of forms.

The fourth way that bothersome is defined within this PhD dovetails into the questions concerning ‘bothering’ or ‘not-bothering’95 as an approach to materials as they arise through practice. Not bothering materials very much allows for an openness or an informality which suggests that by remaining open-ended, there is always the potential to come back and rework something. It follows therefore, that in unbothering (not fully

94 I find that the capacity to see human traits in non-human things is problematic but never-the-less occurs and contributes to not only much comedy around objects and creatures but also our capacity to empathise with things.
95 ‘bothering’ is the word I use to describe the way I continually add to, change, fiddle with, work on my sculptures in an incremental way over time. I aspire to bother things less from now on.
finishing or resolving works into final form), they bother one back. The materials, the
‘works’ maintain the capacity to keep bothering me to keep addressing them! This fourth
version connects ‘bothersome’ directly to part of the contribution of this PhD which is
cconcerned with the ethical position of not working towards a finished or resolved outcome
but embraces open-ended processes and is therefore addressed in this chapter more
extensively than the aforementioned notions of bothersome.

In addition there is the feeling or state that we might have of ‘being bothered’ to do
dsomething in the sense of being energised to attend to an issue. This connects to the
ethics\(^96\) of care when working with matter and as such constitutes an imperative that has
grown throughout the project.

**proposition:**

The proposition here is two pronged. Choosing a process of producing open-ended work
that refuses to resolve allows a return again and again for tinkering or bothering. This,
therefore, becomes a non-teleological approach to practice that does not progress to (or
aspire to) an outcome of perfection or resolve. It demands a constant opening out and that
constitutes an ethical position. This approach forms a component of my original
contribution to new knowledge.

Matter has the capacity to be bothersome, a mass of bewildering abundance and too much.
Art can find ways to deal with troublesome excesses but also has the capacity to create
them and I like them to, in turn, become bothersome to the viewer. This can occur when a
material encounter manifests as something not easily known and is therefore resistant to
categorisation.

\(^{96}\) The word ‘ethics’ recurs throughout the dissertation and I conceive of ethics or sense them as virtues or
principles that are becoming rather than as fixed rules. (This is the reason I am not laying out a code of ethics
for practice but allude to them something developing in response to circumstances.)
Contextualisation: using Gedi Sibony and my exhibition *the things they are unbothered* to ground the discussion

Here I use the practice of Gedi Sibony and my own work, the exhibition, *the things they are unbothered* to ground the discussion.

In thinking through the immanent and continuously emergent relationality between myself as an artist and the broader abstract concerns about matter I have found the practice of Gedi Sibony stimulating. The tensions inherent between artistic bothering versus leaving of materials and the capacity of the materials themselves to be bothersome or insistent in their affects upon the artist and the viewer are activated for me in considering Sibony’s work.

Sibony’s comment “I am bothered. The things are unbothered”\(^97\) provoked my thinking around ‘bothering’ and ‘unbothering’ materials throughout this PhD practice and led to these terms becoming key to how I see my relationship to materials and processes. The ‘things’ in my studio (the materials, the art works) have the potential to be both bothered and unbothered by me. Sibony’s use of the term ‘unbothered’ suggests that materials, objects, artworks, out and about in the world just are. They lack consciousness and therefore mental agitation and restlessness to complicate what transpires. Sibony, as the bothered one, is provoked in some way by the materials whether it be to thought or action.

case study # 7: Gedi Sibony

Sibony’s delicate, recuperative approach to materials and work involves treading lightly upon the earth and teetering gently around matter. Impoverished and makeshift sculptures are put together and carefully ‘placed’ with materials allowed to remain fundamentally in their found condition with minimal intervention but with highly considered framing within space. Found materials such as used plywood, plasterboard, cardboard boxes and industrial carpeting are typically arranged to form relationships with other elements or architectural surroundings and are thereby “…challenged via their interaction with countering materials and gestures…” 98 In appearing both unassuming and theatrically poised the sculptures exude a certain awkward unease, as if “…taken out of their everyday place in the workshop, studio and real world, and forced to put on a good show, which they do, however uncomfortably”99. Regarding materiality, Bret Schneider observes:

Gedi Sibony attempts to enhance the idealist shortcomings of material. Solid matter, doomed to gravity, incapable of floating or levitating, is exploited for what it is and is not and will never be, when divested of conceptual meaning. The work is materialist in the most grounded way imaginable, but ‘imaginable’ is the key word here. The goal in such materialism is self-evidently the negation of conceptual, dematerial trends in contemporary art as well as the so-called critical artist, but there is a more interesting notion that these works provoke: that the material world is an alien one that has never been sufficiently created, that humans have had their heads in ineffectual spiritual clouds since the dawn of man. It is not as if Sibony tries to recover a lost materialism, but rather provokes an understanding of material that has never really occurred by exercising material unrestrained by content, through formalizing it.100

I interpret Schneider’s ‘material unrestrained by content’ as material without a message or narrative thrust imposed onto it by the artist to actively direct the reading by the viewer. The work of materiality itself is plainly presented. The exercising of that material, through elegant and gentle formalisation, has the potential to provoke a new way of apprehending the material, engendering a heightened awareness of its qualities and embedded energies. But Schneider’s remark that “…the material world is an alien one that has never been sufficiently created…” reminds me that Sibony’s formalisation, however subtle, is the work

99 ibid.
of ‘his’ hand alone. This again raises the spectre of the primacy of the ‘masterful’ artist and complicates an entirely materialist account of matter towards which I tend. Sibony is masterfully playing an old game but so very, very softly and with almost unprecedented austerity\(^\text{101}\). His economic interventions combined with thoughtful balance of form, materiality and space can really make us look and wonder what is there. Our attention is focussed on the subtle tensions within the composition. By openly exposing exactly what the material is, how the work was put together, Sibony sets in motion a performative role for the artistic process:

\[
\text{…the fragility of construction is a device to draw attention to the actual works, which are not as quotidian, recycled, or everyday as they appear, as those qualities are exceeded through the artist’s careful deliberation, which is mimicked by the viewer’s carefully attentive body – something missing in the everyday, which Sibony masterfully uses against itself by an attenuated empiricism.}^{102}
\]

\textit{case study \# 8: channeling Gedi Sibony by Sarah crowEST}

\textit{Fig. 24, crowEST, the portal, the circumstance, 2010}

\(^{101}\) Richard Tuttle’s three-dimensional doodles exhibit similar lightness of touch and paucity of materials. The Italian 1960s movement Arte Povera employed poor, unglamorous, everyday materials and simple gestures to close the gap between art and life as they connected with social and political agendas to break down hierarchies. Most Arte Povera works looked haphazard, used unaltered elements as they embraced an anti-interventionist approach manifesting as a turning away from ‘high’ art values.

Channeling Gedi Sibony is a group of works exhibited at the Trocadero Art Space in 2010 as part of the Cashmere If You Can series of expanding group shows\textsuperscript{103}. The proposition involved channeling Sibony (partly chosen for his status as a youngish, successful, male artist from New York\textsuperscript{104}) in an attempt to explore from the inside something of his process and artistic demeanour. I confess a deep admiration and fascination for his practice, finding both congruence between our care for the overlooked but also a deep gulf between his sense of sureness about the validity of his nonchalant practice and my pressing uncertainty compelling me to do too much. It is with some chagrin that I notice he trusts his own intelligence more than I trust mine. Clearly, without doing very much at all but using his eyes, noticing and choosing things, Sibony confidently and masterfully proclaims nothing very much to be something, and might be described as having a practice predicated on him fulfilling the constructed role of ‘the genius’. (As my argument against conventional methodological procedures for artists, augmented by Sandqvist’s centre experience showed, this is still a very attractive position for an artist to take). Whilst Sibony’s work is un-monumental and he eschews traditional skills and materials, it has been overwhelmingly framed in the artworld as magical, mysterious and probing of the malleability of experience with Sibony’s eye at the centre. It is within this space between, on the one hand, the autonomy of the artist and their choices and, on the other hand, the leaving of the materials unbothered – to be what they are, that I encounter part of the aforementioned tension. In finding enchanting qualities in Sibony’s work and in attempting to reconcile them with my strongly materialist thesis and propensity to do too much I am provoked to embark on this ‘channeling’ exercise.

My ‘channeling’ of Gedi Sibony is used as a strategy to inhabit the ethos and approach to practice of Sibony rather than mimic his style. The channelling process occurs through observation of his work, gleaning and internalising curator, critic and writer commentaries, Sibony’s own descriptions and some anecdotal views of mutual friends. The incongruity of

\textsuperscript{103}Cashmere If You Can is a project of seven exhibitions, initiated in 2007, that will span over 7 years. Each exhibition has been assigned a bracket of seven years of human development, C.I.U.C. Series-1 (0-7yrs), C.I.U.C. Series-2 (8-14yrs), etc. With each passing year the C.I.U.C. group acquires a new artist, so, that by the 7th year, 7 artists have joined and continued with the project until the final show. The overall Cashmere If You Can project is something separate from this PhD research. It is a project instigated by others but I used my personal contribution to the exhibition as an opportunity to test my research.

\textsuperscript{104}I mention these somewhat arbitrary biographical details here because in the context of the Cashmere If You Can project they had relevance to the professional, artistic aspirations humorously and critically addressed through the seven ages or stages that structured the exhibition series.
channeling such an artist with whom I share an ethical concern\textsuperscript{105} in relation to materials and processes but (and I write this with some regret) not his exquisite restraint, holds potential for humour and critique. I did not aspire to imitate Sibony’s oeuvre or expect my work would mimic his because, where he is poetic and spare, I am mute and lumpen and where his arrangements are barely there and almost seem to levitate, mine are worked, dense and almost always too much. How far, in his direction could I drift?

A digital video, Channeling Gedi, 2010, (13:31 minutes, looped) shows ‘found’ unedited roving footage of the interior of my Lisbon studio combined with a text devised via my channeling process. Initially, my plan was to run a similar text over images of sculptural works and arrangements that transpired during my research into the sayings and doings of Sibony. However, in keeping with his approach of finding things and using them relatively unbothered and unworked I selected a single cut section of video footage from my archive allowing it to remain barely touched apart from laying over the words.

This is a transcript of the rolling text which I constructed for the video work Channeling Gedi Sibony:

he is an Alpha-male ‘genius' and…. 
she is a woman who does too much.

... my artistic posture....... 
I shift between great seriousness and great levity....
between basic research and amused nonchalance....
between deep immersion in the fables of Chuang Tzu and the humour of Buster Keaton
I do not struggle against the living....
I never resist the general entropy that governs the universe

my lack of application is not exactly laziness…
its more like hyper inactivity
I can’t stay focused on one thing ....
my mind is very active…
constantly spinning in all directions

\textsuperscript{105} We share a distaste for over consumption of material goods and the inherent waste and squandering of resources involved.
I can't be still

it's being there that I am looking for…. so it became natural to use things that are on hand…
or materials that are light…. available, and easy to move around
I like to gather the unused to use what I already have then I put them to work to serve something else

I use the best of what I can find that's left over I like things that hide in plain sight

often the excitement comes from exposing the eccentric pragmatic operations of an amateur

I like best work that is left the way it is and can live out its years without anything imposed on it

the things are unbothered

what angers me is…. filling up my space, snapping my attention…
and telling me to buy this product or to produce waste
in this society I feel forcefully removed from reverence …for this I blame technology, the privileging of information and so on …this is our era …And you can feel the atrophy of certain human abilities

there is humour in the work….
a sense of liberation a sense of provocation
I try to expand the space, gently introduce beautiful, elegant objects…

The channeling process involved immersing myself in all available textual and anecdotal sources about Sibony. The sound and vision provided by Youtube in the form of direct access to Sibony's own demeanour and utterings, proved particularly rich. An example,
offering both humour and insight, are the ramblings of the curator Anthony Huberman as he talked about the working process of Sibony. The following is a partial transcript:

...you're on the floor, but then you like, then he notices this sort of piece of carpet and fabric over there and he wants to lay it out but these two pieces of carpet are in the way and he picks them up and moves them out of the way so he can like yunno like spread out and like it or whatever he's doing in the studio at the time you know and then like he's spreading out the blanket and seeing whether that somehow like transforms something and it doesn't work yunno he can put it aside and yunno the next day or the next hour or two weeks later he'll like be over here and find those two carpets like that and it's like kind of by not trying to do it that he can do it. It's by not trying to solve the problem... as long as you don't try to solve it and kind of look next to the problem...that maybe...maybe so. He always jokes about... as an artist what he does is just show up at the studio and like... he needs to wait for something... things to happen...you know he has.... What he needs to do he say yeah I come.... I just move things and I spend time just like living with these things. I share my life with these materials and I'm like touching them. I move them around. It's like doing that that sometimes I kind of find my work. I find the sculpture there. He's telling me stuff... that he was just leaning against a wall because it was in the way and he was going to find a crate. That's how he did that elephant mask thing... it was few weeks ago we were like looking for a... carpet in his store somewhere... and he was like, ah wait and he was like ok pull this and... like lean all these things and then he came like and opened the door and closed it and right the way he closed the door we had that particular angle on that crate with that blanket on it. Then we had it and he was like oh my god what's that? What's that? You go... and yunno... it's kinda... but we would never have done that without... the kind of ...act of living with these things.... experiencing them....

In this description I find an exemplification in motion of a fumbling, bumbling, (albeit mostly the curator’s) non-predetermined process and the way a work transpires through chance movements and perceptions. Living with things in the studio, letting them rest and noticing things anew all play their part in this process.

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106 Transcribed from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7q4fzssCLTs (accessed on 19/6/2010)
In March, 2011 I moved a mass of works, part-works, objects and materials from my studio to the student gallery at the VCA. *The things they are unbothered* was a mutating, provisional installation of these items spread across the entire floor. A lunch table with snacks and water was set up to encourage other artists and students to bring their lunch and partake in conversation. Visitors were invited to move and play with the forms and via a collection of actions the arrangement was altered daily. This process allowed me the opportunity to see what I had by way of opening out the previously compacted contents of the studio. This was revelatory as I had been agglomerating and wadding matter and paint somewhat blindly for several months in a process that had developed a reassuring momentum with which I was able to continue in a sure-footed manner. I needed to stop. It was time to see what I had done to see where I was going. I was astonished to see how ugly and awful everything was and that the pleasure, for me, was all in the process rather than the viewing. The colours of the found paint was vomit inducing, the large things looked too small and the sense of unboundedness of an expanse of floor scattered with random looking shapes looked messy and entirely without elegance. The forms that I had intimately and stickily bothered and tended to in my immersive, cosy cave of a studio were quite simply horrid. They had become too textured when I wasn’t paying attention. Could it be that the naughty, agentic matter was exercising its potential for mischief? It was the combination of pulped paper, used coffee grouts and the rejected paint of others and my manic attempts to ‘clean up’ by incorporating it all into sculptures that got me into this trouble.

Letting the material lead the way had resulted in a sprawling mass of forms but, in exercising no control at all in an effort to avoid conscious planning and pre-conceived outcomes, I had managed to astonish myself with my capacity to produce such an excess of ghastly things. Another view had become available to me in shifting what was a dense mass of forms in the cave-like studio into the bright open space of the gallery. It became apparent to me that I needed some of Sibony’s pared down aesthetics and poetry to counter-balance the residue of calamity that I discerned from my manifest tendency to over-make. Gedi Sibony places spatial concerns and light at the core of his practice and lets his objects and materials do the work of showing what they are and how they inhabit...
space. With regard to the question of the site specificity of his sculptures against their potential to go anywhere, Sibony has likened them to a travelling circus – adapting.  

I embarked on a more watchful, gentle process of rendering the mass of forms less dense and overwhelming and taking them towards the presentation that became the inexplicable magnetism of an alien object exhibition. This process involved adapting what I had to where I was – the Margaret Lawrence Gallery and this became a more attentive kind of making-do on a grand scale. I began to bother the materials and forms less and became more attuned to the ways in which they bothered me back. This realisation marked the beginnings of a deeper engagement with the forces inherent within matter that had been active throughout the PhD without being the central focus of my attention. This notion of unstable, agentic matter, as it came to be figured within this project is expanded in chapter four. In tuning in to the ways in which the forms inhabited the gallery space and through observing their capacity to be slippery in the face of viewers propensities to ascribe meaning I was better able develop and showcase their mute and resistant qualities.

**summary:**

The practice of Gedi Sibony has been provocative in engendering thought and art work in the context of this PhD. Questions regarding matter’s capacity to be bothersome and to be bothered by the artist stimulate thought and practice and enrich the encounter with stuff. Sibony’s oeuvre alerts me to the fact that within my own practice, if materials are dealt with loosely or informally, the ever-present opportunity for me to keep bothering them in a sequence of perpetual reworkings is enhanced. Through a process of intensive bothering of materials during this PhD, which has then largely been undone and reworked, I have confirmed my suspicions that I harbour aspirations to bother things less. At the same time I delight in the processes with materials that involve seeing, gathering, making, agglomerating, painting, sticking, moulding, in short, bothering. Further more, in re-

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108 An example of this can found in my use of plinths. I made use of what was already available and adapted the works to fit the supports available as in 23 things tending towards white which may have been, for example, 13 things tending towards white under different circumstances and constraints such as the size of available plinths.
configuring and re-contextualising works into new exhibition contexts and arrangements (that might involve making-do) and often re-working elements and materials entirely, I continue to bother them over time. This is indicative of an ambivalent pleasure that the highly bothered works that transpired during this PhD hold for me. I am drawn to those sculptures and objects that can reflectively acknowledge the bothersome qualities of materiality. A direction for further research is suggested by the idea of treading lightly with materials in terms of the processes used thereby allowing the materiality itself to be bothersome without being so very bothered by me.

What might these ideas on bothering contribute to the field of sculpture, for art and beyond? In extending the implications beyond my own practice and the materials that bother me in the studio or the wider world it is useful to consider what is activated when the bothersome flows over into the exhibition situation. The exhibition produces a context in which the viewer (and also the maker) may be affected, gain new perceptual awareness and knowledge through an encounter with the art. The work of art that bothers the viewer produces presence (rather than consuming it) and that adds something beyond a merely pragmatic use109. The viewer brings a framework and experience to looking that operates as a force that’s brought upon the work. If this is disrupted in some way it activates a different encounter demanding a divergent relation with knowledge formation and the world as we do not yet know it.

In addition to this, further implications for the field lie in sculpture’s capacity to bring real physical presence (more than other mediums) giving it a power to resist representational logic through being itself. Its sheer materiality is active, productive, has agency and activates and connects to things beyond itself. Sculpture is bothersome through its capacity to evoke the virtual through the activity of its presence.

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109 Jeroen Boomgaard informed my thinking here in his argument for a radical artistic autonomy and against the contemporary critique of autonomy. “An autonomous work of art can…not only succeed in unmasking self-interest as the dominant principle, but can impart a new authority to the symbolic freedom that was formerly the hallmark of autonomy. Because the artist chooses of her own free will to create an entirely personal world, she shows that it is possible to choose radically. And because she places that out of self-interest created world as a symbol for the possible, she succeeds in charging the idea of public interest with new energy.” Boomgaard, J. (2004) Radical Autonomy: Art in the Era of Process Management. OPEN. Amsterdam, SKOR. p 5
Fig. 25, *purposeful purposelessness - nothing*
CHAPTER FOUR: MATTER

chapter guide:

This chapter begins with a lively definition of matter. A methodology is then proposed that foregrounds a conscious and responsive relationship to matter and materials and their existence in the world within a large web of forces. This awareness involves inhabiting a tentative, non-dominant role that whilst engaging in processes of transforming materials and contexts is attentive to all forces that affect form. An approach to art practice that is material, durational and responsive to the provocations of excess and the ecological is considered in relation to the philosophy of Elizabeth Grosz. Notions of excess as they relate to becoming artistic and becoming other are explored before a brief explication of Bergson’s concept of philosophical intuition and its rigours. Duration and becoming are addressed in relation to practice and then, in contextualising the importance of materials to this PhD, the process of use and reuse are articulated via studio procedure as production of ecosystem.

definition:

Matter is simply defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “Physical material of any kind …esp. when only vaguely or generally characterized… Frequently with modifying word”.\textsuperscript{110} This broad definition is applicable to a very basic way the word matter has been used in this dissertation which does indeed become modified (and complicated) with the appendage of ‘bothersome’. This chapter will focus on expanding this basic concept of matter as \textit{just any kind of material} to one in which matter is figured as active. In the Oxford English Dictionary matter is also described as “That which has mass and occupies space; physical substance as distinct from spirit, mind, qualities, actions, etc.”\textsuperscript{111} Here we see matter described as contrasting with those very things that constitute energy suggesting a


\textsuperscript{111} ibid. (available online)
concept of matter as a passive or inert substance. These kind of rigid dualisms are
something this PhD seeks to think past by circling through open-ended, process-oriented
work whilst playing with (subverting) the ‘appearance of matter as that which is still, aloof
and, as I describe it, unbothered. I believe one of the contributions of this PhD project
resides in this approach.

Matter has been traditionally organised into binary opposites such as matter—mind,
matter—form and matter—energy. In these contrasting binaries matter is conceived as
something distinct from energy whereas in this project, matter is positioned as having
agency and an inherent self-generating dynamism. In taking a particular position on
thinking about and engaging with the force of matter I question these habitual ways of
conceptualising the world into divisions of inorganic matter and organic life.

Matter is conceived as an immense continuum, a field of immanent and continuously
emergent relations conditioned by duration, flux and process. Matter, under particular
conditions, is actualised into things and bodies with self-organising trajectories,
propensities or tendencies. These things and bodies (recognising here no essential or
elemental difference between minerals, vegetables, animals and humans) are not stable or
given, not so much beings but as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari imagined,
‘becomings. My arrival at this understanding and its emergence between the experience
of art production and textual research throughout the PhD are extrapolated below.

To summarise the definition: my use of the word ‘matter’ in this PhD describes physical
material (of any kind) that has oscillating qualities, self-disclosing and self-organising rather
than something inert and distinct from energy. As Grosz describes it becoming is “…the
very principle of matter itself”.

112 See, for example, the lumpy, rock-like forms in the exhibition the inexplicable magnetism of an alien object. Many
of these forms appear to be mute, solid and unbothered but are, in fact, the result of accretive, endless
bothering processes and were destined, on de-installation of the exhibition, for new mutations and contexts.
Their ‘pose’ as monumental sculpture is a transitory performance.
Press)
University Press) p 52
proposition:

Acknowledging that matter has vibrancy and volatility and imagining there is no such thing as matter as inert substance activates a series of relationships that produce agency in the world via the emergence of nonhuman and human forces. I propose a methodology and relationship to materials that maintains an awareness of their existence in the world within a large web of forces. This awareness facilitates a co-active role that, whilst engaging in processes of transforming materials and contexts, is attentive to all those forces that determine form. My role as an artist is therefore one of entering the flows of both collaboration and intervention with materials whilst simultaneously following them through processes of making and unmaking in which they do what they do. This non-teleological way of working materialises a studio procedure as a production of ecosystem and, as such, relates to this PhD’s contribution to new knowledge.

contextualisation:

The challenge here is to locate my daily procedures and hands-on and hands-off experiences with materials within the larger philosophical discourse surrounding matter, its vibrancy and the creative impulse. The theories of Elizabeth Grosz have provided an invaluable conduit to a world of ideas that encompass the notion of material as a series of temporary eruptions in a flux of solidification and decomposition. Grosz seeks to understand “… life and matter in terms of their temporal and durational entwinements”.

It is through Grosz’s engagement with art that I have been enabled to connect with ideas that begin with Charles Darwin and are developed through Henri Bergson, then Deleuze and Guattari which concern the way matter carries duration, flux, non-identity and becoming.

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115 ‘bothering’ and ‘not bothering’ with materials
117 This contextualisation of my practice also has its roots in the (new) materialist history and understanding of material processes derived from the sciences of dynamics to be found in De Landa, M. (1997) *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History*, (New York, Zone Books) in which De Landa, (as described on the book jacket) “traces the concrete movements and interplays of matter and energy through human populations in the last millennium”. De Landa shows that human societies and the economic, biological and linguistic domains that
Grosz looks at the conditions of art’s emergence and offers a philosophical underpinning for a particular way of imagining the possible relations of the artist to matter. This enables an understanding of the forces behind a contemporary approach to art practice that is material, durational and excessive and in addressing the problems and provocations of ‘stuff’ considers the ecological and the political implications.

As a philosopher, Grosz speaks in a far-reaching, general way about the origins of the impulse to produce art that arises in both humans and non-humans that resonates strongly with the way I produce art and place it for potential viewers. More particularly, the way I have come to understand my co-active relations with materials combined with making-without-preconception as ‘becomings’ has evolved via an interweaving of these ideas with practice within this PhD. As such Grosz’s vast body of writing on matter, life, politics and life constitute an ever-present atmosphere within which this PhD has transpired over three years.

In further contextualising this PhD art practice within the above mentioned field of ideas I will proceed to use my own work and approach to materials to ground the discussion. For clarification I will use a series of sub-headings to explicate several approaches and concepts that are impossible to lay out in a linear argument but will cross-link in multiple ways to provide a view. This view will contribute to the positioning of my practice within a methodological framework that seeks to work from within the dynamism and force of matter and its operations.

have shaped them derive from internal (self-directed) morphogenetic capabilities that lie within the flow of matter-energy itself.

Grosz uses Darwin’s work with (amongst others) that of French philosopher Luce Irigaray as a resource for developing a politicised, radical and feminist understanding of matter, nature, biology, time and becoming. The feminist slant of Grosz’s philosophy is of interest to me but is not something I have chosen to incorporate into this dissertation. Artist and academic Terri Bird also contributes to this line of thought expanding on the relations of matter and materiality in art and how they can be figured differently beyond a legacy of dualisms. Bird is unique and important here in that her writing brings these ideas into the realm of contemporary art. See: Bird, T. (2011) Figuring Materiality. Angelaki, 16(1), 5-14. This addresses the work of Fiona Abicare. See also: Bird, T. (2009) Material Thinking: Essay for Exhibition ‘Accommodating Spaces, Materials, Projects, People, Videos, Actions, Thoughts: Relatively’ (The Narrows) on the work of Bianca Hester.
becoming artistic

Grosz’s readings of Deleuze and Guattari open their thought to possible relationships between artistic behaviour and the natural world. Grosz provides a link between an (my) artistic practice that expresses evolutionary characteristics with an increasingly primal response to chaos and matter and the silent knowledge or nascent awareness in Sandqvist’s intuition or centre experience. In both there is an emphasis on a kind of knowing, half-knowing or even not-knowing that leads to something unforeseen. “Art”, says Grosz, glossing Deleuze and Guattari, “elaborates, produces, and intensifies affects and percepts as its mode of response to and contamination by chaos”\textsuperscript{119}. Art intensifies sensation and is, in part, an excess of the body’s capacities and productions. My hope is for an art that brings forth what is not already recognisable. In attempting to alter things, create variance, imagine and produce those things and affects that are not already there, I find there is great room for error, chaos and an uncalled for excess. Excessive and useless production for its own sake often feels like extraneous behaviour to me but it sets up the conditions for an affective intensity to occur sometimes in a way that could not be predetermined.\textsuperscript{120}

Grosz, drawing extensively on the concept of life as it is figured by Bergson\textsuperscript{121} and reinvented by Deleuze\textsuperscript{122}, understands life as the “becoming-artistic of the material world” and “art as the mode of making matter live,”\textsuperscript{123} She suggests that:

> Life brings art to matter and art brings matter to life. Art here is not to be understood as fabrication, the subordination of matter to conscious purpose or taste, but as an intensification: life magnifies and extends matter and matter in turn intensifies and transforms life. Art is engendered through the excess of matter that life utilises for its own sake, and that


\textsuperscript{120} As De Landa describes it, we inhabit a world of complex structures comprised of geological, biological, social and linguistic constructions “that are nothing but accumulations of materials shaped and hardened by history. Immersed as we are in this mixture, we cannot help but interact in a variety of ways with the other historical constructions that surround us, and in these interactions we generate novel combinations, some of which possess emergent properites. In turn, these synergistic combinations, whether of human origin or not, become the raw material for further mixtures. This is how the population of structures inhabiting our planet has acquired its rich variety, as the entry of novel materials into the mix triggers wild proliferations of new forms.” De Landa, M. (1997) *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History*, (New York, Zone Books) p 25-26


excess of life that directs it beyond itself. This art cannot be identified with the creation of artworks, but rather is a temporary, unstable perhaps unsustainable union of the living and the non-living, a co-becoming, like a wave-surfing or gymnastics in which unliving forces (an event) and living forces coalesce, impart to each other their impacts and resources, and create for a moment a hybrid, something non-living which nonetheless lives a life of its own.\textsuperscript{124}

This, Grosz elaborates, is what Deleuze would describe as ‘becoming other’, and I return to the concept of becoming as “the replacement of static conceptions of things through the creation of dynamic conceptions of relations”\textsuperscript{125} below in the section on duration and becoming.

Referring to simple life forms, Grosz emphasises that the processes of evolution are never predictable in advance:

\begin{quote}
Such elementary life can only evolve, become more, develop and elaborate itself to the extent that there is something fundamentally unstable about both its milieu and its organic constitution. The evolution of life can be seen not only in the increasing specialisation and bifurcation or differentiation of life forms from each other, the elaboration and development of profoundly variable morphologies and bodily forms, but, above all, in their becoming-artistic, in their self-transformations, which exceed the bare requirements of existence.\textsuperscript{126}
\end{quote}

The idea of exceeding the bare requirements of existence via artistic emergences is something that seems a very long way from the conventions and structures of our sophisticated contemporary art world. Grosz, in taking our attention back to primal, evolutionary processes, is describing a world in which we are enmeshed rather than one over which we have dominion.\textsuperscript{127} I recognise these processes as something continuous and vibrating in my practice and of the universe as a whole.

When I watch documentary footage of Bowerbirds and their displays of gathered decorative elements, such as David Attenborough’s \textit{Animal Behaviour of the Australian

\begin{footnotes}
\item[124] ibid. p 299
\end{footnotes}
Bowerbird  

I feel an affinity with the process and pleasures of these extraordinary creatures. The search for eye-catching things in the surrounding area, the gleaning of what one can carry and the careful arrangements contingent on readily available resources resonates with the way my artistic efforts come together. Grosz positions art as an abundance or excess where art is revelry in the excess of nature and energy in our bodies connected to sexual selection. I will return to this artistic becoming which is excessive to bare survival, but first I will touch upon Bergson’s idea of intuition as a slightly more knowing return to the ideas discussed around intuition in chapter one accountable.

intuition and matter

Henri Bergson wrote of what he called ‘philosophical intuition’. This movement of intuition requires a subject to place herself in the very midst of things in the world and Grosz explains that Bergson’s precise method of ‘intuition’ is quite unlike the commonly understood meaning of this term as an emotive or impulsive feeling, a vague empathy.

The most general methodological question is this: How is intuition – which primarily denotes an immediate knowledge (connaissance) – capable of forming a method, once it is accepted that the method essentially involves one or several mediations? Bergson often presents intuition as a simple act. But, in his view, simplicity does not exclude a qualitative and virtual multiplicity, various directions in which it comes to be actualised. It is in this sense, then, that intuition involves a plurality of meanings and irreducible multiple aspects.

Through immersion without expectation or preconception, Bergson’s movement of intuition opens up the possibility to “…discern, gradually and with effort, through learning, the natural articulations between things, the places and events where differences most

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directly emerge”¹³³. This method for the discernment of difference or acute ‘noticing’ is prevalent in the realm of artistic endeavour and in appreciating and partaking of immanent forces at work within matter it becomes possible to move beyond preconceived patterns (for example of fabricating sculpture) and understand unforeseen movements and sensations beyond that with which we are already familiar. Grosz finds that the field of creation for artists is primarily durational and that “The common ground for all the arts is the rhythmic, irreducibly durational universe of invisible, inaudible forces whose order isn’t experientially discernible and is thus experienced or lived, at best as chaotic.”¹³⁴. This supports my position taken in chapter one, unaccountable, regarding the importance of the place of not-knowing in practice. I equate being immersed in experientially indiscernible forces that are lived as chaotic, as akin to this approach to practice.

Much more than something we know or recognise, Bergson’s emergent and imprecise movement of intuition is a “swirling of dust” a “shadow”¹³⁵ that might be discerned retrospectively. This is because intuition erupts only because “…our own inner life, the continuity of consciousness, reveals to us varieties of quality (that is, qualitative differences), a continuous forward movement and a unity and simplicity of direction…”¹³⁶ As an artist, an attunement with one’s objects, materials and processes can result in a sympathy, beyond rational thought, that carries one along in a flow. “This inner continuity, to which all living things have direct access in varying degrees, is that through which they can access the continuity with matter and the world of objects, through which a different kind of knowledge is possible.”¹³⁷. This unknown knowledge is the very thing that lurks, in the midst of my practice, at the utmost edges of my understanding impetuously propelling things forward. Bergson recognised artists as particularly predisposed to becoming professional intuiters:

Suppose that instead of trying to rise above our perception of things we were to plunge into it for the purpose of deepening and widening it. Suppose that we were to insert our will into it,

¹³⁴ ibid. p 86
¹³⁷ ibid. p 49
and this will, expanding, were to expand our vision of things. We should obtain...a philosophy where nothing in the data of the senses of the consciousness would be sacrificed: no quality, no aspect of the real would be substituted for the real ostensibly to explain it...It would have taken everything that is given, and even more, for the senses and consciousness, urged on by this philosophy to an exceptional effort, would have given it more than they furnish it naturally...For hundreds of years, in fact, there have been men whose function has been precisely to see and to make us see what we do not naturally perceive. They are the artists.138

The plunging into chaos, the opening of the senses to all things to expand our vision and the sharing of those things – I see these as part of my task as an artist but, in immersing myself through practice in indifferent materiality, I cannot know, in language, what I do. I can show and I can describe and much, much later discern a pattern and perhaps the significance of the context. (This connects to the ideas in Gertrud Sandqvist’s centre experience addressed in chapter one unaccountable). Meanwhile I both bumble and leap along. In struggling with articulating the expanded vision of things in words I can only hope that discernment of differences in things (materials, objects) and tendencies can be recognised in the work that I produce and present to the viewer. Intuition intervenes to transform intelligence but here that is more likely to be seen and perhaps felt rather than verbalised. Deleuze described intuition as “…the joy of difference”139.

duration and becoming

For Grosz, amongst thinkers, Charles Darwin is considered the most “powerful and more pervasive in his understanding of time and becoming”140. Grosz puts forward Darwin’s account of time as “an open-ended, even random, becoming”141 as being key in enabling new understandings in the areas of cosmology and biology of his time. Grosz discerns a point of harmonising resonance with Darwin and the philosophers Nietzsche, Bergson and Deleuze, that, despite the non-convergence in many of their explorations, “synchronises a

141 ibid. p 3
cluster of concepts: chance, randomness, open-endedness, and becoming". In conceptualising time as becoming it is figured as an opening up which is at the same time a form of bifurcation or divergence. As Grosz succinctly sums this up:

Each conceives of time as difference... Each rejects the notion of time as passivity, a mode of passing, a neutral immersion of things in a temporal medium; each refuses to think of time as a modality or dimension of space... More positively, each in his own way affirms time as an open-ended and fundamentally active force – a materialising if not material – force whose operations have an inherent element of surprise, unpredictability, or newness.

This idea of time as an open-ended and dynamic force is a concept that underpins the unsettled, ever-shifting nature of my practice and is activated in the series of images *transformations of matter*. In this series an attempt is made to show how the idea of time as an open, becoming, active force is manifest through an art practice that is not focused on resolved and complete outcomes but exists within an ongoing state of flux. This series of images continues to expand as the works from the show are recorded as they find homes, land in the skip or decompose in the country. As Bergson put it “Form is only a snapshot view of transition.”

Grosz warns us that “…matter presents itself as the other, the spatial counterpart, the opposite of duration”. (This historically occurred when scientific disciplines reduced matter by dividing it up to render it analysable and predictable instead of seeing it as a

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142 ibid. 
143 ibid. pp 3 - 4
whole, open universe which is also duration)\textsuperscript{146}. However, Grosz reminds us that “…matter also carries, as it were in secret, duration, flux, non-identity, becoming”\textsuperscript{147}. Bergson imaginatively describes this larger view where matter “…thus resolves itself into numberless vibrations, all linked together in uninterrupted continuity, all bound up with each other, and travelling in every direction like shivers through an immense body”\textsuperscript{148}. This concept of the presentation or appearance of spatialised matter (for example through the objects in the exhibition \textit{the inexplicable magnetism of an alien object}) and the secret energies and forces we can imagine folded within is key to understanding the position taken within this PhD towards the temporal movements inherent to all things.

**Contextualisation:**

Here I use my own work to ground the discussion with reference to a studio ecosystem and the material factors I apprehend as duration or as movement inherent in matter.

**materials matter**

In this PhD matter itself is a catalyst for art production that utilises somewhat passively\textsuperscript{149} or responsively acquired and ethically sourced materials. Excess or waste materials and matter at-hand contribute to processes that are largely accumulative and accretive but fluid enough to encompass dissolution and disintegration. Nothing is discarded or wasted in a studio procedure viewed as an ecosystem within a wider network of ecosystems. Everything feeds into everything else in a particular ‘scheme of things’ involving the consideration, dispersion or densification of available resources. The tendency is for this matter to be transmogrified into something that resists categorisation or, an unaccountable

\textsuperscript{146} Whilst this implies a wholesale critique of science, it is made here in particular relation to the larger, universal whole. It must be recognised that science is at the forefront of expanding our understanding of matter such as, at the time of writing, the advances with the Higgs Boson particle experiments.

\textsuperscript{147} Grosz, E. (2007) Deleuze, Bergson and the Concept of Life. \textit{Revue Internationale de Philosophie}, 241 (3) p 293


\textsuperscript{149} Although I argue that decisions are being made from an open position in the middle of directions that proliferate in the process of art making, I use the word ‘passively’ here to allow for materials that appear in my studio as a result of generous donation or less generous dumping.
mass! Matter is transformed into matter. Bothersome matter is transformed into bothersome matter, which is again transformed into bothersome matter.

What constitutes ‘bothersome matter’ in relation to all potential material?

It is the stuff that is around that causes or motivates a response. What is to be done with this? It often transpires, somewhat unbidden and could be ignored or cast aside but it asserts a presence, requires attention and demands some care. For example, throughout the candidature I have collected the used coffee grounds from my daily pot of coffee but apartment dwelling has meant this previously composted material has become that which arouses concern (bothersome) prompting art activity. Sometimes the bothersome matter is in the form of donated material and appears in the studio, other times it is found (perhaps by the path or in an Op shop) and in exerting a pull or resonance, picked up or acquired. So, the matter, the materials could be something declassed or removed from their original purpose and context, something that is lurking in the vicinity perhaps abandoned or lost. There is clearly some filtering and selecting that goes which seems largely intuitive.

Grosz restates an idea from Bergson in which life extracts what it needs from the chaos that is nature by perceiving only that which is of interest, is of use and “that to which the senses have, through evolution, been attuned”. Grosz elaborates:

That is, life, even the simplest organic cell, carries its past with its present as no material object does. This incipient memory endows life with creativity, the capacity to elaborate an innovative and unpredictable response to stimuli, to react or, rather simply to act, to enfold matter into itself, to transform matter and life in unpredictable ways.

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150 Terri Bird, in reminding us how hard it is get past descriptions of matter’s operations without resorting to oppositional thinking, acknowledges all matter has a history which extends “to an understanding of matter as never ‘unformed’. It’s always in some form, just not yet formed or purposefully deployed by us.” Hester, B., Bird, T. & Australian Centre for Contemporary Art. (2011) Bianca Hester: Please Leave These Windows Open Overnight to Enable the Fans to Draw in Cool Air During the Early Hours of the Morning. (Southbank, Vic., Australian Centre for Contemporary Art) p 81


153 ibid. p 6
The artist, through practice, deploys particular techniques, materials and aesthetic preferences which can be in a state of flux but, never-the-less, influence what is bought into creative play. It may not be possible to say exactly why or how particular elements of chaos have been bracketed out and why others have become of interest and been chosen. However it is the appeal of difference and the allure of the new that contributes to a state of indeterminacy that is of distinct relevance to the kind of creative practice of interest here.

**studio ecosystem**

The space of the studio provides a repository for materials which become part of a milieu or community of things. This facilitates the production of a seemingly self-contained ecosystem in which all things are connected and the living and non-living things work together. In recognising my practice is also part of a larger eco system it is perhaps better conceived of as a concentration or magnification of those connective processes and relations at work through matter as they occur in my immediate vicinity. Accumulated matter, reference materials and objects that are visibly held in the studio allow me to participate in an ongoing encounter or dwelling with stuff. These materials, whether utilised or rejected at a given moment, are important and often serve as a starting point or dictate the direction a work will take. The materials that become art are a combination of conscious choice and unforseen fortuitous events where perhaps something underneath became attached or came into accidental relation with something else that was then accepted into the work. The materials-at-hand are contingent on the location of the studio or the site of production and the facilities and resources available. Excessive use of unnecessary carbon-emitting transport is avoided with most materials collected on foot or bicycle. The travel time and space between home and studio constitute the principle stretch

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154 I do believe that unnameable sensibilities are connected to ‘taste’ and fashion in ways we are not always aware of. When talking about the role of abstraction in painting today, Charline von Heyl addresses this idea, “I think that taste is an underrated power. One’s formative tastes are linked to a sincere conception of beauty. They stay charged, symbolically and aesthetically, no matter how much we should (and do) ‘know better’. We think our taste is evolving, often losing a powerful link to who we are and what we can do. The ‘tasteless colours’ of my paintings are the colours I grew up with. I find no others to be so directly satisfying.” Bedford, C. (2012) Dear Painter... Frieze, Issue (145) p 101

155 Materials and processes involved in casting, including foundry work, ceramics and digital printing have come into play prompted by opportunities offered in the sculpture workshop and digital lab at the VCA.
for gleaning. Ethical considerations in relation to materials are paramount where choices need to be made.

The continuous material reuse in making (referring here to the processes involving myself – including art-object break down and reconstruction) is undertaken with the recognition that the work carries with it the memory of its past in the form of embedded knowledge of what transpired before. This knowledge is largely available to me as the producer, partially available to viewers familiar with my practice, but perhaps not easily accessible to those coming to it for the first time. This factor of proposing matter as having agency, and the question of its subsequent visibility between intention and reception became significant throughout the PhD when exhibiting the work. The tension that arose between the numerous simultaneous events occurring in the studio, the exhibitions and the movements and changes over time between them tended towards a state of flux which had the potential to verge on the chaotic. This is one the reasons I elected to present the work as still objects and images. To actually present all the materials and forms and processes in movement (as in video) would remove the time for a slower contemplation enabling the subtler forces of change to be revealed.

**flux**

The series of images transformations of matter shown on the wall of the exhibition the inexplicable magnetism of an alien object sought to share (but not explicitly) the insight that a processual aspect was a constitutive element of the practice including the ‘frame’ of multiple exhibition contexts. Shifts occur in this state of flux and one thing becomes another or is little changed but differently contextualised. The images index some of those changes and transformations. However, close attention to these images and their suggestion of a linear sequence via numbering throws up a resistance to communication and diagrammatic revelation via linear progression. The numbering is not entirely logical and the images do not reveal a clearly readable sequence of events because that does not occur in the practice. The transformations are discernable in several directions – across the series and in the actual works comprising the entire contents of the exhibition the inexplicable magnetism of an alien object. The images assist the objects, the objects and
arrangements assist each other and the images and this is available to the viewer to pick up through the senses.

In apprehending an exhibition like the inexplicable magnetism of an alien object consisting of what might appear as still objects and images (as opposed to actually moving kinetic sculptures or video projections) a tension is activated. This occurs in the encounter between those things appearing to the viewer as objects for contemplation and their indicative context quietly expressing evidence of their state of flux. The works are better described as ‘intensifications’ of a notion of sculpture and time and movement which is duration. When the moment of ‘display’ is over they move along to become something else somewhere else.

**summary:**

In this chapter matter is defined as active even when it appears inert. I signalled my intention to rethink rigid dualisms that position matter in opposition to those things which are alive and dynamic and matter is therefore positioned as having agency and an inherent self-generating dynamism. Matter is conceived as an immense continuum, a field of immanent and continuously emergent relations conditioned by duration, flux and process that can be imagined as ‘becomings’. The definition of matter within this dissertation is of physical material (of any kind) that has oscillating qualities that are self-disclosing and self-organising.

I proposed an artistic methodology that involves entering flows of both collaboration and intervention with matter whilst simultaneously following materials through processes of making and unmaking in which they do what they do. In contextualising the artistic methodology used in this PhD, Elizabeth Grosz is cited as a conduit to several thinkers concerned with the way matter carries duration, flux, non-identity and becoming thereby enabling insights into the forces behind a contemporary approach to art practice that is material, durational, and excessive. It is acknowledged that the particular artistic methodology has been developed within a complex milieu of philosophical ideas connected to theories of evolution, chaos, excess, indeterminacy, and the unpredictable.
Grosz, drawing on Bergson, proposes that art is the mode of making matter live in that it intensifies matter and participates in a union of the living and non-living as a temporary co-becoming. Grosz brings the discussion on the impulse to make art to a place of enmeshment with the world privileging primal and evolutionary considerations where artistic becoming is seen as excessive to bare survival. Bergson’s notion of intuition is bought in relation to the place of not-knowing in practice where being immersed in experientially indiscernible forces that are lived as chaotic is valued. Intuition and its place in transforming intelligence is considered as the realm of the artist where its involvement with a heightened noticing of things can be occasion for joy.

The notion of becoming and of duration as a materialising force whose operations have an inherent element of surprise and unpredictability is figured in the series of images transformations of matter which highlights aspects of practice that exist within an ongoing state of flux with no resolved and complete outcomes. Materials as they are used, reused and used up in the studio and beyond are positioned as part of a wider eco system and imagined as forming a sustainable, micro-eco system as artistic process. As part of a larger eco system, the sculptures and images produced are conceived of as a concentration or magnification of those connective processes and relations at work through matter.

Bothersome matter as excess and waste material that constitutes an ethical burden requiring attention thereby leads to an incorporation into studio processes in which nothing is wasted. Inklings and attractions for the new and unknown are connected to primal responses of life forms extracting what they need from chaos. These ideas and impulses, along with Bergson’s view of form as snapshot of transition in process, elucidate and inform my studio practice and have been drawn out most explicitly in my series of images, transformation of matter.
CHAPTER FIVE: HUMOUR

warning:

Orderly people who like things to be arranged in a linear time-line sequence will be perturbed by the position of this chapter in the dissertation. The title *an unaccountable mass: bothersome matter and the humorous life of forms* provided an idiosyncratic template for ordering information. So this is where it had to land in accordance with the phrase I selected for this PhD’s title. This is the closest I have come to imposing form on matter in this PhD and as a consequence I find myself, in slapstick terms, a woman in trouble.

chapter guide:

In this chapter I return to the very beginnings of this PhD research that emerged from a place of not knowing anything at all about the operations of humour arising in my work. From there I entered a circuitous and absorbing period of textual research on humour which, whilst returning me to a place of not-knowing, has provided a developed understanding of the effects of humour. The language and operations of slapstick emerged as an underlying and enduring influence on my practice with its roots in an attitude formed in my childhood.

First I will provide a definition of humour that emphasises the difficulty of pinning anything down in such a vast and incommensurable area. This definition is then expanded to deconflate humour and irony to further our understanding of the sense in which the term humour has been used to contribute to the shape of this PhD. A convincing proposition concerning humour proved elusive but some ideas regarding its usefulness to the project are suggested before a contextualisation of the discussion focussing on two of my works.
Firstly incongruity theories of humour are tested via the doubled arrangement of small
brown things 17 nasty little brown things and 16 beautiful little browns things. Secondly, humour,
as it is figured through slapstick, is then considered for its potential to contribute to an
artistic methodology through a case study of the expanding work mound activity. This is
undertaken with the intention of locating and exemplifying what slapstick activates through
art practice and, recognising the place of non-knowledge within this work, connecting it
with the position taken in chapter one unaccountable. Slapstick is addressed at length here
drawing on the texts of Jörg Heiser and Brian Dillon in order to better understand its
operations as they work within art practice and their potential use in developing a
methodological framework for disruption.

definition:

A clear definition of how the term humour is used in this paper is impossible beyond the
simple explanation of the word as referring to the quality of being amusing or comic. The
field of humour theory is complex and contradictory, complicated by fuzzy divisions and
crossovers between conceptualisations of the comic, laughter and humour. In his afterword
to The Labyrinth of the Comic, Richard Keller Simon elucidates upon the “…almost perfect
symmetry of binary oppositions, or mirrored and inverted arguments, and of flawed and
unreliable guides” and demonstrates how little agreement can be found at even the most
basic level of terminology. How or why things come to be funny is determined by culture.
In addition to this, as individuals located within common cultures, our sense of humour
can vary widely. To further complicate the matter my interest lies in a kind of humour that
is resistant to definition and fixity. This is based on the observation that the moment
humour becomes predictable it loses its edge and capacity for surprise (an important
element of humour).

‘Humorous’ is an adjective which the dictionary simply defines as “Full of, characterized
by, or showing humour or drollery; … facetious, jocular, comical, funny. (Of persons,

University Presses of Florida, Florida State University Press) p 239
157 ibid. p 239
actions, etc.)\textsuperscript{158} Similarly, this will barely suffice as a definition. Describing humour as that which causes laughter and amusement hardly gives us an insight into what it actually is. I will now shift and tighten the focus to expand an understanding of the term humour as it is positioned in this PhD by contrasting it with irony. This involves an extensive and circuitous attempt to elucidate upon something that, as I mentioned above, is almost impossible to pin down. Bringing what it is not into the discussion through differentiating it from irony offers some understanding.

\textbf{irony}

Irony is an often misunderstood and misused word and concept due to its unwieldy complexity. In language, irony is commonly used to express something different from the literal meaning of the words and images and sometimes the meaning can be expressed in language that signifies the complete opposite. Irony can allow us to see subtle contradictions within language and images enabling us to read between the lines rather than taking them at face value. Irony may also take the form of an incongruity\textsuperscript{159} between what occurs and what might be expected to happen, particularly when this disparity appears absurd and cause for hilarity.

\textbf{deconflating irony and humour}

Post-modern art practices of the 1980’s and 1990’s embraced ironic positions but more recently a tendency towards humour or post-irony has risen to the fore as an alternative to such cynical detachment\textsuperscript{160}. Robert Garnett has recently undertaken research that analyses humour in contemporary art using the theory of Deleuze to discuss what he considers the crucial, critical task of deconflating irony and humour. This is a particularly useful distinction to understand, and to consider in the context of this project, and I put my hand


\textsuperscript{159} This is an example of how complicated these definitions can be. In my opinion incongruity traverses the categorical distinctions of humour and irony.

\textsuperscript{160} Heinzelmann, M. (2011) Neues Rheinland: Die Postironische Generation, (Berlin, Die Gestalten Verlag) This is the catalogue from an exhibition of Rhineland artists who are in their thirties and are described as following on from earlier postmodern protagonists but rejecting of their distancing ironic attitude in favour of a more serious, engaged approach. This earnest attitude still nevertheless inclines towards humour.
up to having both accidentally and deliberately confused humour and irony in the past. Garnett’s text *Abstract Humour, Humorous Abstraction*\(^{161}\) foregrounds the distinctions between the negativity of irony and the more open form of critical and aesthetic intelligence which he proposes is humour. The aesthetic modality of humour has a distinct ethics and politics, and by separating its qualities from those of irony, we can focus on those attributes specific to humour.

There is always an element of uncertainty present in apprehending the difference between humour and irony. This is complicated by what I discern from Garnett’s thesis as the potential for the existence of both humour and irony within one art practice or body of work. This can depend on whether a literal reading is taken or the viewer simply allows themselves to be open to the ‘sense event’. An object or artwork can provoke a humorous response via the senses and might be described as abstract when, in a non-literal or non-prescriptive way, it opens or explodes sense into another place by over-turning expectations or disrupting habitual ways of seeing or understanding.

Deleuze, in cutting across categories of subjective and objective, of immanent and transcendent, described humour as breaking down subjective positions and fixed ideas of ‘the signifier’. He referred to humour across several of his texts as a tendency opposed to irony\(^{162}\). First I will lay out the various distinctions between humour and irony based on those described by Deleuze and those interpreted via Garnett and expanded by Andrew Hunt,\(^{163}\) to examine their usefulness in understanding where this PhD practice might be positioned in relation to humour.

**opening to the encounter**

For Deleuze the ironist is someone who is seeking a first or universal principle, a higher position or transcendent level from which to comment from above:


\(^{162}\) Deleuze used a term ‘superior irony’ to mean the same as humour as it is opposed to irony which in the interests of clarity I will not bring into the discussion. Colebrook, C. (2004) *Irony*, (Routledge, London) p 150.

The first way of overturning the law is ironic, where irony appears as an art of principles, of ascent towards the principles and overturning principles. The second is humour, which is an art of consequences and descents, of suspensions and falls.\textsuperscript{164}

Garnett describes it thus; “Irony rises to a transcendent Law or Idea and then descends in order to demonstrate its inadequacy to any worldly determinant context.”\textsuperscript{165} The humorist, by contrast, takes an element of risk, allowing for the joyous eruption of life or an openness to the encounter, failure and the fall. Deleuze has argued against irony and the elevation of the signifier to this higher place of all encompassing universality. The idea of imposed structures in language and the logic of the signifier and the speaking subject (seen as necessary for irony) is criticised as being of a modern Western system of thought. In the \textit{Logic of Sense},\textsuperscript{166} Deleuze attempted to free sense from this system of language by arguing that human signification and the creation of a speaking subject or ‘I’ are effects of a \textit{milieu} of sense which exceeds this system. He proposed that humour has an anti-subjective aspect and is an art of pure events that takes the human subject back or ‘down’ to its corporeal origins.

Deleuze contrasted the operation of irony as that which is prepared in advance of an encounter, with humour which involves being open to the encounter\textsuperscript{167}. Across various Deleuzian texts and Garnett’s \textit{Abstract Humour, Humorous Abstraction},\textsuperscript{168} and Hunt’s analysis in \textit{Humour v Irony}\textsuperscript{169} I have gleaned the following features of humour and irony to clarify and expand upon the aforementioned distinctions: Humour is often abstract, tender and empathetic with an audience whereas irony is detached and embodies a violent tendency. Humour can be compared to masochism and, if it has the capacity to hurt, that is most frequently directed at the self rather than others, whereas irony represents a sadistic position in contemporary practice\textsuperscript{170}. Humour takes the affirmative, benevolent, self-deprecating position whereas irony takes a position of distance and is a knowing critical instrument. Humour can be described as “a system that questions accepted values and


\textsuperscript{165} Garnett, R. (2010b) \textit{Abstract Humour, Humorous Abstraction}, (Edinborough University Press) p 178

\textsuperscript{166} Deleuze, G. (1990) \textit{The Logic of Sense}, (New York, Columbia University Press) p 7


\textsuperscript{168} Garnett, R. (2010b) \textit{Abstract Humour, Humorous Abstraction}, (Edinborough University Press)


\textsuperscript{170} ibid. p 16
patterns of experience and is therefore more in keeping with a search for new commonalities and differences between cultures. Humour doesn’t necessarily mean funny, comedic or infantile. Although irony is perceived to be more adult, world weary, knowing and sensible, Hunt points out that paradoxically it is possibly a more immature response when compared with humour. Humour is open and autonomous where irony is prescriptive. Humour is treachery and the agent is the traitor whilst irony practices positionality and the agent is the trickster. The traitor makes gestures and proceeds through ‘posture’ as opposed to positionality. The trickster plays on words and practices the transcendent ironic positionality of ‘discourse specificity’. Deleuze proposed a counter-ironic direction which avoids the point of view from above and beyond life, to apprehend a life as a joyous or humorous multiplicity of incommensurable perceptions.

This clarification leads me to understand that it is an open, affirmative humour rather than a closed, proscriptive irony that underpins this research and informs the emergent strategies. This lengthy expanded attempt at defining the humour as it lurks in this PhD has involved the negation of irony and, as such, touches on some complex ideas. I introduce it for its importance in imparting a ‘sense’ of what humour means to me even as it evades definition.

**proposition:**

Humour is elusive in the context of this PhD in terms of developing a satisfying strategy but a slapstick attitude is ever present. I therefore abandon all pretence at constructing a plausible proposition here. I find it is more honest to disclose that a particular way of working with (humour) theory in relation to practice arose wherein the theoretical works contributed to the transformation and reorientation of the mode of operation that my practice took during the PhD. In simple terms this means that the humour research affected the works that I produced in various unforeseen ways.

171 ibid. p 14
172 ibid. p 14
The focus on the aspects of humour and slapstick that resonate contribute to an articulation and framing of my PhD practice. The explication of humour as it is contrasted with irony and research into slapstick methods was useful in informing the strategies of this PhD project but mostly served to highlight the importance of avoiding knowingly constructed ‘humorous’ art works. Insights gleaned into the operations of humour and what it activates provided fertile ground for developing a methodology for production that attends to moments of ‘short-circuit’ or shocks to thought that can occur unexpectedly through practice.

**contextualisation:**

In this section I describe how humour provided the original impetus for this PhD project. I briefly run through the initial questions and focus of the research. Slapstick is addressed at some length in relation to two artworks. Although the project shifted away from being centrally concerned with humour, several ideas encountered during this foundational research phase provided jumping off points to lines of thought and an approach to practice which have remained relevant throughout. Early research extensively explored: traditional theories of humour including superiority,\(^174\) relief\(^175\) and incongruity,\(^176\) how humour transpires in art practice, both from an art historical view and via more contemporary tendencies\(^177\). The aim was to gain a deeper understanding of what humour was, how humour emerged through art practice to then explore the potential for a strategic approach armed with this knowledge. I soon found myself on slippery ground.

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174 The superiority theory revolves around recognising a feeling of supremacy over others through ridiculing their defects. It is fundamentally a theory of mockery that suggests that laughter results from disparaging or degrading others.

175 Release or relief theories are typically associated with Freud, whereby humour is seen as a way to release or redirect energy that is pent up. The energy discharged in laughter is pleasurable because it might be considered to economise on energy that would otherwise be used to contain or repress psychic activity. “Freud theorised that humour works because it appeals to unconscious thoughts that remain largely hidden in the majority of our social interactions” Stott, A. (2005) *Comedy* (London, Routledge) p 138

176 Incongruity is discussed in the case study: *brown things* in chapter six *humour* of this dissertation.

177 I have not included this research in this dissertation but the breadth of it is reflected in the bibliography.
humour: barking up the wrong tree

I found humour to be something quite ungraspable and several problems were encountered in foregrounding it within this project and within an art practice at large. Initially the research into humour from a theoretical point of view seemed to be leading the way for the stuttering studio research. As I progressed this emphasis became increasingly problematic for three reasons: humour could not form the ‘content’ of my work; understanding the operations and strategies of humour and attempting to enact them through practice or behaviours with objects with clear intentionality did not necessarily lead to humorous or engaging works; and setting up the expectation of viewing humorous work in an audience inhibited the potential for surprise.

An all-pervasive and recurring viewer response to the mere mention of the word ‘humour’ in my PhD title was to judge – funny or not? As artists we are all too familiar with people knowing what they like and don’t like when it comes to ‘art’. These kind of random pronouncements are usually avoided in the ‘academy’ in the interests of taking the discussion beyond personal taste. When humour is sign-posted as a factor this kind of restraint is seemingly cast aside and on inspection of my work in exhibition and studio contexts, countless intelligent, restrained and sensitive people felt compelled to point and pronounce that which they found to be funny or not (the objects judged to be funny always differed from person to person). This led me to realise that although I was intrigued by the fact that humour does arise in my work from time to time I was not interested in strategically ‘becoming comedian’ for entertainment purposes nor was I interested in trying to play to the diverse panoply of ‘senses’ of humour at large.

Therefore the slant of this chapter will emphasise the energy and forces of the unexpected and the idea of the short-circuit which, through attending to various theories on humour, have gained in resonance even as they remain difficult to define.
why are they laughing?

Now I will return to the initial motivations of this PhD. My practice, involving process-intensive object making over many years, has grown out of dark, melancholy, anxious places being as I am, deeply pessimistic about just about everything in the world. A recurring thread weaving throughout my artistic output has been an element of humour which masks a more serious intent. In 2008, as I observed audiences smiling and shortling their way around an exhibition of my (in my opinion) bleak work in Lisbon, Portugal, I began to wonder where this humour came from and what it was about. How is humour practiced through art? For me, until embarking on this research, humour was an intuitive, almost non-thinking process resulting in scant awareness of how it operates. I soon found that several major exhibitions and publications had addressed the presence of humour in art. I quote here from When Humour Becomes Painful by Lunn & Munder:

Humour and art share much in common in enabling access to a world of freedom and intuition. Both find absolute values alien. Both ignore all barriers, permit contradictions and constitute an experimental space where human concerns are introduced in all their relativities, with one’s own failure always in view.¹⁷⁸

It seems that contemporary art is getting funnier. Although it might be argued that humour has always been present in art, several significant exhibitions and publications have highlighted this growing international tendency in art practice of the last decade¹⁷⁹. The idea that humour can be used to address the serious or darker side of existence while offering the freedom to be essentially disrespectful and even offensive within certain bounds of normalcy, is potent in the context of visual art. As humour and art are coming together more frequently, and constitute a growing trend in international contemporary art, it was timely to explore this shift within and through my own practice.

¹⁷⁸ Lunn, Felicity & Munder, Heike (eds). When Humour Becomes Painful, Exhibition Catalogue, JRP/Ringier, Zurich, 2006, p 11
¹⁷⁹ Too Much of Me: 7 Paths through the Absurd, (with detour), Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, 2009
When Humour Becomes Painful, Migros Museum, Zurich, 2005
Situation Comedy: Humor in Recent Art, Independent Curators International, New York, 2005
Deep Comedy, Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, 2008
I began with the question: how might humour be explored through practice and further developed to become a creative force? I determined to understand how and why humour manifests in art practice generally and specifically within my own output. How does it work and what is it good for? Initial exploration in the studio revolved around exploring the potential of forms to elicit a humorous response via their placement and use as objects under the rubric of sculpture and their contexts and arrangements presented as photographic images or video. The aforementioned problems with foregrounding or announcing ‘humour’ quickly became evident. The practical aspect of the art project was not motivated by the ambition to produce funny artwork nor was I aspiring to exhibit work labelled as humorous. Beyond divulging that I find the work my dead dad’s reminders and remains deeply hilarious and tragic, I am loath to move beyond this to locate humour anywhere on behalf of viewers. It was clearly necessary to avoid setting up expectations that could not be fulfilled whilst not precluding the output from having the possibility of provoking mirth. No things are intrinsically funny and this research was undertaken with the recognition that there is nothing like a bit of academic discourse to drain the humour out of an artwork. Don’t expect any laughs here!

**case study # 10: brown things**

This series of works, consisting of adjacent collections of ‘beautiful little brown things’ and ‘nasty little brown things’, attempts to test strategies associated with perceiving incongruity and engendering an awareness of this in the viewer. As a result of developing an understanding of the various ways humour can operate, I began to consider how a viewer might apprehend an ‘incongruity’ and at the same time be alerted to the dynamic that unfolds in the perception. But first, what is an incongruity theory in the field of humour?

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180 The research into humour theories in philosophy, humour tracked through art history and its presence in contemporary art was vast and could have constituted a PhD dissertation in itself. This research is not included in this PhD except where it has become relevant through reflection on practice. It was the practice that led me away from humour as the main research pathway.
Incongruity theories have evolved through the attempt to identify the features that give rise to laughter and focus on the object of humour. Incongruity is a term that has been used broadly to include “ambiguity, logical impossibility, irrelevance and inappropriateness”\textsuperscript{181}. James Beattie (1735-1803) described incongruity theories where wit and linguistic invention was admired; “Laughter arises from the view of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage, or as acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them.”\textsuperscript{182} The most important aspect of incongruity theory is that humour arises as a response to disrupting the expectations of the listener or viewer in some way.

The first version of this work, arranged in 2009, comprised a clumsily handmade tray of 15 \textit{nasty little brown things} displayed adjacent to an elegant Scandinavian style, wood patterned, plastic tray of 12 \textit{beautiful little brown things}. Each is an almost, but not quite, identical collection of found collectible or rejectable ceramics with a number of elements fabricated

\textsuperscript{181} Philosophy, T.I.E.O. \textit{Humor}. Available online at: \url{http://www.iep.utm.edu/h/humor.htm} (accessed 23/07/2009)

by myself\textsuperscript{183}. Most of the items are recognisable but some may perplex, for example, the upended, plaster filled kangaroo scrotums. At play here is the setting up of a situation, which activates the viewer to question congruence or incongruence between the two configurations. This occurs after the viewer is alerted to the possibilities of sameness and difference via the clearly visible labels. This is the first and last work in this PhD project in which I deliberately and knowingly set up a situation to activate a particular operation and in doing so attempted to direct the viewer through an experience of a mental short-circuit. In discussing incongruity theories Andrew Stott highlights:

\begin{quote}
…the importance of crossing ideational boundaries and the bringing of one thing into a taxonomy to which it is not considered to belong. As incongruity plays with taxonomies and hierarchies it suggests that these hierarchies are permeable and fluid rather than rigid and permanent. The collision or juxtaposition of the great with the low, or the humble adopting the airs of the elite, take their humour from a displacement of order that simultaneously acknowledges order and reveals its absurdity.\textsuperscript{184}
\end{quote}

Subsequent versions have expanded to 23 \textit{nasty little brown things} and 23 \textit{beautiful little brown things} (2011), on similar large, round clumsily rendered trays. Then 17 \textit{nasty little brown things} and 16 \textit{beautiful little brown things} (2012), on flip-tablet shelves (made from appendages to old lecture theatre chairs) shown in the \textit{inexplicable magnetism of an alien object} exhibition.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{fig29.png}
\caption{17 \textit{nasty little brown things} and 16 \textit{beautiful little brown things}}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{183} 'rejectable' in the sense that some of them came from the 50 cent shelf of The Sacred Heart Mission Op Shop and were clearly not valued very highly in that context plus someone had already discarded them.

I have observed viewers approach the two adjacent arrangements of brown things, move in to read the labels and then proceed to look more attentively from one group to the other. It is possible to discern in their bodily movements and expressions a shift occurring, a destabilisation of thought which is often accompanied by a frown and a smile. A newspaper review allows me a rare insight into a stranger’s cognitive process as they ponder the “…paradoxical semiotic platforms”\(^{185}\). Robert Nelson writes:

> How can a label have so much power? In this mischievously poetic juxtaposition, one of the shelves makes you think that the beige and umber blobs are abject and despised. Worse than junk, they're morally cheap or "nasty". They're objects made without heart or inspiration, still hanging around with their depressing obsolescence.

> The other label elevates the identical junk to aesthetic appeal. We look upon the twin shelf positively, as if it were a precious collection of endearing relics, exquisitely fashioned to a rare palette and texture. You see how pretty they are, how variegated are the cute glazes in colour and reflectivity and you ponder the earthy philosophy of the hippy epoch that enjoyed them.\(^{186}\)

For me, the materiality and odd nature of the brown things juxtaposed with all the other potentially “…confounding objects…”\(^{187}\) in the exhibition arouse as much curiosity as the play with taxonomies and it is through these qualities that the work continues to exert a pull even after the ‘labelling’ displacement is recognised. This work, \(17 \text{ nasty little brown things}\) and \(16 \text{ beautiful little brown things}\), in the context of the exhibition the inexplicable magnetism of an alien object, activates an opening up of the viewer to the possibility of incommensurable perceptions and the possibility of enjoying that, with humour, rather than searching for meaning. At the very edges of my comprehension I hope that this points to an art where the unsayable might be seen or the unknowable might be felt. But if that is not the case, at the very least, \(17 \text{ nasty little brown things}\) and \(16 \text{ beautiful little brown things}\) indicates the play versus knowing at work which links it to my concerns with the distinctions between humour and irony.

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\(^{185}\) Nelson, R. (2012) *Junk Bonds Itself to Trash Talk*. Melbourne, The Age, 22/02/2012. This review can also be found as appendix #4 of this dissertation.

\(^{186}\) ibid.

\(^{187}\) ibid.
linguistic incomprehension

Whilst this project was not initially interested in focussing upon laughter, the action or the sound, I will briefly mention the group of ideas defined by Andrew Stott as ‘Poststructuralist Laughters’\textsuperscript{188}. These seem relevant in the light of the influence that poststructuralist ideas and thinkers such as Derrida, Kristeva and Foucault, have exerted on contemporary art practice particularly during the 1980s and early 1990s. Stott describes contemporary poststructuralist theory as configuring “…laughter as a trope that expresses a sense of the beyond, of something outside language and cognition as it is organised in the quotidian”\textsuperscript{189}. This approach is a means of reaching out and forming an idea of the boundaries and utmost edge of all things that can be uttered and understood. It is not nonsense, nor an expression of pleasure, superiority or release but an acknowledgment of the humour inherent in recognising ones inability to fully comprehend through language. This goes a little way towards explaining the difficulty inherent in articulating where humour resides in this project and my research turn towards the not-known.

slapstick

I will now proceed to consider the operations of slapstick for two reasons: one being the deep, pervasive influence it had throughout my childhood on the development of my sense of humour,\textsuperscript{190} and two because I sense its presence running through all the work I have produced for this PhD, even though it is tempered it remains present as a quiet undercurrent. Humour lingers still but has shifted from its place as a major concern to become one of many concerns within my practice. Within the overall scheme of the project the humour research must be credited with serving as a stepping stone to embracing a position of not knowing that values an openness to the sense event. It took me a long time to recognise that the liveliness of objects in my imagination owes much to my childhood exposure to the cinematic tricks and peculiar qualities of objects in early slapstick films.

\textsuperscript{189} ibid. p 141
\textsuperscript{190} Whilst admitting to this bias, throughout this research I sought to avoid the conventions of verbal, narrative and illusionistic mainstream comedy.
The nature of this influence is expanded below but is mentioned to here to iterate the importance it plays as a background refrain in this PhD.

Jörg Heiser has described slapstick as “…a crucial artistic method that concerns the way authority – whether embodied in auratic objects or charismatic gestures – gets erected and deflated in one go”\textsuperscript{191}. Heiser cites many artists and artworks, focussing on ideas and methods, in an attempt to share his understandings about the growing mass of contemporary art that he sees as lacking in suitable criteria with which to discuss it. To sum up Heiser’s conception of slapstick and his hopes for the art we might encounter Heiser proposes that:

Slapstick is a sudden jolt in a smooth sequence, an absurd attack of hiccoughs in everyday life and world events, allowing us to catch glimpses of truth about ourselves and our relations with others. There’s something liberating about this and something moving.\textsuperscript{192}

This description can be likened to what I have earlier described as a ‘short-circuit’ or disruption that causes a flip or a jolt to thought.

The term ‘slapstick’ was onomatopoeically derived from the sound made by an implement, used by the Commedia del’Arte’s\textsuperscript{193} harlequins and subsequently burlesque and circus clowns, to beat one another. A flexible divided lath or two wooden paddles would crash together, simulating a violent crack perhaps to the head or backside causing great hilarity. The forceful aural effect – the slap – has its parallels in such cinematic equivalents as a pie in the face, a poke in the eye, a boot to the bum, a rock to the head, a slip on a banana skin, the sudden collision and/or pratfall.

Slapstick is generally considered to be a highly physical comedy based on boisterous, exaggerated actions often involving violence and pain or humorously embarrassing events such as extreme clumsiness. This low, rough kind of comedy has probably been around in everyday life since human beings became vertical but has come to be typified by early American silent cinema and the films of talents like Harold Lloyd, Buster Keaton and

\textsuperscript{192} Heiser, J. (2008) \textit{All of a Sudden: Things That Matter in Contemporary Art}, (Berlin, Sternberg Press) p 17
\textsuperscript{193} 17th-century Italian popular theatre
Charlie Chaplin. The slapstick genre in film was shaped by the limits of the media and was necessarily silent before 1926 and therefore the humour was visual. The cinema technology that was available at the time was often exploited to amplify humour through rhythm and tempo, for example, the chopping up, the slowing down and speeding up of events. Camera angle, editing and projection involving technical tricks, such as Buster Keaton utilising multiple exposures to multiply himself in order to play several roles, were crucial to the development of the genre.

As slapstick is where the body meets the world of things, it is suitably fascinated with objects. By examining the identity and utility of things and playing with the space they occupy, their dimensions, properties, and cultural significance, the body’s relationship to the external world is made strange.\footnote{Stott, A. (2005) Comedy, (London, Routledge) p 94}

The emphasis on the visual and the importance of the liveliness of objects have been significant factors in the whole cinematic genre of slapstick. This, in turn, has informed and inspired the practice of a considerable number of contemporary visual artists.\footnote{Peter Land, Martin Kersals, Bas Jan Ader, John Wood and Paul Harrison, Andreas Slominski to name but a few.} Buster Keaton’s talent and tragic personae is particularly influential in contemporary art practice, most notably in Steve McQueen’s, 1997 video \textit{Deadpan}\footnote{British video artist Steve McQueen appropriated Keaton’s site gag in which an entire wall of a house topples over him and he remains unscathed by the open window falling exactly where he stood.}. This phenomenon was documented in Marc Spiegler’s 2004 article \textit{How Many Buster Keaton’s Does It Take To Fill an Art Gallery}\footnote{Spiegler, M. (2004) How Many Buster Keaton’s Does It Take to Fill an Art Gallery. \textit{ARTnews}, September p 120-121}. Scottish sculptor Brian Griffiths disorientates the viewer with an installation\footnote{Griffiths, B. (2004) Beneath the Stride of Giants. London, Saatchi Gallery, summer show \textit{Galleon and Other Stories}} of a massive galleon in a comparatively small gallery and describes the influence from Keaton’s films where:

\begin{quote}
\ldots there are often these strange constructions that he has to physically navigate himself around. They become like characters he is interacting with. And people who see my piece have to work their way around this oversize object. So the scale in itself is a sort of deadpan humour.\footnote{Spiegler, M. (2004) How Many Buster Keaton’s Does It Take to Fill an Art Gallery. \textit{ARTnews}, September p 121}
\end{quote}
Similarly, Keaton’s niggling effect was present both in my studio peregrinations (in which I was increasingly compelled to negotiate oversized forms in a relatively small space as the mounds and agglomerations proliferated throughout the PhD) and in my perpetual conveyance of heavy-looking-but-actually-light lumps between St Kilda (home) and Southbank (where my studio was located) and back again on the tram or my bicycle.

the slapstick protagonist

In Alan Dale’s book on slapstick in American movies *Comedy is a man in trouble* the essence of a slapstick gag is described as “…a physical assault on, or collapse of, the hero’s dignity…”201. This can be staged as attack from the outside or occur through the protagonist’s inattention or haplessness usually resulting in the viewer identifying with the victim.

Slapstick characters such as those played by Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin often seemed to flourish in adverse circumstances because of their utter naivety. The protagonist was always pitted against the brutal realities of capitalist America yet always managed to rise above the poverty and exploitation, and, as Jan Verwoert describes it (in likening them to the cartoon character SpongeBob), “…triumph over these realities through the resilience of a simple mind and a flexible body”.202 The unfailing resistance and optimism of the heroes of slapstick’s cinematic heyday overrides the harsh actuality of life enforced by the disciplinary principles of the social order. As Verwoert sees it, “Like SpongeBob, the characters that Keaton and Chaplin play usually succeed in unhinging the dominant reality principle as they, against all odds and blissfully ignorant of impossibilities, simply keep pushing until their desires are realised and the world has been turned on its head to become a better place where desire, not discipline, defines the real.”203 This resonates with my approach to sustaining a life as a full time artist.

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201 ibid. p 3
203 ibid.
slapstick as a methodology

From the early stages of this PhD research the idea of using slapstick to develop a methodology has been tantalisingly attractive. I have, perhaps, a pre-linguistically developed sense of humour acquired through childhood exposure to early silent comedy of a slapstick nature (most notably the films of Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin but also including my parents favourites – the films of Jaques Tati)\textsuperscript{204}. I have observed my procedures and activities with matter and my performances in film and video and noticed that my intuitive behaviours owe much to this childhood grounding in the language of slapstick\textsuperscript{205}. I often picture myself, from the outside, in sepia tones, as a slapstick protagonist in an almost silent, non-verbal movement which is by turns jerky then smooth, very fast then very slow, oscillating between one art activity and another. This clearly locates my imagination and sense of humour as something culturally shaped. I perceive, an often latent, performative element linking my sculptural forms with their potential as absurd props (Franz West’s \textit{Adaptives} have endured amongst my most favourite and influential art objects).

Fig. 30 Franz West, \textit{Adaptive}

I decided against embracing and developing an entire slapstick methodology as a motor for this PhD (although the idea never went away entirely). However the following discussion

\textsuperscript{204} We didn’t have a television set in our family home until I was about 10 years old and then watching it was a matter of great family deliberation. My father only encouraged my brothers and I to watch comedy and there was always excitement amongst us when the old slapstick films were shown which was mostly a Christmas treat.

\textsuperscript{205} Prior to embarking on this PhD my practice was focussed on sculptural concerns that were shared through video works of activities or performative behaviours with matter and processes. These most often involved myself as the performer but disguised by a massive bulbous mask-like head. Retrospectively I can describe them as having a slapstick quality but I was not aware of this at the time of making. See: Crowest, S. (2005) The Joy of Beauty. \url{http://www.videoartarchive.org.au/scrowest/JoB.html} (accessed 07/08/2012)
and case study of mound activity are positioned to acknowledge its grounding force and haunting presence in the background of this PhD.

Two contemporary writers associated with the British art magazine Frieze have approached the idea of slapstick as a method: Brian Dillon discerns and describes *Nine Theses on Slapstick*; Jörg Heiser devotes the first chapter (Pathos versus Ridiculousness: Art with Slapstick) of his book *All of a Sudden: Things That Matter in Contemporary Art* to the idea. Heiser expands upon slapstick as the method within contemporary art practice “...by which to operate under the radar of stiff seriousness” which can be found in theoretical characterisations of avant-garde practices.

**heiser’s argument**

In this section I lay out Jörg Heiser’s conception of the slapstick method as he applies it to contemporary art and summarise the characteristics of slapstick as he defines them.

In Heiser’s introduction to *All of a Sudden: Things That Matter in Contemporary Art* he observes that “… in contemporary art, the emphasis has shifted from biography and medium to method and situation.” He therefore suggests that a valuable approach to the analysis of contemporary art would be through the exploration of artists’ methodologies and proposes the method of slapstick as “…a technique, attitude or approach; as something that gets to the heart (or is the dark, empty core?) of making and looking at art itself”. I interpret this as a proposition for a slapstick method for both artists and viewers including any of those involved in the apprehension of art such as writers, critics and curators. Heiser is at pains to point out that his exposition is not about ‘slapstick artists’ as such but more the disruptive (bothersome) attitude and methods expressed through their artworks. Like Heiser, I have hopes that the art that I make and the art that I come across will disrupt...

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206 In 2007 *Frieze* devoted a whole issue to slapstick as an artistic methodology
208 Curator, author and co-editor of *Frieze* magazine, lives in Berlin
210 ibid. p 37
211 ibid. p 9
212 ibid. p 17
213 ibid. p 79
something habitual in the way that I apprehend the world. This kind of sense event would challenge and obstruct expectations in its opening out to the encounter.

Heiser believes the principle criteria that always indicates good art, is that it possesses a robust mistrust of the schools, categories and conventions that art itself forms of art\textsuperscript{214}. One of the things that I find appealing about the art of Elizabeth Newman is her simultaneous embrace and disruption of visual art conventions as discussed in chapter one unaccountable. Heiser describes slapstick as “…the method that saves art from becoming frozen in dogmas and schools, including the dogmas and schools of slapstick itself; the slapstick method addresses the fantasy of an automated, flexible, and accelerated life by making it halt and stumble”\textsuperscript{215}. My eyes light up as I read this because questions involving the investigation, revelation and deconstruction of the nature of art systems/conventions both formal and conceptual via art making and exhibiting are something that inflect my thinking through practice at all times. This largely occurs beyond the confines of this PhD (and within this discreet research duration, ruminations have tended to swirl around the conventions of academia). In my broader practice this is made evident in my strategies of working across mediums\textsuperscript{216} and disrupting mercantile imperatives\textsuperscript{217}. Within the PhD this is evidenced via playing with conventions of display\textsuperscript{218} and labelling\textsuperscript{219} and by the insertion of mound activity in the art world by stealth\textsuperscript{220}.

How does Heiser see these slapstick characteristics manifesting as approaches in art? He states that the theme or content of slapstick alone doesn’t necessarily make outstanding or good works of art, neither the presentation of stage/screen or literary comedy that somehow ends up in an art context. Similarly, opportunistic and market driven strategies that might unimaginatively concoct exhibitions with titles like ‘Art and Laughter’ don’t fit

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{214} ibid. p 276
\item \textsuperscript{215} ibid. p 273
\item \textsuperscript{216} I have a background in design, craft and film-making and weave these activities seamlessly into my visual arts practice with little interest in distinctions between these categories.
\item \textsuperscript{217} My prices for my art works swing wildly from absurdly low to inconceivably high as a deliberately disruptive strategy.
\item \textsuperscript{218} For example, by using plinths that are at-hand rather constructing appropriate ones can result in odd configurations or the utilisation of a cardboard box to ‘agrandise’ a sculpture.
\item \textsuperscript{219} For example using labelling to activate an unusual way of looking such as in my work 23 nasty little brown things and 23 beautiful little brown things, 2011
\item \textsuperscript{220} I have relentlessly proposed mound activity for art prizes, exhibitions in serious institutional contexts and funding.
\end{itemize}
his bill. Heiser emphasises his concern is with slapstick as a method “…a central triggering mechanism, both a premeditated trick and a spontaneous idea – a déclic,” as Walter Benjamin called it – that’s responsible for bringing art into being and making it go somewhere”.

Picking over Heiser’s text to glean an awareness of how he variously defines the term slapstick as he proceeds to align it with contemporary art, I have collected the following phrases: the tragicomic boom-bash as fates entwine and bodies collide; repetition of motifs (running gags); chaotic montage; overindulgence in certain medium-specific effects; dispensing with narrative logic, plot and characterization for the sake of a good gag; fast cuts; absurd contrasts; tendency toward the anti-narrative (slapstick and contemporary art); flogging a joke to death even to the extent of compulsive repetition; in a sculptural context it could be an object with movement that knocks the dignified off-balance; it feeds on the failure of attempts to shore up gestures of authority and dignity and results in them coming unstuck; involves constant instability – and the corrective sobriety of the deadpan. Slapstick might involve: exaggerated portrayals of physical injury; an overplaying of the sexual with jokes (Heiser considers this a weak point); obstruction, paralysing hesitation, embarrassing silence. Classic slapstick props might include: a plank; a banana skin; a custard pie. Corresponding forms in my work include, mounds, ‘rocks’ little residues of unspecified powder and paint all of which exhibit a tendency to confound and appear inappropriate to a context.

I attempted to apply a few of the ideas as strategies through mound activity and others emerged unbidden through the process activating that operation of opening out.

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221 ‘déclic’ is a kind of psychic triggering mechanism, like a jump cut in a film montage, that suddenly brings two disparate domains together producing a momentary insight. The French word déclic translates into English as trigger but in the section on idleness in: Benjamin, W. & Tiedemann, R. (1999) The Arcades Project, (Cambridge, Mass., Belknap Press) Benjamin describes empathy as coming into being “through a déclic, a kind of gearing action. With it, the inner life derives a pendant to the element of shock in sense perception. (Empathy is a synchronization, in the intimate sense.”) p 804


223 This is often marble dust or dry plaster and suggests movement and decomposition. In the exhibition the inexplicable magnetism of an alien object I had an unremarked but ongoing activity with the cleaners who would sweep up my sprinklings only for me to deposit a fresh scattering the next day.
case study # 11: mound activity

Here, through my practice and the particular accumulative and open-ended work mound activity, I seek to explicate the use of slapstick techniques and pinpoint where a slapstick attitude can arise. I continue, in this case study to draw on the aforementioned observations of Heiser’s slapstick method. But foremost I propose to draw on five of nine ‘theses’ on slapstick to be found in Frieze which, in 2007, devoted a whole issue to slapstick as an artistic methodology featuring writer Brian Dillon’s Another Fine Mess: Nine Theses on Slapstick. Dillon describes several aspects of slapstick that exhibit congruence with my approach and these involve slowness, machine logic, deep immersion, the fall and lively forms. I will proceed to analyse how these aspects, in combination with Heiser’s, hook into my own methods and methodology focussing on the work of mound activity. This involves ‘testing’ some of the approaches that Dillon and Heiser have listed for their usefulness in articulating things sensed through my art process. This discussion of the mound activity project through the lenses of Dillon’s slapstick theses and Heiser’s notions concerning method will involve some conceptual warping and morphing.

What is mound activity? The term is used to describe the many and various mounds that have emerged from my studio in the last three years extending to activities that include exhibitions and documented situations. Mound activity comes to focus on the agglomeration of matter into mounds, piles and lumps attending to the shifting signification across contexts. The most accessible aspect of mound activity is a blog where I gather images and texts that pertain to the loose idea of a mound. In terms of making, it involves attempting but failing to make the same form over and over again. For mound activity, in line with

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224 Dillon, B. (2007) 9 Theses on Slapstick. Frieze, October pp 212-217

The Nine Theses on Slapstick are: 1. The essence of slapstick is slowness, 2. Slapstick is inherently logical: its subject is reason itself, and its form is but a repeated insistence on the relation of cause to effect. 3. Deliberation and delicacy are essential to slapstick: so much so that its closest aesthetic affinity is with the world of the dandy. 4. In slapstick the pratfall is more a heroic than a hapless dive: what it stages is not the self as it slips and forgets itself, but the tragic impossibility of escaping oneself. 5. Slapstick is a masterclass in what it means to be inhuman; it discerns the limit not only of subjectivity but of life, and dangles some poor schmuck over it, just for fun. 6. Just as humans are rendered thing-like, so by the logic of slapstick things themselves start to rebel, to take on a life of their own. 7. If slapstick seems to demand double acts, in fact the two are always one. 8. The politics of slapstick are utterly anomic, and unamenable to reformist or liberationist programmes. 9. Given its obsession with inert objects, its circularity, its violence, its nihilism, it seems that the ultimate slapstick act would involve beating oneself to within an inch of one’s life.

Heiser’s slapstick conditions, all narrative logic is dispensed with. Whilst I exhibit the mounds themselves as seemingly autonomous, mute, (mysterious) sculptural objects, the slapstick exists in the role that the viewer imagines for me: a studiously productive maker of mounds. The slapstick attitude inherent to the work is tied up with the action.

**slowness**

Dillon’s first thesis is: The essence of slapstick is slowness. *Mound Activity* began in 2010 and is an open-ended, on-going durational project of changing speeds but its essence is slowness. I have ambitions for *Mound Activity* that will continue to see its presence slowly and stealthily unfold in the *artworld* beyond the remit of this PhD. Whilst acknowledging the velocity of many violent actions and high-speed chases within the cinematic genre of slapstick Dillon asserts “…slapstick is in truth sedulously devoted to the study of slowness”.

Dillon holds up Laurel and Hardy as the most advanced purveyors of this slow unfolding which always occur via the to and fro of their tit-for-tat transgressions. Slapstick as Dillon sees it, rather than surprise us, exhibits a dogged “…decomposition of human actions into their component gestures, so that they seem to last forever”. This requires boundless patience from viewers and performers alike and I can remember feeling frustrated with the predictability of it, even as a very young child, and wondering why the ‘victims’ stubbornly waited in such a long drawn out way to receive their inevitable punishments instead of running away. The strange saintly resignation on the part of both parties for each stage of their come-uppance was painful to endure.

There is a relationship between duration and embarrassment which comedy exploits. ‘Timing’ is critical to both visual and verbal comedy and requires great skill. After

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226 By ‘artworld’ I indiscriminately mean any part of it that exists in an atmosphere of art theory including exhibition and museum contexts, magazines and journals, web presence, collaborative projects, public art and even the popular press. I am particularly interested in the ‘mounds’ relentlessly appearing in front of assessment panels for project or funding opportunities, not so much with successful outcomes in mind, but with the idea of ‘hitting them over the head’ with such an arbitrary concept again and again and again. Although these Mound Activities are well under way, I am beginning to think this is a scheme best left to my imagination as it smacks of masochistic self-sabotage and might be detrimental to my well-being!


228 ibid. p 213
experimenting with several video works during the early stages of the PhD using extreme or substance altering ‘sculptural’ actions\textsuperscript{229}, I eventually decided to focus the practice around objects and work with implied movement with the suggestion of some kind of occurrence in the past or future implied in its presentation. This could be conceived as an extreme slowness. The mound appears here as something inanimate arising as an oases of intense concentration in the midst of turmoil. I imagine in their seemingly inert countenance, their lumpen presence, an immanence and indeterminacy – like a pregnant pause that is stretched out unnecessarily.

Presenting the public face of \textit{mound activity} involves that I, as artist, am ostensibly dedicated to only making mounds. This slowing down of creativity is a deliberate cramping and rigidification that positions the mounds as stilled forms of something that was once much livelier. On my view, these stilled forms are charged with a potential for liveliness over extended time.

\textbf{machine logic}

Dillon brings our attention to the machine logic inherent in slapstick by proposing, in his second thesis, that “Slapstick is inherently logical: its subject is reason itself, and its form is but a repeated insistence on the relation of cause to effect.”\textsuperscript{230} This connects to Bergson’s famous notion of comedy as something mechanical encrusted on the living.\textsuperscript{231} Dillon expands this: “At its best, slapstick goes further: it stages not only the appearance of rational action taken to its absurd extreme but also the mechanics of thought as such – the (perfectly rational, therefore idiotic) decisions behind the behaviour.”\textsuperscript{232}

Machine logic can equate to rigid formal or conceptual strategies which in art making can seem like applying constraints to the mobility of life and creativity. As an artist I am always trying to set up rules and constraints on my practice to control my waywardness and I am

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item For example, I made several stop-start animations of sculptures as they were fabricated and morphed from one thing into another.
\item Dillon, B. (2007) 9 Theses on Slapstick. Freize, October p 213
\item Dillon, B. (2007) 9 Theses on Slapstick. Freize, October p 213
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
always breaking them. By embracing the idea that life and art-making are supple I find, in
my excessive relish of freedom, that I do too many things. Towards the end of the first
year of this PhD I decided to just make mounds to subvert this and in a sense a mound can
be conceptualised as a blockage. Mound making is a strategic attempt to follow the lines of
an applied rigidity, a decree to stick within a proscribed formal area. The logic here is that if
I settle on one form, ‘the mound’ and make it again and again, it will follow that my output
will have a simplicity and consistency that will enable me to analyse and make logical
judgements and arguments about them. More relevant to the discussion is that mound activity
also fits into Heiser’s slapstick criteria of using the repetition of motifs or running gags and
flogging a joke to death to the extent of compulsive repetition.

Dillon’s thesis on the logic of slapstick links into the thoughts of Jeremy Millar’s in relation
to the seemingly reflective nature of the objects in Fischli and Weiss’s Der Lauf der Dinge
(The Way Things Go, 1987)\(^{233}\) which I discuss further in chapter six life of forms. The chain
of cause and effect between objects, machines and substances which, instead of flowing in
the expected automated manner, show several moments when “…the objects seem to
hesitate, as if reflecting upon what it is they are about to do”\(^{234}\). (This, in turn, links back
into the aforementioned notion of slapsticks adherence to slowness exemplified by Laurel
and Hardy). This attribution of a knowing logic seeming to exist within objects or matter is
expanded upon by Dillon to observe that they “…seem possessed not only of agency but
of reason, and doubt and suspicion”.\(^{235}\) We perceive an inherent logic attached to the way
materials behave based on our knowledge or previous experience and, in observing the
pause, Dillon regards the objects as having human characteristics.\(^{236}\)

(also mentioned in chapter 6 humour of this dissertation)


\(^{235}\) Dillon, B. (2007) 9 Theses on Slapstick. Freize, October p 213

\(^{236}\) I am not proposing any kind of animistic schema that attributes a soul to inanimate objects but
acknowledge that anthropomorphism (or attributing human characteristics to inanimate objects) contributes
to the humour to be found in the visible life of forms.
immersion in the matter at hand

Dillon’s third thesis of slapstick declares that: “Deliberation and delicacy are essential to slapstick: so much so that its closest aesthetic affinity is with the world of the dandy.”237 Laurel and Hardy are both described as being extremely careful and fastidious and taking pratfalls not because they are stupid or distracted but because they are concentrating too deeply upon the matter at hand. “This sort of diligence marks the slapstick artist out as a comic dandy, an aesthete with regard to his own body and the objects it touches. (That his assiduity rebounds on him is almost, in the best slapstick performances, beside the point).”238

It is the “concentrating too deeply upon the matter at hand” in which I am particularly interested in the context of mound activity with its implications that something is occurring, all the while at the edges almost out of view. At the centre of my conception of what it is to be an artist is that it involves noticing things. Artists often become concerned with minute details and subtleties which can parallel dandyish sharpness and aesthetic discernment. In making a mound over and over again I developed the capacity for noticing acute distinctions between mound shapes. I came to understand physical phenomena such as the angle of repose (maximum slope) of granular materials and how disturbing it was to see mounds seemingly composed of granules but peculiarly unable to follow what would appear to be the right settling shape. Paradoxically this attention to detail and acuity has far more nonchalant and careless beginnings. The mounds are never prefigured before making and matter at hand is agglomerated almost blindly. Parts of the mound will delight but others will bother and, on that basis, it is sometimes necessary to cover or build on the irksome parts and occasionally hack into it. There is a compulsion to make things ‘sound’ and strong, to smooth and seal but I frequently attempt to suspend those urges and accept that which occurs unexpectedly which may not contribute to a very harmonious shape. The mounds I favour most appear as residue of calamity but, in meticulously tuning in to the subtleties of shape, the hysterical dandy in me discerns amongst them forms that disturb and which I am incapable of living with in the studio. Mound Activity is fraught with incommensurables. I am quite unable to look without 'tending' and incrementally adjusting

237 Dillon, B. (2007) 9 Theses on Slapstick. Freize, October p 214
238 ibid. p 214
the form sometimes every few days for months at a time. Is it a perilous move for an artist to focus too intently on the matter at hand and persist in making the same kind of thing over and over again? Alanna Lorenzon discerns:

Persisting for the appropriate amount of time suggests that you are passionate, purposeful, and humbly know when to let go. Then again, persistence is not an innately admirable trait. An obsessive-compulsive persister does not instinctively understand the unwritten laws of appropriate repetitive action, loses their style, and eventually risks becoming irritating to those around them.²³⁹

Persisting with mound making has the potential to be annoying and involve setting up the conditions for a fall.

**the heroic pratfall**

In his fourth thesis Dillon asserts that “In slapstick the pratfall is more a heroic than a hapless dive: what it stages is not the self as it slips and forgets itself, but the tragic impossibility of escaping oneself.”²⁴⁰ Dillon goes on to recount a slapstick fall of a television character who seems marvellously oblivious to his predicament in the sense that he takes a side-ways fall with a rigid body (in drinking pose with wine glass) continuing to talk as he falls. This example demonstrates that the character doesn’t escape himself, or forget himself because he stays utterly fixed as himself, or as he was, despite the indignity of what is occurring to his body. It is possible to discern a kind of absurd heroicism in this. How could this kind of attitude translate into an approach to art making?

*Mound activity* became a vehicle to explore a version of this heroic, intractable fixity via art production involving a blinkered focus on the production of ‘mounds’. *Mound activity* constitutes a tenacious attempt to surrender to an artistic fate regardless of the reception or interest by the world at large. Alanna Lorenzon contemplates the heroics of persistence in relation to *Mound Activity* in her essay *It Goes On and On*²⁴¹ and finds that:

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²³⁹ ibid. p 214
²⁴⁰ ibid. p 214
To fruitlessly endeavour to continue on an absurdist path without a seeming glimmer of cynicism strikes me as a heroic move that belies sophistication. As though the seemingly compulsive persister has taken one step past existential dilemmas to forgive themselves for their inborn futility and instead exalts joyously in their void of meaninglessness—a place where everything becomes simultaneously trivial yet vital.242

Indeed stubborn persistence against the odds, an insistence on making and absurdly performing time-consuming activities beyond a point when all seems quite futile sets up the conditions for a fall or at the very least an embarrassing event. Heiser describes flogging a joke to death as “… a legitimate slapstick technique even when pushed to the level of compulsive repetition”. Mound Activity carries within an implicit critique of artists strategically developing ‘trademark’ practices.244 Sarah crowEST does Mounds™. I recognise humour in my own dogged commitment to maintaining an art practice and have extended this behaviour to hyperbolic heights in my Mound Activity work (and I have only just begun).

things take on a life of their own

In his sixth thesis of slapstick Dillon proposes that: “Just as humans are rendered thing-like, so by the logic of slapstick things themselves start to rebel, to take on a life of their own.”246 On the whole, a mound is very easy thing to make. It is possible to make mounds without really knowing what one is doing or what kind of mound will transpire and what purposes it will be put to when it is finished. Indeed it is possible to make mounds with one’s eyes closed and even without realising one is making them at all. I found this to be so when I arrived into my studio one morning and was surprised to find several clay mounds that I had rapidly fabricated the night before. In taking an approach to studio practice that

242 ibid.
244 Developing a recognisable style is one of the hallmarks of a successful commercial practice.
245 I must confess that I was thinking about a mural and poster by Vuk Vidor, an artist working in Paris. His work called Art History is a list; on each line he links an artist to his/her cultural impact in three words. So, for example Pollock owns Drippings, Orlan owns Plastic surgery, Buren owns Stripes, Prince owns Jokes, and Arman owns Accumulation. See appendix #7. In observing the mass of forms in my studio I was compelled to conclude that were I part of such a list it would say “crowEST owns Mounds”.
creates room for chance and contingency with regard to process and materials one creates an open space for the unexpected to occur which can involve a tussle. Heiser’s slapstick condition of constant instability also might be said to reside in this approach.

I made a big, mound-like, clay ‘vase’ with arbitrary bulges which, as I proceeded, began to sag and collapse under its own weight. As I tried to pad and prop and lean it in order to salvage the form I realised it exemplified an aspect of slapstick methodology which involves stubbornly proceeding despite disaster, refusing to give up on the materials, using what I have, no matter what occurs. (This points to the artistic ethos concerning materials, sustainability and matter-at-hand which has been developed throughout this PhD and forms a part of the contribution to new knowledge.) In the end the form had to be laid down on its side and the bulges, which I had struggled to keep up, were ‘assisted’ with little clay props incorporated into the form. This wrangling of the moist and wayward clay connects to Dillon’s thesis in which, by the logic of slapstick, things themselves kick back and begin to go their own way.

Here Dillon asserts that characters in slapstick are confirmed empiricists basing their practical apprehension of the world on experiment and observation only to discover in the process that “things have a habit of kicking back”247. Basil Fawlty from the 1970s British sitcom Fawlty Towers is cited for his struggles with seemingly wilful objects such as a stalled car, a badly hung painting, a moth-eaten moose head and a vagrant corpse. Unlike his hapless waiter Manuel who Basil manipulates easily like a thing, these real objects seem to wilfully resist submitting to his desire. Basil’s exasperation is all very funny but we are

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247 ibid. p 215
reminded by Dillon that there is something quite uncanny going on here. “Fawlty Towers is set in something akin to the world of Freud’s *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901), where one’s most inexpressible desires and frustrations are externalised in countless lapses, gaffes and broken ornaments.”

This idea of a life of objects taps into the very heart of my PhD research which, in its early stages, was centred around the humorous life of forms. I envisaged missiles and thought about throwing my artifacts at people a lot. I imagined seething ornamentation in domestic settings. I made mounds instead with the sobriety of the deadpan and found myself constantly moving unwieldy sculptures from place to place. The mounds have proliferated and taken on a life of their own as they moved out of the studio into various homes and gardens around the country. Characters in slapstick discover that things take on a life of their own and objects run amok. Similarly, now I have been evicted from my studio, the mounds have made their way into my apartment and peep up in front of the television, line the kitchen shelves and lurk amongst the crops in the balcony garden. In one event, I even became a mound and in so doing activated a liveliness emerging from within it, cocoon like, to the surprise of the viewer. The reduction of my very self to a mound prompts me to wonder if there is a masochistic element in the imposition of mound activity. However, since I have a tendency to break all my self-imposed rules at my convenience, I can only conclude this is not the case.

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Fig. 32, performance still from *Cashmere If You Can* mutated into image from *transformations of matter.*

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248 ibid. p 215
249 For my initiation ceremony into the *Cashmere If You Can* art posse, I felt too embarrassed by such proceedings to present myself raw so I was wheeled in on a trolley disguised as a mound.
slapstick summary

Heiser seems emphatic and delighted with the idea of slapstick as a method for artists and so am I. However, it is not clear to me that it really can be described as an artistic method although I can concede that slapstick ‘attitude’ and ‘approach’ are terms I have embraced for mound activity.

Heiser’s text enabled me, within the parameters of this project, to expand my experience of slapstick beyond the limitations of the early cinematic genre. The slapstick approach had been inadvertently used prior to this PhD in my art practice. Those earlier works, amongst other things, attempted to share what it feels like to be an artist with all the absurdities, doubts, precariousness, pregnant hesitations and compulsive tendencies inherent in that role. This has often been enacted through unwittingly funny, performance video of processes and behaviours with objects that humorously critique the artworld. Heiser describes the culture of contemporary art as “…nothing but a black hole – nothing but embarrassing pauses, comic stumbling blocks, silent intermezzos”250 During this PhD, I have teetered and tripped around my studio with the matter at hand, blindly chancing upon alternative pathways to leap up the mountain from stone to stone. Then, fast-forward, I speed up and leap, sure-footed from crag to crag like a mountain goat. This is how it seems when, not knowing what I am doing, I proceed, decisively, in art making with an energy and force that feels like a slapstick chase.

The aspects of slapstick that Heiser emphasises that are discernable in my own practice include the repetition of motifs or running gags. My relentless mound activity can be perceived as a manifestation of compulsive repetition, an overindulgence or an example of flogging a joke to death. A constant instability involves me making rules for generating artwork then flakily breaking them as I get a better idea mid-work or realise the futility of pursuing such an approach.

Heiser warns against becoming complacent and comfortable with a formulaic version of slapstick as a method because the struggle between “doubtful constancy and constant

doubt”251 is crucial to slapstick’s essentially volatile nature. Heiser reminds us that endless ironic gestures, jokiness and repeated one-liners are akin to "being rhetorically posited with a frozen grin”252. The delicate balance “between ridiculousness and pathos, between foolishness and the earnest must remain truly fragile”253. Recognising this idea of the delicate fragility inherent in the slapstick method reinforces the necessity for following and trusting intuitive aspects of humour as it arises through practice.

**summary:**

Humour provided a starting point for the PhD research process and a ground for developing an understanding of its previously unexamined effects. The difficulty in defining humour was addressed by deconflating it from irony thereby highlighting qualities that have relevance for this project which include the potential for: opening to the sense-event, encounter, failure or fall; allowing for risk, affirmation and the eruption of joy; the presence of the abstract, tender, empathetic, masochistic and many layered incommensurable perceptions.

In coming to understand the many contradictory conceptions of humour I came to value that which cannot be accounted for, that arises at the utmost edges of understanding and holds the capacity to destabilise thought. The importance of the element of surprise in apprehending something that elicits a humorous response (and here I include myself as producer) instigated a crucial shift in this PhD project away from the subject of humour as the central defining axis of the research whilst acknowledging its potential throughout.

Incongruity theory provoked a strategy for developing a particular kind of engagement with objects and their contextualisation exemplified through the works featuring curious little brown things. Observing the ideas operating in this work further emphasised my desire to astonish myself during production via affirmative and humorous creative processes that avoid predetermined outcomes. This involves a deliberate attempt to disrupt the logic of decision-making that may proceed in a linear fashion by, for example, making

251 ibid. p 94
252 ibid. p 94
253 ibid. p 94
works contingent upon materials at hand gathered by ad hoc processes and reworking those works.

The approach made to understanding the possibilities of slapstick as a method deepened my awareness of the influences shaping my intuitive process of art making (this connects back to the presence of silent knowledge discussed in chapter one unaccountable). Slapstick qualities were addressed as they operated through the work mound activity. Specifically these can be summarised as: repetition of motifs; flogging a joke to death; knocking the dignified off-balance; the essence of slowness (but also passages of high speed); rational or machine (idiotic) logic; deep concentration and persistence; objects running amok.

Humour has the potential to alert the viewer to something troubling, rather than merely fun, and the incorporation of humorous strategies and effects can operate as a form of critical engagement. Mound activity is shaping up into something troubling and I will persist with it.

A deeper understanding of slapstick as an ‘attitude’ combined with making work from the middle of a materials-led process without pre-planned outcomes became the driving force behind the PhD project. The research into humour and its operations has informed my understanding of something difficult to define that has very real effects.

The effects of coming to a particular understanding of humour have transformed my approach to practice. Things fall apart and have a life of their own where form comes undone, order is displaced and sense is disrupted. There is humour to be found in the unforeseen encounter but this is something I seek to engender through practice rather than contrive for the viewer.
Fig. 33, *untitled (rock on the Ikea trolley)*
CHAPTER SIX: LIFE OF FORMS

chapter guide:

The phrase ‘life of forms’ activates some important conceptual ground in this PhD; its significance is highlighted by its placement within the dissertation title. In this chapter, I shall define the meanings behind this phrase, noting the attention to anthropomorphism my artwork invites and my resistance to the binary duality of matter and form. The proposition advocates a regard for the concept of sculptural forms as lively and always mobile. Fishli and Weiss’ photographic series Stiller Nachmittag is briefly addressed with Henri Focillon’s text The Life of Forms in Art, for their formative contribution to the direction of this PhD. The focus then turns to life as it is expressed through form and the processes of making and unmaking with a case study of my photographic series transformations of matter. This is followed by an extensive, comparative study of the sculptor Phyllida Barlow with an emphasis on finding the connections between our respective approaches to sculptural practice and the life of forms as they emanate through process. I explicate and identify with aspects of Barlow’s open-ended working practice that involve: not-knowing, instability, excess, re-use of materials and sculptural elements, intermittent extra-rapid construction and thinking, the subversion of the monumental, ephemerality, duration in materiality, hands-on and hands-off approaches to production, the humorous encounter and the potential absurdity of practice. This is undertaken with a view to demonstrating various approaches to sculptural practice that have emerged within the PhD framework that prioritise the material and durational over the conceptual and are responsive to the folding and unfolding of forms and materials (matter) over time.

254 A note on animism: this PhD is not concerned with the theme of animism (in the sense of the attribution of a soul to inanimate objects and natural phenomena) although I acknowledge that it is a dynamic area of research in contemporary practice at the time of writing. “Animism has recently become a concept through which to look at the construction and organization of collective relations between various social actors – human and non-human – once again. Retrospectively, the concept opens new perspectives on modern boundary-practices – culture and nature, life and non-life – forms of knowledge and power, and the aesthetic economies that they produce.” E-Flux (2010) Animism. Available online at: http://www.e-flux.com/announcements/animism/ (accessed 14/06/12)

Life, put simply, can be defined as, “The condition or attribute of living or being alive; animate existence. Opposed to death or inanimate existence.” However, this chapter is concerned with life as it relates to forms and specifically forms in the context of sculpture. This, in turn, slots into a broader theme of the humorous contemplation of an imaginary life in those forms, as addressed in chapter five humour. In terms of the materials that appear in this PhD practice, it is acknowledged that both an immanent life and a social life are present. I actively set out to avoid anthropomorphisation or treating inanimate objects as if they had human thoughts, feelings or sensations but, irrepressibly, this occurred from time to time. The life and liveliness that I propose is inherent to matter is positioned as intrinsic within it and not something spiritual coming from the outside that animates or ensouls it. However, as the discussion of slapstick in relation to objects demonstrates in the previous chapter five humour, it is a seemingly innate human inclination to imaginatively perceive human characteristics in things. It is also a political and ethical imperative for thinkers such as Bennett, who advocates a “strategic anthropomorphism” which doggedly resists anthropocentrism by putting great emphasis on the “… agentic contributions of nonhuman forces (operating in nature, in the human body, and in human artefacts)…” as an antidote to human centred language and thought. Bennett asserts that “We need to cultivate a bit of anthropomorphism – the idea that human agency has some

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257 Bennett, J. (2010a) Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things, (Durham, Duke University Press) Vibrancy in matter is discussed in these terms in chapter 3 ‘Edible Matter’ and chapter 4 ‘A Life of Metal’ rather than attributed to non-material sources such as an animating spirit or a soul.
258 Bennett recognises the problems with this: “With regard to the liabilities of the strategy of anthropomorphizing or allowing yourself to relax into resemblances between your-body-and-its-operations and the bodies-of-things-outside, I can think of at least three: it is easy to get carried away and 1) forget that analogies are slippery and often misleading because they can highlight (what turn out to be) insignificant or non-salient-to-the-task-at-hand resemblances, 2) forget that your body-and-its-operations is not an ideal or pinnacle of evolution, but just the body you have; 3) forget that the human body is itself a composite of many different it-bodies, including bacteria, viruses, metals, etc. and that when we recognize a resemblance between a human form and a nonhuman one, sometimes the connecting link is a shared inorganicism. I think that anthropomorphizing can be a valuable technique for building an ecological sensibility in oneself, but of course it is insufficient to the task.” Bennett, J. (2010b) Vibrant Matters: An Interview with Jane Bennett. Available online at: http://philosophyinatimeoferror.wordpress.com/2010/04/22/vibrant-matters-an-interview-with-jane-bennett/ (accessed 11/06/2012).
echoes in nonhuman nature – to counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the world. I propose then that ‘life’ as used in this PhD, when bought into relations with sculptural form, is opened out to encompass inherent biological life and that which might be experienced, rather than imposed, by humans.

**form**

I began to use the phrase ‘life of forms’ in a slightly humorous way, after reading the French art-historian, Henri Focillon’s book *The Life of Forms in Art.* There is something sweetly twisted in bringing the somewhat old-fashioned term ‘form’ into play and I expand upon Focillon’s view of forms in art as vital and never stationary below. I have now come to the view, that when discussing sculpture, ‘form’ is an indispensable word because no matter what arises, sculpture is always concerned with process and formation. I use the noun ‘form’ in the title of this dissertation to denote that which exists in space in three-dimensions. However there is no taking the idea of sculpture in relationship to form for granted as I attempt, through practice, to explode it out by maintaining a free relationship to traditions, asserting it with a recognition of the field’s conventions and then facilitating a collapse. There is a layering up of the process always with the sense that a sculpture (a form) might be here for now (in an exhibition or cityscape) but then it goes elsewhere, disappears or undergoes strange transmogrifications. This relates to the idea of art, not as something intrinsic to an object, but as contingent upon the object’s contexts.

To summarise, I simply define ‘form’ as that which possesses three-dimensional shape, and configuration constituting “The visible aspect of a thing...” but this perception is inflected with an awareness that form is not fixed but is distinctly in flux. It follows then that ‘life’ is already implicated with form and not something separate but never-the-less it is foregrounded in this chapter to explicate the sense in which it is aligned with the object-oriented forms of sculpture produced for this PhD.

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260 ibid. p xvi
262 I expand on this notion below in relation to Phyllida Barlow, myself and the monumental in the section titled beyond grasp of this chapter.
I now proceed to briefly situate this chapter within a way of thinking in which matter is not separate from form.

**matter and form**

In choosing to utilise this straight-forward sculptural use of the term ‘form’, as it sits in the title of this PhD, I also acknowledge, but question, an older use in which intellectual truth is valued and considered more true than physical truth\(^264\). Historically the distinction between matter and form creates a binary. A part of this project involves trying to practice and think about matter, and the dynamic potential of its relationship to form in a way that is outside the inherent binaries typical in dualist philosophies in which matter is devalued. I reiterate here an important point addressed in the section ‘materials matter’ in chapter four where Terri Bird, in reminding us how hard it is get past descriptions of matter’s operations without resorting to oppositional thinking, acknowledges all matter has a history which extends “…to an understanding of matter as never ‘unformed’. It’s always in some form, just not yet formed or purposefully deployed by us”\(^265\).

**proposition:**

Forms in art are born of change and lead to other changes.\(^266\) Regarding form as never static but alive, vital and always mobile has implications for my sculptural practice where techniques of production which include making, materials and exhibition assembly are explicated via methods that foster indeterminacy. Change and transition as they emerge through forms are understood as always already situated within a process and can be manifest in evocative and non-didactic ways.

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\(^264\) Plato’s theory of forms as ideas denigrates the physical world in favour of ideal form.

\(^265\) Hester, B., Bird, T. & Australian Centre for Contemporary Art. (2011) *Bianca Hester: Please Leave These Windows Open Overnight to Enable the Fans to Draw in Cool Air During the Early Hours of the Morning,* (Southbank, Vic., Australian Centre for Contemporary Art) p 81

\(^266\) Focillon, H. (1989) *The Life of Forms in Art,* (New York, Zone Books) This proposition summarises the thesis of the book where Focillon states that “Life is form, and form is the modality of life.” p 33
contextualisation:

I begin by briefly discussing Fishli and Weiss’ photographic series *Stiller Nachmittag (Quiet Afternoon)*\(^{267}\) before linking them to an idea proposed in Henri Focillon’s *The Life of Forms in Art*\(^ {268}\). In considering this key artwork by Fischli and Weiss and how it relates to a text by Henri Focillon I seek to provide further insight into the ground upon which this investigation was built in relation to the idea of forms having life. The focus then turns to a case study of the photographic series *transformations of matter* that formed a part of the exhibition *the inexplicable magnetism of an alien object*. I will then discuss how the ‘life of forms’ has been expressed through processes of making and unmaking in a case study of the practice of English sculptor Phyllida Barlow. This will demonstrate several links between her practice and my own and serves to expand on the above mentioned concepts of transition, change, indeterminacy, of matter always already in some form and situated within a process.

\[\text{the life of forms in art}\]

This work of Fischli and Weiss, the series of about twenty seven photographs known as *Stiller Nachmittag (Quiet Afternoon)* was pivotal in thinking through the very early stages of this research project. The series of images suggest ways to experiment with provisional arrangements of objects and the apprehension of form as never static but as alive, vital and mobile.

\(^{267}\) Fishchli and Weiss, *Stiller Nachmittag (Quiet Afternoon)* or alternatively *Equilibres* from 1984-86
The photographs document a series of experiments using everyday objects balanced in precarious constructions that defy gravity, even if only for the moment it takes to capture the image. Contemplating this series of images alerted me to the ways in which traditionally conceived sculpture, as objects in space to be looked at, seemed to strike an awkward pose, as if in suspended animation awaiting (I anthropomorphise) for the mischief to begin when our backs are turned. My lingering child-like imagination activates a latent belief in the spontaneity of things and their potential for liveliness. I am amused by the thought that an object’s perceived dormancy might be likened to a pregnant pause or a held breath that might burst at any moment. A passing fancy perhaps but these images provoked an interest in working (through practice) with forms appearing to be in a state of stasis yet within the context of a vital materiality.

The aforementioned series Stiller Nachmittag (Quiet Afternoon) can be described as a precedent for the well-known Fischli and Weiss’ film The Way Things Go²⁶⁹. The dynamism inherent in these constructions can be linked to the writings of French art historian Henri Focillon²⁷⁰ and aligned with the ideas to be found in The Life of Forms in Art (1934)²⁷¹. He observes:

²⁶⁹ This is a 30 minute film of a series of chain reactions involving every day objects.
Whether constructed of masonry, carved in marble, cast in bronze, fixed beneath varnish, engraved in copper or on wood, a work of art is motionless only in appearance. It seems to be set fast – arrested, as are the moments of time gone by. But in reality it is born of change, and it leads to other changes.²⁷²

Focillon’s view was that “…art was always dynamic, shifting, riven by fractures and discontinuities, unstable and off-balance”²⁷³. Focillon was discussing traditional and sometimes quite ancient artefacts that he describes as constituting “…an order of existence and that this order has the motion and the breath of life. Plastic forms are subject to the principle of metamorphoses, by which they are perpetually renewed…”²⁷⁴.

This is a process that is always already underway during the development of the forms themselves and that continues even when they appear to be at rest indicating the ‘virtuality’ that is immanent in the actual²⁷⁵. Part of this movement might occur in our minds as form conjures up the existence of other forms. Invoking the idea of succession, the work of art “…takes its place in a sequence both before and after other works of art. Its formation does not occur on the spur of the moment, but results from a long series of experiments”.²⁷⁶

Fischli and Weiss’s photographs of teetering, experimental arrangements hold a potential energy in which movement is implied. This brings us to my series of images transformations of matter which explores the latent vitality one can imagine to exist within the sculptural forms.

²⁷² ibid. p 41
²⁷⁵ Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (1988) A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, (London, Athlone Press) One of their important concepts - the virtual is used to refer to something different from the actual. I understand Deleuze’s virtual as the field of pure potentiality.
case study # 12: transformations of matter by Sarah crowEST

Fig. 36 transformations of matter, installation view from the inexplicable magnetism of an alien object, (detail pp 233 – 234)

Thirty-three images or ‘phases’ from the work transformations of matter were shown in the back gallery of the exhibition the inexplicable magnetism of an alien object. The numbering and discontinuous sequencing of these images was discussed in chapter four matter, in the section flux. This work is an ongoing series of digital prints tracking, somewhat idiosyncratically, the restless life and mutation of forms as they shift through contexts such as the studio, the outside, exhibitions, domestic environments and spaces between those. Whilst many of the images serve to document processes and situations, they are not, on the whole, made and used in the clear and direct manner typical of documentary photography. The series aims to activate a sense of the unresolved and immanent by suggesting the ever-present potential for something further to unfold or occur tangentially to what is visible at any point. I sought to avoid laborious and didactic sequences of every stage of transformation\(^{277}\) and prefer to privilege aspects of arising transformations that capture the unexpected, or an earlier stage of a form or material that has retrospectively gained an unanticipated significance. Images are added above and below the line to operate in the manner of footnotes in text and serve to visually expand an aspect of what is shown.

\(^{277}\) Extensive video documentation was undertaken as part of this PhD research. This has not been included as part of the exhibition or durable visual record and has only been used for the occasional screen grab for the series transformation of matter.
For example, the snapshot views Phase 2 to Phase 6 track some of the variations of form as a beautiful Indian quilt becomes encrusted and encased to then appear rock-like. My intimate and convoluted relationship to this form is contingent upon several occurrences that were not part of an ‘art’ documentation process because it was anticipated that the quilt would remain in use as a quilt for many years to come. This explains, for example, why the only image I have of the quilt, as a quilt, is mutated from a snapshot of my mother sitting on the quilt on the bed in my Lisbon home and mother is covered over (at her request) by an image of a ‘bolder’ that was to hand at the time of making the image file. The back-story that I will recount below would not form a part of an exhibition context in the shape an explication (wall or catalogue notes). The evidence transpires through the images. It is only briefly set out below to indicate the nature of the transitions (that might be discernable to the viewer) and exemplify how they are manifest through the images for the purpose of clarifying the process through this dissertation. It follows then, that all the forms in the exhibition are momentarily stilled points on multiple trajectories of matter/energy.
I bought the quilt as last minute essential bedding from a chi-chi home-store late one Sunday afternoon when I had arrived to live in Lisbon, Portugal. It was a delicate, hand-block printed muslin, Indian quilt and kept me warm in bed for one year before I used it to wrap up framed art works for shipping home to Australia. Several months later St Kilda ‘dry’ Cleaners ruined the quilt by washing it in water. It seemed they couldn’t understand the Portuguese ‘dry clean only’ label. It came back ruinously lumpy and unusable. So the lumpy thing became the basis for a ‘mound’ covering from which I subsequently emerged as part of a performance (see Fig. 32). Back in the studio it was rolled up, the spaces between the crusty biscuity shapes filled in with pulped paper and the surfaced sealed with a skins of paint and layers of other substances. It has been shown in various exhibition contexts such as *the inexplicable magnetism of an alien object* (see Fig. 2 background, Fig. 37 and Fig. 38). It is, at the time of writing, pale, sky blue and semi-hovering up near my bedroom ceiling perched on the corner of a cupboard and so it goes on (see Fig. 39).

### The life of forms in assemblage

The engagement of sometimes long processes of making and unmaking, in which materials might be added, subtracted and mutated, and in which nothing is fixed or planned, tends towards never finishing. An endless, aimless pushing around of materials often leads to the bringing about of something that is of no use, that is in excess to any known requirements.

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278 Assemblage is used here in its conventional artistic mode to refer to amassed grouping of found or artist-made, perhaps unrelated objects. This definition is for me inflected by awareness of what Deleuze and Guattari call an assemblage as a collection of randomly gathered and jumbled discreet parts capable of producing any number of affects.
However, as an occasion (a particular context, place and time) to present work arises, a more considered clustering or dispersal – a differing concentration comes to the fore, an emergence that again is not prefigured. This exhibition or sharing, forces a coalescence, a bringing of parts into temporary relation to one another. Conceptual, artistic, human, social and political concerns enter the fray contingent upon factors ranging from location, thematic or curatorial imperatives, to personal and world events. Sometimes works might be put together or arranged by others, such as curators and thereby brought into unanticipated relation to other artists and spaces. Many of the elements or forms in my practice remain ‘unbothered’ lurking on studio shelves, awaiting another context. Others gain momentum after periods of stasis and work their way into a particular arrangement or context for the duration of a show.

In summary, these transitions and transformations are digitally recorded with wildly fluctuating degrees of attention paid to technical aspects such as lighting and position (contingent upon circumstances such as location and equipment to hand). The aim is to use snapshots of transition as an adjunct to objects to allow the viewer access to the life of forms. As such, in the context of the exhibition *the inexplicable magnetism of an alien object*, the images in *transformations of matter* serve to inform the other sculptures in the exhibition either by directly referencing a phase in their life or by implying that they all born of change and lead to other changes.

I can pinpoint several approaches to process and material that became prominent during this PhD: agglomerative processes leading to larger and larger forms; the unmaking of forms; the recycling of elements of forms; bursts of rapid construction; hands-on manipulation of materials or a haptic approach; expediency with change to forms occurring according to practical imperatives sometimes from beyond art practice itself; ephemerality; over-working; surfacing and re-surfacing with materials such as paint; the value of the studio for dwelling with materials and forms allowing open-ended experimentation.

In expanding upon the aforementioned aspects of the life of forms that have become integral to the artistic methodology at stake in this PhD, the critical discourse that surrounds Phyllida Barlow’s work has become invaluable in enabling me to recognise and
articulate many things concerning process and the life of forms that were formerly taken for granted in comprehending my own work.

case study # 13: Phyllida Barlow

Despite a prolific, lifelong, experimental practice the English sculptor and art educator Phyllida Barlow has only recently come to be widely recognised. Finally she ceased teaching at the age of sixty five to focus on her work and signed to her first commercial gallery aged sixty six. Barlow’s haptic approach typically involves large-scale, rapidly executed works and masses of everyday materials brought together through bundling, piling and sticking. Barlow, for the most part, approaches a gallery space as a site of experimentation and the thread of the unresolved and the unfinished weaves throughout her oeuvre. After being out of step for decades with the aesthetic fashions of art, it seems her rough and ready, anti-glamorous constructions and installations of everyday materials are now finding a mainstream audience.

Fig. 40 Phyllida Barlow, Untitled: Double Act (2010)

Attending to Barlow’s practice further enables me to talk about sculpture, the physical and material processes of making and how this connects to ideas of life, movement, transformation and sculptural form. In this case study my own working processes have been used to ground the discussion. I must point out here that I find it excruciatingly difficult to talk directly about my work and processes (the practical characteristics sound
banal and the psychological aspects prove unspeakable)\textsuperscript{279}. In finding another artist such as Barlow, with a practice that has been the subject of analysis that explicated those things about process and the liveliness of forms that I have in common with her, I am able to enter the discussion. On the whole, it is in Barlow’s approach to processes, materials and forms that I identify with rather than in her actual art works which I have never encountered in real life.

Fig 41, Phyllida Barlow, installation view from \textit{Beauty and The Beast}, 2006

I have been vaguely aware, via media images, of Barlow’s practice for several years and felt some curiosity and kinship towards her massed, lumpen forms and processes of cobbling together materials with paint, glue and string. However, it is only on pausing from being immersed with my practice to engage in an extended period of writing that I have allowed myself to be drawn into her world and taken the time to examine her actions and relationship to making. There are connections and parallels on many levels between our practices with similarities in approach to physical and material process that resonate within this PhD’s field of enquiry. Barlow’s ad-hoc activity of bundling everyday found materials leading to sculptural forms that are continuously dismantled and recycled into new works is a process similar to mine. Over the course of her career this material reworking manifests as a vast open-ended and unfinished output\textsuperscript{280}. In mining the archive of texts and interviews on Barlow I have come to recognise pre-existing aspects of my practice and their evolution throughout the PhD that were often too close to see and consequently

\textsuperscript{279} My interview with Elizabeth Newman in chapter one, \textit{unaccountable}, connects to this difficulty.

\textsuperscript{280} Barlow’s early works from the 1970s and 1980s had affinities with American process and anti-form tendencies of the 1960s. See Potts, A. (2000) \textit{The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist}, (New Haven, CT, Yale University Press) p 250
articulate. Reflection on Barlow’s approach has enabled this process of clarification. I have structured this case study around a series of ideas which refer back to several issues touched on in previous chapters such as not-knowing, ephemerality, and humour making extensive use of Barlow’s voice or her commentators.

**beyond grasp**

My work typically changes in scale contingent upon my working locations, budget and the availability of materials. During this PhD I constructed several large (in relation to the size of my 3 metre x 6 metre studio) forms. When they began to crowd me out of the studio and movement was constricted I was compelled to partake of some absurd manoeuvres and ad-hoc placements of the forms. Phyllida Barlow and I both produce large unwieldy sculptures and share an interest in the object ‘getting away’ from the sculptor. I have relished the slapstick struggles that ensue as I stubbornly and independently attempt to move or transform shapes that are quite beyond my capacity to grasp and stabilise. Barlow, on why she makes large objects, has said:

> As an artist, I make things on a large scale not to create heroic objects but because largeness takes me into that area of making where there is that risk of losing control. I’m excited by making physical stuff that isn’t definitive from the outset, and I try and find its definition through a process of making. I’m often working beyond my reach and beyond my height, so the object is constantly eluding me, even though the physical stuff is accessible and handleable. That contradiction really is what drives me with these big objects. Therefore, whether it fails or not is a complicated question. It may fail formally, but the actual process was enormously thrilling – this journey to make work that is beyond our control the whole time. I think that is something that sculpture has been able to take on. It has been part of the history of 20th-century sculpture that it can go well beyond its former orthodoxies, the public or the heroic.282

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281 Objects can get away from me by virtue of their instability and propensity to topple, their dimensions or weight which are beyond my capabilities for manoeuvring and yet I persist, my use of materials in an inappropriate or inexpert fashion, their mutability in terms of their materiality (this can occur with materials with which I am not very familiar such as clay), my reluctance to ask for help, my pleasure in attempting the impossible and also due to their deliberately rough fabrication.

Whilst on the subject of size, the question of the monumental must be acknowledged. In terms of contemporary sculptural practice I have felt that my recent bodies of work sit into the framework of sculptural “…things that are cobbled together, pushed and prodded into a state of suspended animation”283 as described in Unmonumental: the object in the 21st century284. The exhibition of this name at the New Museum in New York and the accompanying book survey ‘unmonumental’ sculpture as the product of the first decade of the twenty-first century “…a sculpture of fragments, a debased, precarious, trembling form…”285. However, rather than embracing the fallen and the pathetic286 I semi-suspected that a monumental quality, in so far as it might be possible to achieve by my own efforts, was something I was looking for. Barlow sheds some light:

Making from lightweight, disposable things pastiches the monument or the monumental. The latter has this heroic, macho thing that I’m attracted to, but which conversely I couldn’t possibly do myself. So there’s this idea of playing the monumental game but with these crap materials, and because they are crap materials, you can mess around with them, tilting them or balancing them: forcing them to do nonmonumental things. It’s both comic and grimly authoritarian, and that’s my relationship to sculpture.287

Barlow describes, almost exactly, the sense that I have that allows for the aspiration to make something with presence, authority and gravitas but at the same time recognises the impossibility or utter folly of embarking on such endeavors in all seriousness. The sculptures, hands-on fabricated by both Barlow and myself, maintain some monumental ambition but that is undermined by process, materials and contingent placement.

Barlow, from the outset, has built sculpture on a large scale. Almost all of her large body of work, produced over forty-five years, no longer exists except as photographic image.288 Her early output was characterized by an excessive and abundant use of materials coupled

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284 ibid.
285 ibid. p 65
286 These were, in fact, central to my practice for several years prior to embarking on the Phd but I felt them to have become commonplace in art.
288 The destiny of most my large sculptures is likely to be similar due to storage constraints. There will be a record as straight documentation and as part of the series transformations of matter which will continue open-endedly.
with a restraint that used a limited amount of sculptural processes. Barlow has been dealing with matter and materials and vast amounts of them. Typical materials used in the 1980s include: “…carpet felt, polythene, rags, rubber tarpaulin, bitumen, upholstery foam, handkerchiefs, sellotape, canvas, paper, timber, silk, foil, canvas, plaster”289. Industrial materials dominated but not to the exclusion of the organic and almost all could be described as everyday materials. Expediency determined the choices of materials to that which could be found, chanced upon (such as carpet material from a fire-damaged factory)290 or cheaply purchased.

the expedient and the haptic

There are many expediencies or practicalities that impact on artists that are not openly discussed as an integral part of an artistic method. It is rare to hear an established artist speak so openly (apart from student or very early career anecdotes) of dealing with space restrictions, lack of funds or juggling time as a parent. These have had a profound impact on the way Barlow’s practice has evolved, as it has impacted the way that I too have managed to proceed to be an artist and continue to sustain a practice over the long term.

Barlow had five children including two sets of twins but continued to teach and make work for much of the time when parenting must have been intense.

….when the five of them were around it was very difficult to work. So I would go into the studio very late at night, and I actually hadn’t got a clue what to make, so I’d turn all the lights off. I’ve described this many times in slide talks; it was a very, very pivotal moment, when making things not through an image, but through touch, which made me think about this whole issue of where the subject is in the work.291

Under these constrained conditions the Nightworks were hastily, produced by a haptic method in which explorative physicality was privileged over any prefigured idea. These

290 ibid. p 36
smaller works were described by Barlow as bearing signs of their “…struggle to come into existence”\textsuperscript{292}. These pieces or dense collages came into being from the residual parts of other formerly exhibited works. These materials and partial forms were at hand, within reach and I imagine them, like mine, being available to Barlow to facilitate some extra-rapid thinking through making, and as such exemplify a deeply intuitive approach.

Hapticity and the reworking of un-made (pulled apart) pieces of sculpture link back to those contingent actions built-in to my own processes. The use of already-made elements and the re-use of residual sculptures has been incorporated into my own working methods partly to enable spontaneity and a differently paced way of dealing with construction (and partly due to budget and space constraints). Whilst I did not attempt to make sculpture in the dark or blindfolded\textsuperscript{293} as part of this PhD research I tested approaches that involved suspending attention, looking elsewhere, making in a faster-than-habitual way, particularly when working with clay and plaster. All these strategies privilege a haptic approach. I am, by nature, a fairly neat and careful maker but prone to frustration with the resulting aesthetic tightness (my carpenter grandfather and domestic-science teacher mother taught me to create well-finished, sound and long-lasting objects.) The haptic and destabilising approaches connect to the open-ended strategies for opening up spaces for ‘not-knowing’ addressed in chapter one unaccountable. The looseness and unthinking, trance-like states engendered in these experiments worked most effectively on those occasions when I set up


\textsuperscript{293} I investigated the \textit{Blind Drawings} of Robert Morris and considered using blindness as a strategy but decided I was more interested in the kind of states of not-knowing that came with an acute visual awareness even when used in an unfocussed way. See Criqui, J.P. (2005) \textit{Robert Morris: Blind Time Drawings, 1973-2000}, (Steidl, Göttingen) and Morris, R. (1994) \textit{The Mind/Body Problem : Robert Morris}, (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum)
a situation for speedy fabrication. For example, after tiredly deciding to leave the studio for home after a long day’s work, I would attempt a rapid construction before I left. On several occasions I was astonished to arrive back to the studio the next day to find an array of energetically produced, informal offerings on my bench. The elusive element of surprise that I considered so crucial to this project transpired at the edges of my consciousness.

ephemerality

I return now to those pragmatic considerations that impinge on the way an artist might expedite multiple bodies of work or force a shift to occur. The exhibition the inexplicable magnetism of an alien object was ephemeral in nature; consisting of an interlude in the life of those forms resting in temporary stasis for three weeks. Barlow’s works may not be viewed again once an exhibition has been dismantled (other than via the photographs). The sculptures are pulled apart so the materials can be used again or even destroyed and discarded. Two reasons are given to explain the limited life of Barlow’s sculptures: one being the practical impossibility of storing huge works in expensive spaces; secondly, as a political act of resistance that took an anti-market position which retrospectively appears naïve. However, as Godfrey describes it, “More positively, the disappearance of Barlow’s work should be seen as the flipside to her insistence on the here-and-now event of the encounter.”²⁹⁴ Godfrey observes that unlike many canonical, historical examples of post-minimalism, anti-form, and Arte Povera, Barlow’s works have evaded the deadening, packaging and pigeon-holing of museum culture. However, he declares, “No doubt at the cost of greater repute, Barlow has staked out a position against the potentially deadening effect of the museum on sculpture, directing energies towards the creation of new work and never to the preservation of old.”²⁹⁵ Without the burden of an archive in the studio or museum and mercantile imperatives, Barlow has found a freedom to experiment and continually reinvent her practice beyond institutional expectations. There is a connection here to the ethos of my project, both in terms of the realm of production and in the realm of reception where the emphasis is upon the temporality of the encounter that is

²⁹⁵ ibid. p 71
contingent upon objects pausing as an intensification of matter and passing through contexts such as, for example, the exhibition.

Barlow has always used the gallery or exhibition situation (often in or around abandoned buildings) as space for experimentation leading to work that never really finds its resting place. Despite its transitory nature Godfrey reminds us that “…ephemerality has not been the subject of Barlow’s work, and her objects have never been literally transient” 296 in the manner of melting ice works or those that rot, change colour or dissipate as time passes 297.

When something is losing its sense of being an object and becoming something else, that ‘something else’ is a source of fascination for me. Whether that is a cloud evaporating in front of one’s eyes or smoke disappearing, or the weather changing. For instance, is rain an ‘object’? What is it if it isn’t? I’m interested in how spaces are altered by different kinds of things, whether it’s temperature, smell or dampness. Observing these things has made me aware of how things last in a different kind of way. 298

With regard to Barlow’s resistance to rendering her works permanent, she has confessed to feeling that it is impossible. 299 For Barlow the issues of permanence and ephemerality are less important than the action of her doing. She has stated “There is an enormous doubt on my part about the validity or credibility of permanence.” 300 In a round-table discussion on contemporary sculpture at The Slade School of Fine Art, London in 2003 Naomi Salaman responded:

That’s a very gendered and provocative position to take up. I’m not saying that criticizing permanence has not been done before, I’m saying that Phyllida’s work sort of maintains a relationship to tradition but undermines some basic premises, whilst valuing bits of it. It’s a practice in pieces, rather than a solid monolithic thing. 301

296 ibid. p 71
300 ibid. p 237
301 ibid. p 238
Barlow concurs with this as she is aware of wanting many disparate things in the work. In terms of maintaining a relationship with sculpture whilst undermining it I must confess to some confusion on my part during this project. It had been brought to my attention during the early stages of the PhD that I seemed to use the traditions of sculpture against sculpture and I took that to be the case but now I think it is not so. In contrasting my approach to that of Barlow I discern a point of difference. Barlow’s training at The Slade School of Fine Art was very clearly embedded in traditional sculptural processes of carving, moulding and casting and whilst I have perfunctorily learnt these processes in my art school area of specialisation, sculpture, I come from a less focused art educational background. I cannot claim to have emerged out of a traditional way of working from which I turned away. I have come to engage with sculpture in an educational context where anything, in terms of process or material, can be acceptably used; even to the point of complete negation and dematerialisation. Therefore it seems to me that I have always had a freedom to play with plinths, autonomous sculptural objects and monumentalism without claiming to be contributing to arguments that were made decades ago. These sculptural tropes are accessible to me as part of a panoply of available styles and ways to put things together or exhibit.

I have come to understand through the experimental processes of this PhD that my works never reach a fixed point (even as I facilitate the performance of such a pose). It is only if someone entirely removes the sculptures from my reach that they might have a chance to remain unbothered by me or free from being reworked or recontextualised into other art works. That is to say materials, works or partial works that remain in my vicinity continue to be cycled through my studio ecosystem. However in moving beyond my reach, the forms lead to other changes as they unfold their potential to become part of a larger ecosystem of thinking, making, exhibiting, finding, writing and exchanging. The life of these forms will undoubtedly include varying degrees of neglect, rot, unmaking, destruction, and, on a more hopeful note, recycling by others to a life in another context.
hard work

Being a far too conscientious woman who tends to do far too much and make far too many things and write sentences that are far too long, I look, these days, for easier ways. I am burdened with a craft person’s propensity to make things really well whilst having aspirations to ‘perform’ less well here. By this I mean, to ‘make’ in a lighter, less frenetic way that allows me to step back and see when I have done enough for it to work. Traditional, hands-on, training in sewing, pattern-making, design, painting and screen-printing to a high standard as a teenager has contributed to this fierce work ethic which I aspire to break down. A personal outcome of this PhD project is the realization that when it comes to life and making art, ease of movement with somatic awareness is something to be cultivated. In the field of contemporary art this position is exemplified by an artist with a light touch such as Gedi Sibony. The life of most artists can be short on remuneration so a delightful, flowing, unstrained, non-polluting, stress-avoiding approach to practice strikes me as something to aspire too.

Both Phyllida Barlow and I could be described as hyper-productive with a tendency to dive in and make (a lot) without premeditated thought. Barlow, in reference to what she describes as her ‘hardworkingness’ has stated:

I do not see this as any great virtue because it can blind and mask what is really there and the essentials to be done. I have worked hard, overworked, when standing back, waiting and watching would have been infinitely productive.

My hardworkingness is not as ordered as a Protestant work ethic, it is unfortunately, more hysterical, panic stricken, as if driven to exorcise something…. I do keep going and… I cannot close the system down. With this drive to work comes the desire to push the work, to work something through, however inadequately.

302 Elizabeth Newman, Thea Djordjadze Gedi Sibony and Sergej Jensen are my heroes where my aspirations for an insouciant practice are concerned.
303 I have been learning and practicing the Feldenkrais Method throughout the three years of this PhD which involves developing somatic awareness of easier, gentler ways to move and use ones body and improve its range of movement. This is achieved through augmentation of neurological function in the domain of self use.
Barlow connects this attitude to something residual from her earlier working practices with malleable clay which allowed for rapid responses as her thinking shifted. As her material lexicon expanded this developed into a continuing relationship “which assumes that materials can be easily changed, even at the eleventh hour, into something else, better…”

I developed a similar attitude to materials, continually salvaging, reworking, rarely rejecting or discarding anything through a predominantly textiles-based practice during the 1980s. This changing, improving and reworking of materials as part of my working process still lingers on in my current engagement with a more three-dimensional mode of making. The impossibility of not reworking and re-using can be a source of frustration as it can result in some very messy outcomes. Barlow adds, “Working at it, being unable to leave it alone, seems very deep-rooted within me and, at times, something I long to shake off, in order to find another, easier way, which allows for short cuts.”

hands on – hands off

Barlow shares some of my envy for those without the compulsion or need to make or bother materials too much. Barlow refers to those ‘appropriators’ and ‘ready-makers’ who exemplify for her “…the divorce between thinking and doing and between hands on and hands off”.

Barlow has lived and practiced through historical moments (from the 1960s to the present day) when several shifts have occurred in thinking about form and process, and in which ideas of hands-on making came to be opposed by a hands-off displacing of objects with language and the tendency to outsource production. It is clear that Barlow, although envious but not quite convinced by the seduction and seeming effortlessness of the ready-makers, considers the struggle with materials an essential part of her process. For Barlow it is as if through hands-on making, like verbal and written language, a displacement occurs.

The appropriators and the ready-makers seem to have translators who do their work for them whilst I have to slog it out word by word, getting things wrong, not knowing the pronunciation, spelling, etc etc. Their’s is a seamless process, where the thinking is the creative

305 ibid. p 89
306 ibid. p 89
act and where the results appear cleaner, more sensible and more shrewd, with fewer mistakes and less abuse of material. Their struggle is done away from the work; they can stand back and wait; altogether a more reliable activity. 307

Barlow wonders how they make mistakes, try things out and ‘push’ the work and feels she is reliant “…on the flukes that emerge from physical making, endless, often frustrating revision and perpetual turmoil in the studio”308 that she finds “…so far removed from the intellectual neatness of the ready-made”309. Barlow likens the verbal and written to the ready-made as something very close and complimentary and in comparison to this, declares sculpture essentially wordless – “…that is part of its vulnerability”310.

Barlow’s words above were gleaned from a fax conversation between Phyllida Barlow and the sculptor Alison Wilding in 1998. Writing in 2012, these polarities between the made and the readymade have all but dissolved as contemporary practices blur those distinctions and works frequently combine both. There are links between my method of making forms which are used or rejected, then set aside to later be brought into relation or agglomeration with newer elements (the at-hand, readymade by me); Masato Takasaka’s ‘alreadymades’ and Barlow’s perpetual recycling of materials. Barlow almost dismisses her expedient way of working as just a necessity and does not contextualise these processes of re-use at a strategic part of her methodology as I have in this PhD. For me the recycling not only contributes to a sustainable practice economically but allows me to consider their environmental impact as well. The production of the unforeseen via the bringing together of unplanned elements and materials is an aspect of practice that Barlow and I have in common and as such constitutes one of the contributions of this PhD.

the surface of sculpture and paint

Both Phyllida Barlow and I use paint on the surface of our sculptures as an important physical material. Barlow refers to the painting of her work as a gesture:

307 ibid. p 89
308 ibid. p 89
309 ibid. p 89
310 ibid. p 89
The surface of the sculpture has a very odd relationship with it – it almost removes the actual objectiveness of the object, it actually makes it, the surface, be something in its own right. It gives it a painterly identity. It’s like that pillar there which is painted pale green, but that seems to be in competition with what one imagines its physicality might be. I don’t believe that is just a shell, a pale green shell. I believe there is something beneath that painted greenness, there is a sort of duality working so I’m not sure which one wins, which one we’ll see first or experience first, whether we experience it as a painted surface first – the two things seem to be switching. Those qualities about where sculpture starts to dissolve seem to me to be a really exciting place.

The fact that I made extensive use of the painted surface and have used paint as material and binder during this PhD is contingent upon the fact that many tins were cast out from the VCA maintenance department and found their way to my studio. Barlow has stated that “Painting my work is like closing it down, sealing it and in a way rooting it to the spot.” I too am often compelled to use paint both as glue and as a sealer, a protective skin that coheres the disparate elements of the sculpture and assists in making it ‘sound’, in fine fettle and somewhat weatherproof. In my race to use up (clean up, incorporate) the materials in my studio I used paint as a material for bringing other materials together, sometimes mixing it with coffee grouts for strength and texture. In coming across Barlow’s use and explication of paint in her work I am alerted to its almost ubiquitous presence on the surfaces of my PhD sculptural output. I bring paint into the discussion here because I have become aware that, in its contingent appearance in the work, I have come to consider the surfaces as a potential ground for ever-changing effects. Those aforementioned processes of re-working, last minute change and re-use of sculptures across exhibition contexts are easily realised through shifts in surface and colour and I take great pleasure in this.

311 ibid. p 237
312 At the time of writing, as many of the sculptures from the exhibition the inexplicable magnetism of an alien object have moved into my domestic environment, I am reappraising them as ‘décor’. I am re-surfacing the rough, black and brown forms with clear, smoochy pastels.
Barlow’s interest clearly lies in the physical encounter expanding on early minimalist concerns with the viewer’s movement and relationship to the work and the surrounding space. Throughout the 1980s in particular, Barlow produced works that filled spaces, blocking and constraining the viewer to create a sense of imbalance. Godfrey describes the encounter with Barlow’s work as “…never simply a negotiation of stuff in space: the imaginative dimension of the encounter is crucial. The material that is visibly present before the viewer matters, but so do the fantasies that are provoked by its shapes, its colours, its associations. Barlow wants the sculptural encounter to be one of enchantment…” Godfrey describes how in most of Barlow’s works “…the imaginative dimension of the encounter has little to do with resemblance, relying on more abstract principles. These have to do with potential and memory, absurdity and sense, artifice and honesty, concealment and revelation, awkwardness and ease.” In contrast to this kind of work that potentially triggers the sculptural imagination is the ‘made-easy’. Through the conduit of Godfrey again we get an expanded insight into this work described by Barlow as easy to make and easy to consume:

… appropriated from the world of consumerism, fabricated by assistants rather than built by the artist, easily namable and cleverly titled, installed in a vitrine so separated from the viewer, best seen from one spot and quickly recalled as an image, pictorial and simple to photograph. Made-easy objects are press-friendly and easily marketed, yet for Barlow, they are the disappointingly pathetic progeny of Duchamp’s more imaginative readymades.

Suggesting, rather than naming here, the work of younger British artists who came to the fore, with much media attention, in the 1990s, Barlow is constructing an argument for the importance (for her) of the studio and the value of sculptural objects quite unlike those described above. I briefly address the studio below. However I introduced Barlow’s
concept of the ‘made-easy’ to compare it with her conception of an opening out, in apprehending sculpture, to an encounter. For Barlow this involves an object or installation “that contrives to meet the viewer with the demand to be investigated, to be walked around, pried into, stalked, looked under and over.” These she describes as “object experiences that jolt us into seeking out comparisons… question what we are looking at and what it is saying to us… stark, undiluted confrontation…”319 Curiously for me, these encounters were activated for myself and others in the over-crowded confines of my studio space at the VCA. It was there that the energy was palpable. The final PhD exhibition presented (contrived to perform) a much more restrained and poised demeanor.

the life of forms in the studio

The studio320, however loosely conceived, as a site for being with materials and for open-ended experimentation has been key to the working processes and methodology I have developed for this PhD as described in chapter four matter in the section studio ecosystem. Barlow highlights the significance of the studio for its capacity to harbour private acts of making that are deeply rooted in hands-on processes. Barlow is advocating an enlightened studio where:

Curiosity is fundamental to how ideas are explored, manifested through the physical manipulation of material, privately and intimately, where there is a slow evolution of processes, intellectual and practical, involving experimental approaches to concepts, techniques, forms and aesthetics.321

Although I can work in any space, like Barlow, I experience the studio (or designated work room) as a space that facilitates the evolution of intellectual and practical processes over time. The sculptural work produced for the exhibition the inexplicable magnetism of an alien

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319 ibid. p 188 Barlow speaks here with reference to the sculpture of Louise Bourgeois but I have let it operate more generally as criteria for a particular kind of encounter with work that she sees operating in total antithesis to the vitrine.
320 The kind of studio at stake here could be any kind of space, including a yard or corner of a bed-sit which allows physical and mental space to create, gather or store things. I find it particularly useful to have a space that I don’t have to clean up all the time where the works in progress can be left and seamlessly taken up again.
object is entirely contingent on access to a generously sized studio at the VCA, in which to gather, dwell with, and agglomerate materials. A little space would have allowed only little things to transpire.

unknown

I end this case study with a link back to the idea of the unknown and the unaccountable. In the 1998 fax conversation between Barlow and Wilding, the danger and risky nature that Barlow associates with making physical objects is contrasted with the dissolution, fracturing and capturing of objects that occurs increasingly with the easy, fashionable use of the camera in art. Barlow sees an engagement with sculpture becoming more and more questionable…

…as an end in itself which has all those qualities of light, movement, sound, temperature, locked within it, which are revealed imaginatively rather than literally. And instead of it being a passive engagement to unlock those qualities, it demands an active engagement. You have to walk around, stand back, approach, stalk the space the sculpture occupies in order to extract, step by step, the information it contains, its non-visual qualities. Not so with camera art. Therefore the affrontery of sculpture, its inherent obstructiveness, that it exists at all generates hostility from the viewer who can be expected to be rewarded only by a prescribed system of looking. And to complicate matters further, sculpture does not conform to an ordered process of looking: look, then think, then understand: 1 + 1=2. Sculpture is a 1+1=3 experience.

Without the unknown, the unaccountable qualities of things, the bothersome complications that are beyond words and mastery, we would die of the known. My aim in drawing extensively on texts on Barlow’s work has been to connect to processes and ideas concerning the life of sculptural forms to those in my own practice without resorting to deadening attempts to extract ‘meaning’ from that which can be experienced as matter and presence but resists verbal articulation.

322 This thought is based on the observation of Friedrich Nietzsche “We have art in order not to perish from the truth.”
summary:

In considering the ‘life of forms’ and unfolding that term in relation to the sculptural practices of myself and Phyllida Barlow I have deliberately de-conflated the phrase from the word humorous with which it sits in the title of the dissertation. This is because, as discussed in chapter five humour, the kind of humour of interest in this project is often elusive and whilst I know where I find it as a maker I leave it for the viewer to decide if or where it is present in the work.

In this chapter I argue for a concept of form as alive and mobile and use the photographic series *Stiller Nachmittag (Quiet Afternoon)* of Fischli and Weiss and *transformations of matter* of mine as an evocative, non-didactic way to allude to immanent change and transition. Focillon was acknowledged for his influence on the title of my project and a key position with regard to form that, in its reference to art history, opened my thinking to the tensions to be found in the presentation of seemingly static sculpture. The example of material transformation as it changed from a quilt to a mound and then a lump was used to imply a range of variable processes that occurred across multiple forms produced for this PhD and continues on.

As is evident here, I found multiple points of congruence with my practice and methods used in this PhD with those of Barlow pointing to how and where ‘life’ might reside in hands-on fabricated sculptural work. Some of the prominent approaches that contributed to the life of forms in this PhD include: agglomerative processes such as bundling and sticking leading to the enlargement of form; consideration of the monumental; the humorous grappling with unwieldy lumps; the absurd, often precarious placing and negotiation with such forms in the studio; the unmaking of forms; the recycling of elements of forms into new combinations and constellations; hands-on manipulation of materials; strategies that privilege the haptic approach such as bursts of rapid construction facilitating extra-rapid thinking; expediency with change to forms occurring according to practical imperatives sometimes from beyond art practice itself; ephemerality; over-working; changing towards easier working methods and my aspirations for a nonchalant approach; surfacing and re-surfacing with materials such as paint; the value of the studio
for dwelling with materials and forms allowing open-ended experimentation. These characteristics of methodology contribute to a practice where sculpture, materials, matter, those things that exert a physical presence can offer an experience demanding an active engagement over time, allowing for that which is unaccountable and fluid.
Fig. 43, untitled (knitted rock)
CONCLUSION:

The contributions to new knowledge that emerged through this PhD arose at intersecting nodes of theory and practice where activity led to insight. This investigation swerved from being concerned with humour and its operations in relation to sculptural practice to become embroiled in a hazier enterprise that embraced uncertainty. Thereby I was hurtled into unknown territories of thinking and making. The endeavour undertaken in this dissertation, to impose a tidy, formal structure involving propositions and written arguments upon emergent thinking arising from wordless processes with matter, was motivated by the urge to communicate clearly. This was confounded by my organisational system of clustering the research into chapters created by the words from an insistently evocative and poetic title. Each shape emerges as a possibility and each inaugurates its own way of going. On reflection, I am astonished by my optimism but delighted by my newly acquired capacity to embrace uncertainty.

Below I will summarise the propositions and arguments as they arise in each chapter and how they relate to the artistic methodology at stake in this dissertation. I will articulate the findings that have emerged from these methodologies and position the specific contributions made to the field of sculpture and art practice. I set out the terms that I have addressed in developing this particular kind of material practice that is ethical, contingent and open-ended wherein absurdity is always immanent. I will conclude by bringing together the inherent ethical, ecological, and political threads that run through the project and state where I have made a contribution to new knowledge.

In chapter one, unaccountable, I argued for a materials-led engagement with practice that engenders the unforeseen by addressing ways in which the process of making can be unaccountable. I proposed opening up a space for this by developing a methodology or framework for practice that embraces uncertainty, that which is difficult to articulate and moves towards the unknown. Terms and ways to position such a practice were discussed with a focus on intuition, the centre experience and not-knowing and the invaluable insights shared by Elizabeth Newman’s psychoanalytic perspective as a practising artist. A new understanding of an intuitive approach was demonstrated through a discussion of the
exhibition *the inexplicable magnetism of an alien object* through which I argue that expanding an idea from the middle, through experimentation, opens it up to multiple possibilities and open-ended forces with the potential to disrupt habitual ways of making and seeing. The ambivalence and uncertainty of working from the middle with its inherent doubts and hesitations is embraced as an ethic for opening up to the outside of already digested ideas. The original contribution I have made here is to re-orientate the discussion around intuitive practice by bringing it into relation with a materials-led approach to production.

In chapter two, *mass*, notions of the inexplicable, mass as an abundance and the magnetism of unaccountable massed forms were explored through case studies of a range of artistic practices. The compelling materiality of a meteorite fragment, the idea of uncontrolled shaping, never-endism as a practice, ‘trash art’ as a context, and mass as an overwhelming presence of stuff were implicated in the thinking-through-making that occurred. In addressing these concerns it was revealed that there are excesses and forces of formation and deformation which revolve around processes that are beyond human culture and comprehension. These manifest through nature, matter, bodies and things. In addition there are incommensurable excesses of material culture threatening to engulf us with its availability and potential for knowledge and connectivity.

In positioning the idea of an unaccountable mass, or a substantial ‘presence’ as being magnetic in its inexplicability, I am expressing my desire to activate another kind of encounter for the viewer that arouses curiosity and holds the potential for opening one up to the ‘sense-event’. This encounter with material forces of becoming, that hover on the edges of our comprehension, constitutes a motivating factor in the sculpture that I have produced. In considering issues of artistic sustainability whilst dealing with material excess though practice, I proposed the idea of the studio as eco-system whereby materials are perpetually recycled and existing works re-configured and re-contextualised in an open-ended and never-ending process. This offers the potential for perpetual, sustainable production in opposing relation to some practices that rely on pre-determined concepts requiring extensive funding and possibly wasteful use of material resources.

Chapter three, *bothersome*, introduced an oscillating array of concepts around bothering that activated multiple tensions that manifest through the practice. The most pertinent emerged
through the production of open-ended, unresolved works which set up the conditions for them to maintain a bothersome status. This in turn connects to the ethical stance of working from a position based in intuition and non-knowledge. The tensions inherent between our capacity to bother materials and their capacity to bother us back operate as a provocation in sculptural practice and activate an ongoing and energetic encounter with materials.

Chapter four, *matter*, foregrounds an understanding of the oscillating qualities of physical material that are vibrant and volatile. This chapter develops a theoretical context for matter and materials as used through my practice that positions them within a multitude of interconnecting forces that are temporal, durational and responsive to the provocations of excess. My engagement with matter, as it is conceptualised in New Materialist theories, makes a contribution to the dialogue that surrounds object-focussed sculptural practices, offering a framework for a more open, contingent and responsive mode of production. The function of the studio is positioned as contributing to the conditions for an ongoing encounter and mutual ‘bothering’ with materials, allowing an engagement over time which, in turn, facilitates the production of eco system. Apprehending the image series *transformations of matter* and the sculptures as intensifications of matter in temporary stasis for exhibition iterates one of the key positions of this PhD which views form as being in a constant state of transition.

In chapter five, *humour*, the difficulty encountered in bringing the work and the theory into a useful relationship in terms of developing an argument is left to hover. Humour as an artistic outcome was elusive and shifting for me (and perhaps the viewer) in the context of this PhD but somehow it has maintained an insistent presence. I could devise no workable proposition. I must concede however that an argument apposite to my particular art practice evolved in which I assert that humour is unruly and emerges only unbidden and in unexpected places. Humour has the potential to undo form and can appear uninvited, arising without conscious effort as an excess. Humour came to be positioned in this PhD as a sudden eruption that emerges through practice as unpredictable, unquantifiable and recalcitrant to modes of strategic theoretical enquiry. The element of surprise offering an opening to the sense-event is crucial for humour to operate. Therefore, in this PhD research, humour theory has functioned to provoke new questions and a reorientation of
practice in the unfolding of a discreet number of works. Developing strategies for working without predetermining forms and outcomes in advance necessitates an openness to the encounter and the unexpected. Slapstick humour can be found here. A slapstick attitude with its desire to upend and disrupt convention (particularly to the formulaic appending to the art world) underlies the position taken in the PhD. This position continually seeks to move away from the known to risk making an unaccountable mess (or multiple mute lumps) that might open the way to a chanced upon experience that signals a tear or rupture in the known. Here lies the potential for affirmation, the eruption of joy and the presence of the abstract, tender, empathetic and many layered, incommensurable perceptions. There is a delicate fragility inherent in the slapstick approach which highlights the importance of following and trusting intuitive aspects of humour as they arise through practice. It can operate like a jolt or a signal to another way of experiencing forces that are not yet known or understandable.

Chapter six, *life of forms*, demonstrates how the vitality of forms in sculpture are implicated in an ongoing cycle of changes that lead to other changes. I reflected upon Phyllida Barlow’s practice in order to discuss the ways in which my own activities address the life of forms as they go through various states of transition in different contexts, such as the studio, the gallery and beyond. Here I highlight a strategy of openness to the encounter through a working process that emphasises the value of: not-knowing, instability, excess, recycling of materials and works, extra-rapid thinking, ephemerality, hapticity, ad hoc recombinations of other works, the unforeseen and the potential for the absurd to arise through practice. The combination of these approaches contributes new knowledge to an understanding of the notion of sculpture as a duration that unfolds in materiality over time – the life of forms.

**Contributions:**

The contributions to new knowledge that are made through this PhD are significant for the insights they offer to theory and practice in the field of sculpture and contemporary art. In drawing together a number of divergent artists and theories that variously address notions of not-knowing, intuition, excess, materiality, bothering, matter as active, humour as a
disruption and the liveliness of forms I have provided a new framework for discussion which offers new alignments of strategies for art production. My argument for a particular kind of practice therefore constitutes a contribution towards an artistic methodology that:

- is embedded in sculpture due to its intense relationship to materiality leading to the production of art objects that remain incomplete, unresolved and fluid.

- involves an immersion in open-ended processes of making and unmaking in which movement and duration continually condition production.

- is non-masterful, where the role of an artist is one of both collaboration and intervention with materials whilst simultaneously following them through processes of making and unmaking in which they do what they do. Decisions are being made all the time but from an open position of being ‘in the middle’ of, and from being responsive to the directions that proliferate in the process.

- follows a non-teleological way of working which materialises a studio procedure as a production of ecosystem without beginning or end. This incorporates a perpetual cycling through of materials and art works within a proliferating network that addresses the problems and provocations of excess.

- incorporates ready-to-hand materials and elements of previous works in order to facilitate extra-rapid thinking in making and to recycle materials. This supports a methodology that reinforces the notion of practice as perpetual movement that results in artwork as a momentary intensification of matter.

- works without preconceptions and utilises the concept of ‘soft eyes’ or peripheral vision involving awareness of all possibilities without focusing too hard and locking down vision onto particularities. This connects to my embrace of an artistic position that continually seeks to move away from the known, the recognisable and representational to be surprised but also to linger calmly with uncertainty.
• takes an ethical stance of working from a position based in intuition and non-knowledge that enables contradiction and ambivalence with all its hesitations, doubt and uncertainty to abound as qualities for opening up possibilities.

In summary the paramount contribution concerns artists and their position as it relates to working with non-knowledge. The PhD offers insights, with practical examples, tracking methodological processes and outcomes leading to encounters with materiality, excess, disruption and absurdity. An expanded discussion around intuition attending to the perspective of the artist, grounded in practice, both combined a psychoanalytic and an artistic view. Strategies such as: using ‘soft eyes’, attending to random occurrences, basing decisions on contingent conditions such as location and material necessity, ethical implications, surprising outcomes from re-use and recombination of already made and unmade parts of other sculptures.

A part of the contribution to new knowledge was formed by tracking the practice of working with materials and objects in a non-teleological way that does not progress to an outcome of perfection or resolve. Attending to the tensions inherent in bothering materials or leaving them unbothered opened up a space for provocative informality where, by remaining always partially formed or unformed the work continued and continues to offer the potential for further response. In cultivating the demand for a constant opening out and possibility for re-work or perpetual tinkering an ethical position was taken. This position recognises a responsibility of the artist to not only care about the trajectories and environmental implications of materials but also the importance of enjoying and tending to the intensifications and excesses that are not readily or already packaged into existing linguistic categories. The often inexplicable forces and eruptions that manifest in life and in art practice came to new significance as an open engagement with uncertainty engendering the conditions for encountering the unforseen. It was observed that the outcomes of such a practice may lead to nothing but mute lumps of matter (for now) but for the future there remains, inherent to the condition, a presence or an excess which in exerting a compelling force stands in for that which cannot be mastered, grasped or colonised.
I have argued for an ethical approach that involves questioning and disrupting habitual formats of presentation and conventions opening up a space for the unaccountable. One way of framing such an approach to practice is through taking a ‘slapstick’ attitude. Additionally, in considering the environment I take it as an ethical burden or responsibility to address over-production, massive consumption, and over-abundance leading to waste wherever I can. This requires attending to where things have come from and where they are going with the intention to tread lightly on the earth.

Folded within the works that I have produced are energies and forces that are not always immediately visible but are immanent with the temporal movements inherent to all things. There are imperceptible forces in the formation and deformation of every material condition. My appreciation of the situation, in art practice, where I am not fully able to understand or articulate what I am doing and where the work is going has increased and this has been revealed as a valued position. For me, this makes possible or legitimises an opportunity for the emergence of enigmatic forms pregnant with the unresolved, a force which cannot be expressed logically/linguistically - those forms which seem to resist meaning. I argue here that my understanding of an intuitive approach has shifted, whereby the stigma attached to intuitive processes (of working solely with feeling and self-expression) have been repositioned to include other strategies and processes that are responsive to the provocations of unpredictability, matter, excess and duration in which the subject is not positioned at the masterful centre but in the midst of relations. I have arrived at this new understanding through a vital combination of materials and practice-led practice and practice-led theory.
Fig. 44, untitled (bony buttock) 2012
appendices:

appendix #1
list of gallery contents: materials and works

materials

bronze, bamboo, cardboard, cellulose paste, ceramic glazes, chicken wire, coffee grounds, digital prints, earthenware clay, furniture, glass-reinforced concrete, haberdashery, iron, latex, left-over paint, marble dust, newspaper, papier-mâché, photographic prints, plaster, polystyrene, rubber, shellac, shredded olive pips, steel, sticks, terracotta clay, various found objects, wax, wheels, wood, wool., found and made ‘supports’ and plinths, boxes, table, kangaroo scrotums

works

my dead dad, reminders and remains
purposeful purposelessness
17 nasty little brown things
16 beautiful little brown things
large disagreeable object
channelling Gedi Sibony video work, length 13:31 min
transformations of matter
barb bolt
23 things tending towards white
untitled (bronze rock with a long slender stick emerging from a bole)
untitled (massed asteroid-like form with a brown crusty coffee surface)
untitled (quilt)
untitled (rock on Ikea trolley)
untitled (slumped ceramic vase)
installation of residual mounds
appendix #2
exhibition catalogue essay by Akira Akira

Three notes for the inexplicable magnetism of an alien object

CHOCOLATE CAKE – form that reduces

*Today I am a sculpture…..no no a sculptor. To speak of such implies a classical modernist concern with medium-specificity…..my medium is chocolate cake. I am reducing its form.* (1)

In her video from 2007, *Winifred Eats Cake*, (2) Sarah crowEST indeed carries out this very reduction of form. What remains invisible in the video, intentionally or otherwise, is the artist’s idiosyncratically woven set of political and environmental concerns, which affect the constitution of the chocolate cake. The form of the cake, which she gradually reduces over the course of 12 minutes consists entirely of ingredients, which are fair-traded, whole, bio-dynamically/organically grown and locally produced. What is more obvious in the video on the other hand is her apparent failure to choose a chocolate cake recipe that is more fit for her purpose. Instead of making a light sponge cake pigmented with cocoa powder and covered in thin chocolate icing, the form of which she *could* actually reduce in its entirety to the degree zero, the artist somehow opts for one that is richer than Charles Saatchi and could make even Nigella Lawson feel ill.

“I stand defeated by chocolate cake. I am a failure as an endurance performance artist.”(3) declares the artist later in the video.

PUMICE – active matter

In Yasujiro Ozu’s 1959 classic *Good Morning* (4) two brothers surreptitiously, daily and with intense dedication, shave particles from pumice stone. They believe that ingesting a small dose of pumice powder helps them become more flatulent. Their hard-earned ability to produce farts upon request is cheerfully demonstrated to their friends, through the transformation of their respective foreheads into a set of gas releasing buttons. Pumice, volcanic matter that is “an archive of countless forces,” (5) is here implicated into the complex fold of the brothers’ creative endeavour. Whether the outcome be visual, sculptural, or indeed *aural*, our attempt to tap into “the potential for the inorganic to be otherwise” (6) can only be seen as our participation in the process of mutual transformation. Materiality is “the field in and through which free acts are generated through the encounter of life with matter and the capacity of each to yield to the other its forms and forces, both its inertia and its dynamism.” (7) The ingestion of pumice powder by the brothers is as much an act of enablement on the their behalf as the pumice stone’s ability to re-enter its archive of forces, making them (more explicitly) tangible for the human sensory organs.
TUMBLEWEED – methodology

For crowEST, the production of artwork produces the vital energy for itself, creating a self-sufficient ecosystem. In this sense, the body of work presented in this exhibition is a particular moment within the on-going phase transition of matter into energy and vice versa, the process in which the artist is continuously involved. Or seen cyclically, this “body” of work is, and crowEST’s studio always will be, a kind of vehicle, “the effect of processes of continual creation, movement … [and] individuation.” (8) In other words, she is intimately involved in the process of becoming-tumbleweed, (9) ceaselessly rolling, agglomerating matter into its own production, its form being the very vehicle of its [trans]formation and movement, only so that it can continue to roll. What is present in this exhibition, in this very sense, is tumbleweed-in-idle.

Akira Akira 2012

1 ‘Sarah crowEST’s mood’ taken from the artist’s Skype profile.
2 Winifred Eats Cake (2007) Directed by Sarah crowEST. Australia [Video: DVD]
3 ibid.
5 Bird, T. (2011) Figuring materiality, Angelaki, 16(1), 5-15. 10
7 ibid. 70
8 ibid. 28-9
9 Tumbleweed methodology is a term that I coined over the course of discussion surrounding crowEST’s PhD, An unaccountable mass: bothersome matter and the humorous life of forms. It is the process through which a body of knowledge is blindly accumulated by its own mobilisation across multiple terrains.
appendix #3

list of exhibitions, presentations and works undertaken throughout the PhD candidature

2012
*The inexplicable Magnetism of an Alien Object*
February/March, 2012
Margaret Lawrence Gallery, VCA

2011
*Transformation of Matter*
September, 2011
Seventh Gallery
(part of the group project *Cashmere If You Can*)

*Mound Activity vs Slime Theory*
March/April 2011
Platform Contemporary Art Spaces (with Jonas Ropponen)

*The Things They Are Unbothered*
March, 2011
Student Gallery, VCA

2010
*Monumental Effect*
November/December, 2010
Death Be Kind (group exhibition)

*Channeling Gedi Sibony*
October-November, 2010
Trocadero Art Space, Footscray (part of the group project *Cashmere If You Can*)

*Letting the Odd One In*
July, 2010
Linden Centre for Contemporary Art

*The Humorous Life of Forms*
March, 2010
Confirmation presentation at the VCA

*Easi-reach*
March, 2010
Student Gallery, VCA
The Lisbon Suite
February, 2010
Artroom5, Adelaide

2009

The Lisbon Suite (excerpt)
December, 2009
Gallery 9, Sydney

The Humorous Life of Forms (paper)
November, 2009
Presentation of paper at Works-in-Progress Symposium, VCA

"THESIS:"
October, 2009
Sydney College of the Arts/ Victorian College of the Arts PhD Exchange Exhibition
(group show)

PROUD
September, 2009
Mauve Organdie
Student exhibition, Margaret Lawrence Gallery, VCA

Soft Animators
May, 2009
Craft ACT, Canberra
(group show)
Fig. 45, 17 nasty little brown things, 16 beautiful little brown things, (detail) 2012
appendix #4

exhibition review in The Age by Robert Nelson

Junk bonds itself to trash talk
By Robert Nelson
February 22, 2012

THE INEXPLICABLE MAGNETISM OF AN ALIEN OBJECT
By Sarah crowEST, Margaret Lawrence Gallery,
Faculty of VCA and MCM, 40 Dodds Street, Southbank, until March 3, 2012

ALMOST EVERYTHING ALL AT ONCE, TWICE, THREE TIMES (IN FOUR PARTS...)
By Masato Takasaka, Gertrude Contemporary,
200, Gertrude Street, Fitzroy, until March 10, 2012

THERE are two shelves mounted on the wall. The first is called Nasty little brown things. Upon the shelf is a collection of assorted old coffee-coloured vessels and naive implements that you'd see at an op shop. The other shelf is labelled Beautiful little brown things. But the collection of ceramics is more or less the same, like a salt-shaker and the pepper-shaker on the other. Bizarrely, the experience on the left shelf is different to that of the right.

How can a label have so much power? In this mischievously poetic juxtaposition, one of the shelves makes you think that the beige and umber blobs are abject and despised. Worse than junk, they're morally cheap or "nasty". They're objects made without heart or inspiration, still hanging around with their depressing obsolescence.

The other label elevates the identical junk to aesthetic appeal. We look upon the twin shelf positively, as if it were a precious collection of endearing relics, exquisitely fashioned to a rare palette and texture. You see how pretty they are, how variegated are the cute glazes in colour and reflectivity and you ponder the earthy philosophy of the hippy epoch that enjoyed them.
These paradoxical semiotic platforms are created by Sarah crowEST in an exhibition at the Margaret Lawrence Gallery. Much of the content in the show is hard to look at, because it contains yet more confounding objects, such as rocks that somehow lack credibility as rocks and which teeter precariously on the brink of their plinths.

Language has an untoward prejudicial sway when you look at anything, because it sets up expectations of what you see. Either before or after you look - it matters little in what order - the suggestion that the objects are grubby and shabby gets in your ear and travels straight down the optic nerve.

Similarly, crowEST plays with the idea that a rock can be either fascinating or boring beyond belief, depending on your mental framework. Her two shelves with brown things are made from the flip-tablet normally attached to classroom chairs, reminding us that our response is the outcome of what we're taught.

The idea that the name of something conditions its reception is hugely relevant to art. If someone says that the picture in front of you is sublimely beautiful, you're disposed in its favour and look at it sympathetically. But if someone says that a better result could have been achieved with a dishmop on a grease-tray, your scepticism is aroused.

As in psychoanalysis, suggestion in artistic judgment is hard to eliminate and it affects the very definition of art. The public is often frustrated that things that are called art are automatically interpreted as art, even though they might be considered junk by anyone else. Some want the word policed along aesthetic lines.

Aspects of this naming game are explored by Masato Takasaka at Gertrude Contemporary. In aesthetically engaging arrangements, Takasaka has created a vast network of many rooms, almost cityscapes built from humble and ephemeral objects. The materials are things defined by names, like the thin plastic boxes that sushi is contained in; but by making the boxes into a little tower - and without sushi inside - the stack becomes a delicate sculpture, recalling urban buildings, that defies any designation.
Even the floor is laid out in a network of tape, which gives it a sense of roads on a map. So the context outlines a meaning for the objects that was never intended by the industrial manufacture.

The supreme artist for the redemption of trash is Elizabeth Gower. Her exquisite *Monochrome* at Sutton is made from food packaging, brochures and magazine cuttings. From this black and white junk meticulously glued to semi-transparent drafting film, Gower makes intricate geometric patterns recalling minimalist painting. The austere formalism, no less than crowEST's rocks, has "the inexplicable magnetism of an alien object".

*This story was found at: http://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/junk-bonds-itself-to-trash-talk-20120221-1tljz.html*

(download 14/05/12)
Sarah crowEST’s
*The Inexplicable Magnetism of an Alien Object*

WORDS: Alanna Lorenzon

Sarah crowEST
*The Inexplicable Magnetism of an Alien Object*
VCA Margaret Lawrence Gallery,
Melbourne
10 February – 3 March 2012
Collections of handmade, amorphous non-shapes and mounds inhabit the gallery space. Varying in size and colour, the objects’ surfaces offer a changing spectrum of shades, from rusty browns to shiny white glazes mottled with pearl-pink and blue. Some are hidden in corners, some huddle in masses, and others teeter on the edge of tabletops.

One group of objects sits on a low platform, elevating them slightly from the gallery floor. Their proximity to the floor suggests that they are emerging from somewhere beneath, perhaps as a protrusion from the subconscious into our surroundings. This collection titled 23 things tending towards white 2012, uses the word ‘Things’ to suggest that these objects have not yet been identified and, perhaps, that they are comparable to the abstract thoughts that live in the sub-regions of our minds before they have been forced into the framework of language. In direct contrast with the ambiguous shapes of the mounds, one object in the group sits higher than the rest on its own personal plinth—a hairspray bottle with the declarative label ‘Sculpture’. The insertion of this labelled, delineated form amongst other abstract forms could be a way for the artist to clarify the ‘things’ we are observing, but, use of the obvious in the word ‘Sculpture’ acts more as an absurd joke than clarification—the bottle sitting amongst the other art objects as if it had just sprayed them into existence.

The titles crowEST uses for her mounds frequently play with the ways that meaning can be created or rather obfuscated by language; for example, a rock-like object that is painted red and brown with dashes of purple. Entitled Purposeful, purposelessness (nothing) 2012, the work sits spiked on top of a plinth, its title a nod to its own potential obscurity. If we begin to reflect on what this work might ‘mean’, the artwork’s title directs us to give up seeking an answer.

The creative joy found in the rejection of meaning was described by Georges Bataille in Inner Experience as transgressive jouissance—a surrendering to the inherently unknowable. Instead of trying to fill an absence with meaning, Bataille relinquishes control of knowing. Bataille’s theory of ‘non-knowing’ could be contrasted with what crowEST has described as ‘the zone of “not knowing”’—a creative space she moves into, through the process of bringing to life animistic mound-like forms that repeat themselves, ad nauseam, in a seemingly meaningless process of evolution. In this way, crowEST privileges the act of intuitive art-making above the clarification of what she has made.

To continue on crowEST’s absurdist path without any apparent cynicism strikes me as a heroic move that belies sophistication; the seemingly nonsensical approach takes the artist one step past existential dilemmas and into a new space of creativity, where absurdity fulfils its own purpose.

Alanna Lorenzon is an artist and writer based in Melbourne.

NOTES
1. Language plays an important role in this exhibition and is used interestingly not only as titles to works but also as sub-titles in the video Channelling Gedi 2012. It also appears in a collection of crowEST’s father’s notes to himself, that when placed side by side on the gallery wall, away from their original context, act as a nonsensical poem.
2. CrowEST has her own idiosyncratic terms for these art objects and although they could be described equally as ‘rock-like’ or ‘blob-like’, she frequently describes them as ‘mounds’ and, in fact, her blog ‘Mound Activity’ is a devoted to the collection of images, which echo the objects she herself makes.
4. Ibid., p. 12.
It Goes On and On

Persistence is commonly considered a virtue, especially when one persists ‘in the face of’ an opposing force or the horrifying indifference of the world at large. If the subject has persisted successfully then they have ‘persevered,’ a word that suggests heroism. Persisting for the appropriate amount of time suggests that you are passionate, purposeful, and humbly know when to let go. Then again, persistence is not an innately admirable trait. An obsessive-compulsive persister does not instinctively understand the unwritten laws of appropriate repetitive action, loses their style, and eventually risks becoming irritating to those around them. The distinction between appropriate and inappropriate persistence is not clear, though both require a sort of bravery, an unveiling of your own vulnerability and a willingness to publicly admit devotion to your chosen path.

The sculptor Louise Bourgeois has described her emotions as being ‘inappropriate’ to her size. These emotions are her self-confessed ‘demons:’ unmanageable forces that she uses as energy and motivation to create. This ‘inappropriateness’ is an indigestible lump in the throat, an element of oneself that cannot be nice-i-fied, adequately understood or put to rest. Without a solution to pacify her hurt and perceived trauma Bourgeois turns this inappropriate excess of feeling into an ostensibly useful act: the creation of ‘artwork.’

In the creation of all artwork there is the question of inappropriateness and uselessness. In one view art can only be classified as ‘Art’ if it is a gloriously useless object of decoration, or if its reason to be is obtuse or esoteric. It’s inherent impracticality is a vital ingredient of its being. Art is not science, it is not math, it is not philosophy, yet it can draw from all these fields and speak to us in a sideways language, becoming something quite other than all these topics it imitates. Where it can become alive is in the realm of absurdity, a place where comedy also thrives.
Mound activity – the uselessly persistent pursuance of mound-like forms – is the self-conscious need by the artist Sarah crowEST to ‘give more than what is presently requested’ to the art world at large. CrowEST has created an artistic fate and given herself over to it, this being the creation of animistic mound-like forms that repeat themselves ad nauseam in a seemingly meaningless process of evolution. Not one mound is exactly the same but yet they are all alike. The endless manufacturing of mounds is glorious in its impracticality. Why would an artist, with their full faculties, huddle down to such a dribbling project? Why go on and on muddling together the same non-forms for your individual eternity?

‘Why’ is a pertinent and often terrifying question. Every artist has at some stage in their career asked with a sort of adolescent existentialism, ‘why bother at all? It doesn’t mean anything. What is the point of any human endeavour? I mean in the end we’re all dust.’

For me, CrowEST asks this question again and again with the creation of each mound and perhaps the mounds answer this question by cancelling the question out with insistent repetition. The question becomes no longer ‘why?’ but rather ‘why not?’ If mounds, then why not any other act of creation?

A well-read German friend of mine once attempted to explain Camus to me, an author I had never read but of whom he was particularly enamoured. He described the story of The Outsider to me in his endearingly faulted English, summing up the moral of the story as: ‘If you recognise the absurdity in life, yet continue despite, this is heroic and cool.’

Lacan has said that ‘Love is giving what you do not have.’ It is recognising your lack, the gaping hole in yourself and then offering that up to another. In effect offering up your innate uselessness as a form of devotion. Art can also be seen as an act in love in its suspension of disbelief—the way it works through faith in the artist’s vision.

CrowEST’s persistence could be seen as a form of devotion to an absurdist God. I like to imagine that towards the end of her mound making life CrowEST will be surrounded by a Borges-esque museum of mounds whose corridors stretch out towards eternity, a sea of endlessly glimmering and differentiating non-forms.
To fruitlessly endeavour to continue on an absurdist path without a seeming glimmer of cynicism strikes me as a heroic move that belies sophistication. As though the seemingly compulsive persister has taken one step past existential dilemmas to forgive themselves for their inborn futility and instead exalts joyously in their void of meaninglessness – a place where everything becomes simultaneously trivial yet vital.

from:
2011

Alanna Lorenzon is a Melbourne-based artist and writer.
appendix #7

Artist Vuk Vidor Title *Art history (part one – version D)* Medium silkscreen,
Size 41.4 x 29.3 in. / 105.2 x 74.3 cm. Year 2004 – 2011 Edition 200, hand signed
MOUND ACTIVITY

4.18.2012

Kakapo

WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING AT?
akira akira
Gotasalviento
viv miller
michael kutschbach
jahjahsphinx
cashmere if you can
jonas ropponen
e-flux

mistress of bodge

ARCHIVE

▼ 2012 (45)
▶ May (12)
▼ Apr (18)
Kakapo
Kiwi
Uncanny Tui/Kakahu
Willamette
Meteorite
Captcha
Gereon
chatoyant
Kreber
Contemporânea
Keifer
Cloud
Kvie
Jone Kvie

Fiona Pardington, Buller's Yellow Kakapo, 2009

POSTED BY MISTRESS OF BUDGE AT 4/18/2012 05:55:00 AM
LABELS: MYSTERY

Kiwi

Fiona Pardington
Uncanny Tui/Kakahu

Fiona Pardington, Kai Tahu, Kati Mamoe, Kati Waewae, New Zealand
b.1961 | Uncanny Tui/Kakahu, from the collection 'Whanganui Museum' 2008 | Gelatin silver photograph, gold-toned on fibre-based archival paper, ed.1/5 | 61cm x 50.8cm, Collection: Queensland Art Gallery

Willamette
Sarah crowEST inspecting the Willametter Meteorite

POSTED BY MISTRESS OF BODGE AT 4/18/2012 04:48:00 AM
LABELS: AN UNACCOUNTABLE MASS, LANDSCAPE

Meteorite

Children Playing on Willamette Meteorite sitting in pits of the Willamette Meteorite at the Hayden Planetarium in the American Museum of Natural History.

POSTED BY MISTRESS OF BODGE AT 4/18/2012 04:46:00 AM
LABELS: AN UNACCOUNTABLE MASS, LANDSCAPE

4.16.2012

Captcha
Gereon Krebber's 'Captcha' is a dark and blue-green gleaming crater. A wormy mass flows out of its ring mould that opens on one side. The sculptures show a precarious moment of loss of control, tilting and overflow. (Viola Weigel)

POSTED BY MISTRESS OF BODGE AT 4/16/2012 12:34:00 AM
LABELS: SCATALOGIC, SCULPTURE

Gereon

Gereon Krebber’s recent sculptures reside in the realm between fascination and disgust, between creature and object, animation and concretion, slapstick and threat. The same with the work in the second room of the gallery: a multi-part floor work of cellulose and concrete. Egg-like, organic forms build a strange breeding place resembling the hatchery in the space shuttle of the movie Alien. “The objects seem to lurk beneath the surface: There is still something strange, creepy and indescribable in the omitted empty spaces that lets it pound.” (Viola Weigel)

POSTED BY MISTRESS OF BODGE AT 4/16/2012 12:31:00 AM
LABELS: SCULPTURE

chatoyant
In the first gallery room Krebber presents two works from the series Polycurls. These works, made of polyurethane (spray foam) and colored spray paint, are finally coated with epoxy casting resin: "With a gun I spray foam into thin, curling and winding threads that lay on top and next to each other. The view gets lost in a porous swarm that gives the impression of a freely winding and frizzing mass." Krebber sprays his sculptures into shutter moulds that build solid blocks and bodies. Some parts he completes and shapes free hand by piling strands and threads of polyurethane foam which hang down straggly, agglomerate and break out of its forms. The monochrome chatoyant colored bodies appear alive and organic but stay abstract and unfamiliar. The works are coated with dropping layers of epoxy resin that enclose the sculpture like clammy slime. (Viola Weigel)

Krebber

Cologne based sculptor Gereon Krebber is having his 3rd solo exhibition @ Galerie Christian Lethert

Somatōs is a word formation that mixes the idea of the somatic (physiological) and comatose. This state of uncertainty is the basic idea of the exhibition: inscrutable material, form, surface and appearance.
4.13.2012

Contemporânea

Exposição de Arte Contemporânea/Site específico e fiz este trabalho....
Agostinho Goncalves, 2012

POSTED BY MISTRESS OF BODGE AT 4/13/2012 01:21:00 AM
LABELS: SCULPTURE


Keifer

Anselm Kiefer once visited Adelaide for artists week he was attracted
Cloud

Filip Vervaet, Cloud, moving sculpture, 2007
check: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NYR5jHeTDzY
Jone Kvie, UNTITLED (ARCHIVE), PLASTER, DIMENSIONS VARIABLE, INSTALLATION VIEW, NILS STARK CONTEMPORARY ART, COPENHAGEN (a fellow mound connoisseur)

POSTED BY MISTRESS OF BODGE AT 4/12/2012 03:03:00 AM
LABELS: ART, SCULPTURE

Jone Kvie

Meteors, Bronze, 15 pcs, dimensions variable
"Fascinated by the form and expression, I saw the meteor more as an abstract sculpture than a scientific find. I liked the idea that what fascinated me was the form itself and its connotations and not its immediate references. This ambivalence of things and our experience of them is what constructs a core in my way of working. An example of this could be the notion of a meteor, which is a form I have used repetitively over the years. A meteor – like other astronomic phenomena – is fascinating as a phenomenon for most people, and summons up many associations on a psychological as well as a more literary level. Yet again, it is an ambivalent symbol as it represents wishes and aspirations on one hand, and on the other also can represent an omen – a forecast of imminent destruction." excerpt from Jone Kvie in conversation with Jesper N. Jørgensen. 2004.

POSTED BY MISTRESS OF BODGE AT 4/12/2012 03:00:00 AM
LABELS: ART, SCULPTURE
Grotto

Jone Kvie, GROTTE / GROTTO, GUILOFORM. 35 X 35 X 30 CM

POSTED BY MISTRESS OF BODE AT 4/12/2012 02:50:00 AM
LABELS: ARCHITECTURE, ART, SCULPTURE, SHRINE

UFO Archive

Rosell Meseguer, UFO, Installation of several UFO pieces: drawing, photopolymer, cyanotype, Kallitype, and colour photography, PHE, Galeria Magda Belloti, Madrid, 2010

POSTED BY MISTRESS OF BODE AT 4/12/2012 02:40:00 AM
LABELS: ARCHITECTURE, ART

Meseguer
Rosell Meseguer, OVNI III, Ink print on dibond from slide, 40 X 60 cm, 2010

POSTED BY MISTRESS OF BODGE AT 4/12/2012 02:35:00 AM
LABELS: ARCHITECTURE, ART

Super Bock

Katinka Bock at Galerie Jocelyn Wolff

POSTED BY MISTRESS OF BODGE AT 4/12/2012 02:24:00 AM
LABELS: MYSTERY, SCULPTURE
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Fig. 46, untitled (scriggles) 2011, 2012
Fig. 47, *transformations of matter* (detail), 2009-2012 ongoing
Fig. 48, *transformations of matter* (detail), 2009-2012 ongoing
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Author/s:
CROWEST, SARAH

Title:
An unaccountable mass: bothersome matter and the humorous life of forms

Date:
2012

Citation:

Persistent Link:
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File Description:
An unaccountable mass: bothersome matter and the humorous life of forms

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