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quietly, carefully, casually

Diana Baker Smith & Veronica Tello,
Boni Cairncross, Sarah Mosca, Sarah Rodigari

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Cottier
Gallery

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The story of the mouth

Judy Annear

Cast as a classical statue in artist Jean Cocteau's film *Blood of a Poet* 1930, photographer and model Lee Miller receives a mouth from the hand of the poet. 'Do you think it's that simple to get rid of a wound to close the mouth of a wound? Open it,' she says.

Here lies the paradox of speech and silence, picturing and reflecting. One cannot exist without the other. Such are the languages of images and words, regardless of form. The statue speaks, the poet is afraid to.

Drawn on paper as a mouth, then rubbed out, the orifice transfers to the palm of the hand, and asks for air. In wishing to remove the lips, the poet presses his palm to the face of the statue, enlivening it. She speaks, then exhorts the poet to try his luck through the looking glass, where he will peer through keyholes into rooms of experiences.

Rather than performing with clarity, language is revealed, at the least, as a dichotomy, ambiguous. The poet commits suicide, the statue lives on, awaiting further opportunities to speak. Violent, relentless yet enigmatic, the story of the mouth in *Blood of a Poet* is also emblematic of the slow death of historicism.

In 1933 philosopher Walter Benjamin wrote the essay *Experience and poverty*. Describing a general impoverishment through the loss of the simplest connections to forms of cultural heritage, Benjamin noted how those returning from the horrors of modern warfare had been rendered mute then both succoured and suckered by the panacea of the 'up to date.'



Benjamin treasured the small, fragmentary, and supposedly marginal along with their function as memory portals. If we rummage in the actual and imaginary storerooms of our own and others' pasts, the forgotten and the overlooked reveal their riches. The subtleties of the ordinary enlarge the view.

That ordinariness encompasses stories of certain kinds of labour and how that labour might be enacted and seen. Language can constrict as well as release. How to undo language so that associations between humans and things are more fluid and less circumscribed, less bound to socio-political structures that have exhausted themselves.

The discreet labour of support, of making, the amorphous labour behind the scenes, the faceless labour of those who can depict the extraordinariness of the ordinary — these labours, often assumed to be no more than customary, leave a trace, often wordless, though not necessarily silent. They speak between, behind and through. They can be absent but not wholly. They are not eradicated.

The orifice on the hand of the poet tries to speak, asks to breathe. Viewed with horror by the poet and applied to the statue, the animated female mouth brings lips and wound together. These wounds of silence and speech bring forth the wish for both to be oriented and understood differently.

Feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray wrote in 1977, 'If we continue to speak the same language to each other, we will reproduce the same story. Begin the stories all over again... Because your language doesn't follow just one thread, one course, or one pattern, we are in luck. You speak from everywhere at the same time.'

Judy Annear is a writer who lives on the unceded land of the Dja Dja Wurrung. She is Honorary Fellow at the University of Melbourne School of Culture and Communication.

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quietly, carefully, casually

quietly, carefully, casually gathers works by artists and academics that examine social and political implications of labour. In addressing formative questions, the exhibition's own making was conceived as a framework for understanding the intersection – or perhaps entanglement – of the artist-curator-exhibition-institution dynamic. For this reason, *quietly, carefully, casually* has not been conceived as a thematic exhibition, with artists or works populating an overriding curatorial enquiry. Instead, curatorial enquiry has been informed by the work of artists, channelled through a series of engagements with practitioners about their concerns, subsequently building more organically into a network of conversations. Though this exhibiton, like any, cannot be reduced to a single idea, a formative thread connecting exhibited works (and their makers) articulates the labour of women in various contexts as 'quiet, careful and casual'. Through diverse modalities, including photography, video, sculpture, embroidery, and text, exhibiting artists establish tensions between the assumptions and realities of production, revealing divisions of labour and self, famously denounced by Karl Marx as 'alienation'. Summarised eloquently in her accompanying text, *The story of the mouth*, Judy Annear writes:

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quietly, carefully, casually commences with a new photo-installation by Sarah Mosca. A single, found black-and-white photograph of an anonymous woman in a snowy landscape has been scaled for installation on a gallery window. All we know of this woman who is looking backwards, away from us, is that she has been remembered ambiguously in her photographic capture. Mosca utilises the glass window pane and the semi-transparent image to multiply the viewpoints of a conventionally single-sided image and, figuratively, its historical associations. Titled *Desire*, this is the first and largest of her glass-mounted photographs, which began with a series of free-standing photo-sculptures in 2021. A second work by Mosca in the exhibition, *The Photographer*, reiterates this story. For this work, Mosca has simply but carefully mounted a found, original black-and-white photograph of a female photographer from WWII into a frame. The woman's face is obfuscated by her own camera as she photographs the photographer capturing her, whose view we assume as onlookers of the arrested moment. As with much of Mosca's work, these simple gestures bring attention to anonymous or forgotten women, probing deliberate or oblivious failures to remember. They signal a vast lineage of women's stories abandoned by history, deemed 'unremarkable'. Mosca has increasingly been mining archives and open-source databases for imagery, quickly revealing the irony that 'forgettable' female figures are omnipresent. The laborious production of Mosca's work, once centred upon durational photographic and performative gestures, has shifted recently to analyse the incomprehensible, exponential density of existing narratives that require her careful attention. Mosca's labour as an artist, writing as it does the history of her own practice, simultaneously rewrites the history of women she casts in warm light. We needn't know exact identities to comprehend our lacking history or willingness to negate the oft-invisible yet necessary labour of women's contributions. Here is where Mosca shifts from a strategy of clarifying histories to position us, rather, in the urgent reality of, and inevitable disappearance into, their haze. The unrelenting labour of re-historicising is now shared with an otherwise passive audience, less interested in the wrestling trope of gaze-subversion than it is with amplifying erasure as a call-to-action.

In proximity to Mosca's works, occupying the gallery floor, is a series of steel sculptures by Sarah Rodigari, which are 'props' from her 2021 performance *On Time*. Originally commissioned by independent curator Abigail Moncrief for *The National: New Australian Art, On Time* was developed through interaction with casual workers at Carriageworks. The sculptures are hand forged with between one and twelve twists and placed in an abstracted clock face formation, each representing an hour of time. Rodigari has adapted multiple conversations with otherwise invisible workers into a poetic monologue, recalibrating them through language, gesture and installation. Accompanying the sculptures are a series of prints that capture Rodigari's movement through her monologue script, which is broken into chapters that address casual behaviour, casual wear, casual sex, casual agreement, casual academia, and casual relations. The script embodies the confusion and precarity of casual labour, oscillating between incisive humour and earnest doubt:

No stress. It's cool. It's not an occasion. It's not an event. Let's think of this as a short-lived, no impact, chance encounter between us. No need to impress, it's chill, loose, low key, cas-u-el... It's casual, everyone's casual, you're casual, I'm casual, very casual, always casual...

How do I survive? Do I worry about irregularity? Do I worry about next time? Do I worry that I'm putting more of myself in than I'm getting back? Do I feel insecure? It's a sliding scale, but casual work is a sort of like a bit above unemployed.

Like Mosca, Rodigari captures a duanting ambiguity in her reflections on labour, revealing its pervasive and psychosomatic influences. The title, *On Time*, aptly addresses the way this most precious resource of time itself is valued, spent, exploited, and performed in the constant ambivalence between living and working – something especially pertinent to life as an artist.

Like the twists of Rodigari's steel sculptures, the stichs of Boni Cairncross' embroideries function as records of time. Each delicate embroidery is developed over a long duration and titled according to the number of stitches within their composition. Three embroideries from a recent series are included in *quietly, carefully, casually*, each containing thousands of stitches from 3328 to a staggering 9900. The vastness of these interwoven temporalities are contained quietly within raw-edged cuts of linen pinned to the wall. The embroideries began with a small series of stitch studies, developed during two-hour train commutes between the Southern Highlands and Sydney. Used as a temporary studio, train trips enabled quiet and meditative explorations of one specific technique, the cross stitch. As they continued to develop, the embroideries were stitched in small moments of time in Cairncross' daily life, tasked with artist-assigned actions for each work that deliberately broke with conventions of cross stitch. One task was 'painting with thread', where Cairncross departed from the linear structure of the technique – traditionally worked in rows from left to right, top to bottom – to work intuitively with several needles simultaneously across multiple sections of the cloth at any given time. Cairncross continues to utilise techniques of performance and textiles (both with prominent feminist legacies) to develop durational works that are as much about her own laborious activities as they are quieter, longer passages of time. Her work finds a perverse relationship with, or resistance to, the way time is spent and felt. In her 2016 durational performance *Spider*, for example, Cairncross shaved her head, subsequently spinning and binding her hair into rope forms, constituting 33 hours of labour over 6 days. Citing Gertrude Stein, Cairncross shares, "*The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything*", alluding to the complex intersection of time and labour, and how the two are performed.

Concluding the exhibition is a single, collaborative video work by artist Diana Baker Smith and art historian Verónica Tello. Their video essay, *Opening Night (The Order of Arrangements)*, focuses on the National Gallery of Australia, and its opening night which took place October 12, 1982. It reconstructs the opening speeches and walkthrough of the Australian collection, involving Queen Elizabeth II (Head of State), James Mollison (inaugural Director of the NGA) and Gordon Darling (Chairman of the NGA Council). The work analyses the origins of the museum and its foundational rhetoric and values, which celebrate the settler-colonial nation. Crucially, the video shows that while women may be excluded in the collection, they (and predominantly white/Anglo women) are nonetheless ever-present figures of the institution, working 'behind the scenes' as librarians, art handlers and administrators reproducing the museum. Drawing on the NGA's archives, including archival footage and sound, the video plays on various forms of reproduction, repetition and re-enactment within the museum's historiography. The confluence of research, performance and documentation in Baker Smith and Tello's video essay critically addresses industry-wide issues of labour for women.

Baker Smith's broader practice frequently recollects historical women figures through performance, photography, text and video to acknowledge the lineages that continue to inform and generate contemporary art. She has researched the archives of Philippa Cullen and Pat Larter, for example, extrapolating her findings into contemporary performances, videos, and documents. In an article for issue 26 of *Das Super Paper*, *Catching Up On Our Own History: Performance Art and Cultural Amnesia*, Baker Smith channels Anne Marsh's influential work *Body and Self: Performance Art in Australia 1969-92* (1993), reflecting on why it remains the only comprehensive survey of performance art in Australia. Oddly prescient for *quietly, carefully, casually*, this issue of *Das Super Paper* was guest-co-edited by Mosca, bringing feminist purviews to the perennial problem of production and reproduction. Baker Smith writes:

In exploring Marsh's question as to why her work had provoked so few descendents, it seems to me that Australian performance art has been lost somewhere between the ephemeral nature of the medium, a provincial reluctance to value our culture and the seeming invisibility of women's creative output... The concern isn't just how the cultural amnesia has obscured our history, but how it obscures our present and future work.

The need to perform and reperform histories, particularly those of and important to women, underpins all of the works in *quietly, carefully, casually*, each contending with potential obscurity and obfuscation by signalling their own vulnerabilities to historical account and the passage of time. Paradoxically, the task of remembering is no less laborious as cultural production. As Sarah Jaffe observes in her book *Work Won't Love You Back: How Devotion to Our Jobs Keeps Us Exploited, Exhausted, and Alone*, "Labour is locked into the position of affirming its own exploitation under the guise of survival." Through performative and documentary strategies, the artists in *quietly, carefully, casually* reveal and subvert the 'affirmations' of labour exploitation, positioning its 'quiet, careful and casual' producers and products as critical reappraisals of a constantly precarious system.

Diana Baker Smith (b.1981) is an Australian artist based on Gadigal land in Sydney. Her artistic practice is collaborative, research driven, and underpinned by feminist methods. Her recent projects engage with art historiography and its fictions, spanning moving image, performance, photography, and text. They include *She Speaks in Sculpture* (UTS Art Gallery, Sydney, 2022), *The Lost Hour* (Contemporary Art Tasmania, Hobart, 2022), *Tasks yet to be composed* for the occasion (Artspace, Sydney, 2021), and *Backwards Turning* (Channels International Biennial of Video Art, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 2019). **Baker Smith** is also a member of the art collective *Barbara Cleveland* whose recent projects have been presented at the Biennale of Sydney, the National Gallery Australia in Canberra, Hayward Gallery in London, and Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea in Milan. Their works are held in the collections of Artbank, Museum of Contemporary Art, Campbelltown Arts Centre, Monash University Museum of Art, Queensland Art Gallery of Modern Art, and the Art Gallery of NSW. Diana holds a PhD from the University of NSW, where she is Lecturer in Fine Arts in the School of Art and Design.

Verónica Tello is a Chilean-Australian art historian based at UNSW Art & Design, Sydney. She is Sydney editor of *MeMO Review* and Editor-in-Chief of the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*. Tello is lead researcher on *Parallel Structures* (in collaboration with the Murray Albury Museum of Art and Salote Tawale). In 2016, she published her first book *Counter-Memorial Aesthetics: Refugee Histories and the Politics of Contemporary Art* (Bloomsbury). Her second book, *Future Souths: 8 Dialogues on Art, Place and History* is forthcoming with Discipline and Third Text Publications, and includes the writing of Dylan AT Minder, Jennifer Biddle, Carla Macchiavello, Zoe Butt, Chandra Frank, Salote Tawale, Rachel O'Reilly and Walter Mignolo amongst others. She is currently finalising a manuscript on the exhibition history of Art in Chile: *An Audio-Visual Documentation* (1986, co-curated by Juan Dávila and Nelly Richard) and the accompanying catalogue/book *Margins and Institutions: Art in Chile Since 1973*.

Boni Cairncross is a visual artist and academic currently based on Dhawaral Country (Wollongong, NSW). Her art practice is an exploration of time: slow stitching, durational performance, and time-based processes that reveal the trace of the artist's body. Underpinning this is an interest in the multisensory frameworks that shape the cultural and political understandings of materials and the ways in which we encounter them. Boni was awarded a PhD in Creative Practice (Performance Studies) from the University of New South Wales and a Bachelor of Creative Arts (Visual Arts) with first class honours from the University of Wollongong. She has presented exhibitions and performances throughout Australia including at SNO Contemporary Art Projects, Underbelly Arts Festival, Ideas Platform – Artspace, Bus Projects and Margaret Lawrence Gallery. Boni is currently a remote artist-in-residence with Arquetopia Foundation, Mexico, and lecturer in visual arts at the University of Wollongong.

Sarah Mosca (b.1980) currently lives and works in the Blue Mountains. Moving between photography, film and sculpture, Mosca re-presents historical narratives to unveil readings and truths that may otherwise be forgotten or overlooked, especially those of women. Working predominantly with photography, Mosca interrogates the medium's documentary duty, utilising alternative approaches to analog photographic processing and materiality. Her work has been exhibited extensively across Sydney, Melbourne, New York and Germany. Penrith Regional Gallery recently held a major two-person exhibition with Mosca and Todd McMillan. Other notable exhibitions include *Late Summer*, Gertrude Contemporary, Melbourne (2021); *Performing Drawing* (2018) and *NGA Contemporary* (2015) at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; *The Alchemists* (2015), Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney; and *Care* (2015), Interstate Projects, New York. Her work is held in the collections of the Art Gallery of NSW (AGNSW), National Gallery of Australia (NGA), Canberra, and in private collections in Australia, Germany and America. Mosca was recently awarded a 2020 residency at the Cité internationale des arts in Paris.

Sarah Rodigari is an artist whose practice addresses the social and political potential of art. Her work is site responsive, employing, durational live action, improvisation, and dialogical methodologies to produce text-based performance and installations. Rodigari has worked with and within various contexts and institutions. These include *The National: New Australia Art 2021*, Museum of Contemporary Art (Sydney), the 20th Biennale of Sydney, Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne International Arts Festival, ACCA, *The Poetry Project* (NYC) and *SOMA* (Mexico City). Rodigari holds a PhD in Creative Arts from the University of Wollongong and is a member of the collective *Field Theory*.

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