

WALL STORIES: SENSORY ARCHAEOLOGY

Ana Terry

Exhibition Title: *Wall Stories*

Artist: Ana Terry (and assistants)

Site: The Forrester Gallery, Oamaru, New Zealand

Date: Winter Season 2006

The *Wall Stories* project explored an approach towards the comprehension of a space and its previous occupants by way of an archaeological framework that shifted between the empirical and the abstract. Using an archaeological methodology, the *Wall Stories* project attempted to articulate what could be embedded in a site. A public art gallery in a former commercial bank in the historic district of a provincial Otago town was the locus for activity and research in this instance.

This text begins the process of distilling the fieldwork undertaken, initiating a reflexive process by fusing a montage of fieldwork inquiry, biographic and narrative styles. Nadia Seremetakis describes this process as “sensory archaeology” for which she advocates an engagement with the commensality of a space, that is, for the acknowledgement of the tactile, auditory and aromatic realities of a site as part of one’s research. “Without a reflexive anthropology of the senses, fieldwork – short- or long-term – remains trapped in the literal, captive or realist conventions...”¹ A practice of sensory and material reciprocity was – and still is – adopted throughout each stage of the process of the project; though the initial research, the artmaking and the writing.

Workbook Entry, 10 April 2006, Dunedin:

“...recovery of any visual record of the occupants taken within the building has been unsuccessful and thus I am working with photographs from the Hocken Library pictorial archives of Victorian domestic interiors and their occupants alongside recent digital images taken of the site. Both the digital and the analogue photographs share a disruption of the indexicality that photography proposes; both types of images conjure something other than what is visually represented – they suggest an apparition.

The historical photographs present a static interior as a backdrop to an occupant’s blurring form; while rigidly posed minute movements of the body are traced during the extended exposure time required to capture the subject within the dark interior. Now again, some one hundred years later,



Images left to right: Unknown stone building - Wakatipu area, Bush Whare, Catlins Tent, courtesy of the Hocken Library, University of Otago.

technology exposes its anomalies; my deranged printer running low on ink has produced images that appear ghost-like through a stratification of muddy red lines. The later documentation becomes less a record of the space and more of a prompt in their banded rendering – these strata suggest archaeological layers in which bits of information form and are becoming encrusted with digital debris ... The other day I constructed a tent within the simulated boundaries of the site at my studio. The primary focus was to reconstruct the most basic 'A'-frame dwelling made by early settlers, using the jute I am working with. I came to realise that this structure provides in material form my own position as a temporary visitor/anthropologist at the dig and that it reiterates the site as a transitional domain.

I am feeling ambivalent about public access and participation alongside the gallery staff's constant vigilance of its development. The expectations of the gallery manager and locals also contribute to my general anxiety. In one form of documentation of support for the project, the term 'celebration' was used, which suggests a potential lack of critical engagement. I feel like an itinerant posing as an anthropologist. I am aware of the local sense of ownership around the building and its history, and of the possible problematics of working here as an 'outsider'..."

On Site at The Forrester Gallery, Oamaru:

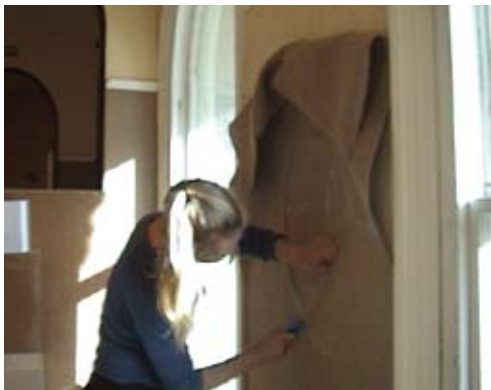
In the far northern corner of the room, adjacent to the ceiling, folds of wall paper sag like skin, pulling away from the wall where the rain had seeped through the slowly eroding exterior limestone walls. With every prevailing northerly, this bulge persistently challenges the desired hermetic interior of a gallery space. While the lifting paper offers no palimpsest, it suggests many. It provokes a desire to connect with the past histories of the room and with associations further afield.

The jute skin of the walls – like the ground for wallpaper – becomes the substrate for the construction of an imagined space that evolves into an excavation site. The forming of a lateral stratification is suggested through the relief of objects and structures that emerge from the wall. Colin Renfrew discusses the practice of stratigraphy and the interpretation of the materials therein: "... archaeology may be defined as the study of the human past as inferred from the surviving material remains...it is primarily about knowledge, about information, and it depends mainly upon stratigraphic excavation, giving particular attention to the precise contexts of association...You can

do that only to a limited extent from individual objects - that is why unprovenanced antiquities are in general relatively useless."²

Unlike the archaeologist, who traditionally would shift the recovered objects from their context, sorting them into generalised categories and spatial containment and thereby repressing their sensory engagement, the objects I am working with are integrated into the substrate and sit between process and display, while encouraging tactile involvement. Miwon Kwon discusses the temporary aspect of current site-specific practice, where the "'work' no longer seeks to be a noun/object but a verb/process...a specific relationship between an art work and its site is not based on a physical permanence of that relationship but rather recognition of its unfixed impermanence, to be experienced as an unrepeatable fleeting situation."³ In my project, an encounter with this transitional space requires physical awareness through the negotiation of guys and tent pegs while other submerged objects invite the immediacy of touch.

I see a woman slowly tracing the embedded mirror frame with her hand. I wonder how the object – its primary function to reflect reality now muted by the fabric – can operate in more accurately transcribing the visual into the spatial reality of her 'being in the world'. Did she become



more conscious of herself as a body rather than an image through this tactile encounter with the object, and how could this experience of her body change in relation to the space and to others in the room, both present and absent? Did she encounter her own mortality within the shrouded form or perhaps the sense of another's presence?

In the formation process of the room, artefacts are buried and incorporated into the material over time. The stratification of existing materials and structures inform their extrusions into other physical forms and embodied associations through their connections to the very fabric of the space. The physical act of pulling back the jute, pegging the guys into the floor; carefully dressing the objects and embroidering the repeat allows a contemplation of the space during the construction/excavation of the interior. Embroidering the red and gold silk thread into the walls is time-consuming and physically demanding through the act of piercing and pulling the fabric off the wall with a curved needle. There is a desire to cover the walls in the repeat pattern as much as time will allow and those who become involved in the process of embroidering also express this desire.

I vacillate between a sense of *horror vacui*⁴ and restraint. The editing process suggests a collapse between artist and archeologist through the imposition of a particular subjectivity; and the difference between how the scientist and the artist select and isolate a detail - what is shown and what is not



and what becomes discarded – comes into focus. The patches of embroidery are strung together by a thread that sustains connections, while simultaneously suggesting the possibilities of a continuum of fragmentation and loss of information. These fragments of embroidery repeatedly migrate from one space to another around the walls, often clinging to the window and door frames or corners of the room, suggesting structural weak points and the possibility of seepage.

Other forms of seeping penetrate the skin of the room and its atmosphere, both through sound and smell. A small stream on the southern side of the building that courses its way through the township forms a deep pool at high-tide against the shoreline embankment. During the shifting of materials and tools into the space via the ground level access, the mingling odours of seaweed and other organic detritus form a potent smell that rises easily on the cold dank air and up the internal stairwell of the building. This palpable odour permeates the space, reminding me of foreign shores and conjuring up the notion of sewers being disturbed during an archaeological dig. I also wonder how this enveloping subterranean reminder of the underbelly of the building and its working occupants impinged upon those who occupied the upper floors one hundred years ago.

Smell, like sound, is experienced through the body beyond the peripheral range of vision – involving an all-round corporeality and spatiality. It also functions as a portal to another time and place. The muted ambience of the space suggests an encapsulation and temporary suspension of time. This inertia of time or *ennui* asserts itself in a number of ways during the process of working with the project. One woman describes her participation in the activity of embroidering as a welcome pause in her day. This comment coincides with my attention to the regular chime of the town hall clock that penetrates the space and has done so for well over a hundred-and-forty years. The anticipatory pause between the preambulatory melody and the stroke of the hour suggests the possibility of a liminal space for an exchange of time and place; a portal through and into the past. It gives me a sense that if I could lean my forehead against this space I would physically encounter another body.

- 1 Nadia C Seremetakis, "The Memory of the Senses: Historical Perception, Commensal Exchange and Modernity", in Lucien Taylor (ed.), *Visualising Theory: Selected Essays from V.A.R. 1990-94* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 226.
- 2 Colin Renfrew, *Figuring it Out* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003), 88-89. Renfrew refers to Sir Mortimer Wheeler's systematic and precise methods using a stratigraphic approach in *Archaeology from the Earth* (1954). For many years this was the standard handbook for archaeological technique.
- 3 Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), 24.
- 4 *Horror vacui* is the latin term for a fear of empty spaces and is, for example, associated with the Italian critic and scholar Mario Praz, who used the term to describe the suffocating atmosphere and clutter of interior design in the Victorian age. See http://www.arthistoryclub.com/art_history/Horror_vacui as last visited on 30 October 2006.

Ana Terry is an interdisciplinary artist currently engaged with a Master of Fine Arts project. She is also a lecturer in drawing and digital & moving image at Otago Polytechnic School of Art in Dunedin and a graphic designer.