

a b l u t i o n

duality and hybridity in sculptural practice

Melanie Hight 2005

This exegesis is submitted to Auckland University of Technology for the Degree of Master in Art & Design

Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a University or other institution of higher learning, except where due acknowledgement is made in the acknowledgements.

table of contents

acknowledgements.....2

abstract.....3

introduction.....4

ablution
a brief description.....5

chapter 1:

composting - background theories, histories and philosophies
methodology - data collection and historic enquiry.....7
positioning dichotomy.....7
domestic worship.....9

chapter 2:

seedlings - positioning the work, prototypes and problem solving
methodology - the search for relationship.....11
hybridity in sculptural practice.....11
beyond the ready-made.....13

chapter 3:

maturation - resolutions, new dialogues, questions

the abject: purity and impurity.....15
blasphemy.....15
the minimalist aesthetic.....16
the gallery and the showroom.....17
whiteness.....18
the presence of water.....18
ablution.....19

conclusion.....20

documentation

selected early works.....22
year 1 exhibition.....23
prototypes and development for *Elevate*.....23
prototypes and development for *Stations*.....25
ablution exhibition.....27

references.....34

acknowledgements

All my love and thanks goes to my family, especially mum and dad, for emotional and financial support. I would not have been able to do this without you.

Special thanks to Monique Redmond and Christopher Braddock for supervision, support, guidance and resources.

Thanks to all my beautiful friends, especially for your patience with my busy schedule and buying me stuff when I had no money! Thanks for reminding me there is life outside of school.

Thanks to all my studio colleagues including fellow masters students, third year and second year sculpture students. Thanks for all your support, fun, laughter, beer and insight.

Thank you to AUT Financial Services for making it possible to buy materials and still eat.

abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to critically interrogate the duality of the sacred and profane as it is situated within traditional Catholic doctrine through the creation of hybrid sculptural objects. This thesis proposes that traditional understandings of dichotomies can be usefully critiqued through the perspective of indivisibility. This proposition brings to the dichotomy of the sacred and the profane a focus of relationship, integration, interdependence and continuum, rather than segregation, polarity and opposition. It is the argument of this thesis that reviewing dichotomy from this perspective may serve to displace the traditional hierarchy and afford opportunity for new understanding allowing for a more integrated view of 'other'. Using Catholic iconography as the signifier for the sacred and the domestic environment as a context for the profane, my studio practice explores the relationship between these signifiers. I intend my sculptural objects to operate as hybrids that can be sited in an 'in-between' space that is neither sacred nor profane but references both.

introduction

I have laid out this exegesis using methodology as a way to introduce each chapter and discuss the evolution of the studio practice. What follows is a selected chronology that discusses the central themes of duality and hybridity as they have influenced my research and the development of my objects. Relevant contexts will be discussed in relationship to each stage of the journey.

In conclusion I will critically reflect on *Ablution* to consider its relationship to my hypothesis: that the dichotomy of the sacred and profane can be critiqued through the invention of a hybrid object that encompasses both positions equally and simultaneously.

The thesis is constituted as practice-based work 80%, accompanied by an exegesis 20%.

ablution

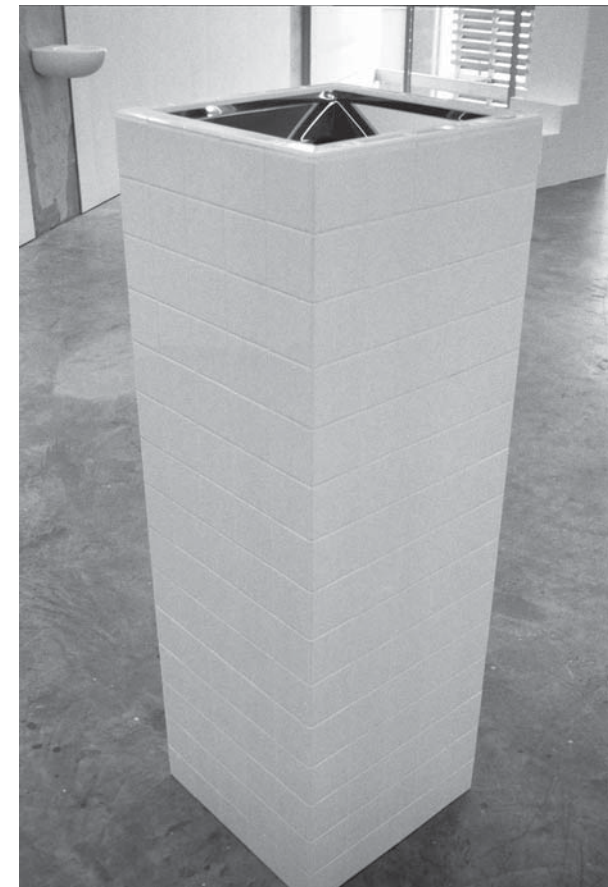
a brief description

Ablution comprises of two interconnected bodies of work.

One of these bodies is a series of water stoups arranged in a single row along one wall. They are individually hand cast in fibreglass and painted in white enamel. Dimensionally these works, collectively titled *Stations*, reference urinals or toilets, and are displayed at a height commonly used for Holy Water fonts rather than typical bathroom fixtures. The title *Stations* refers to the multiple as a whole, though each work is also individually named. The individual works are titled by numbers, for example #9963, and in this way I allude to a relationship between these objects and consumer goods that carry product numbers. In effect, *Stations* is both a title in a conventional sense but also operates as a brand name under which the individual water stoups have been collated.

The second body of work, *Elevate*, consists of three floor-based objects. In relation to form these artefacts loosely negotiate ground between the design of a baptismal font and a domestic shower cubicle. All three fonts are tiled in white ceramic and contain a stainless steel inset. Dimensionally they reference the body, in that a viewer could imagine their own body occupying the form's space. Two of the works are made approximately to the height and width of an average person, the third is smaller in height but the same in width. The stainless steel inset (based on the profile of a stainless steel shower tray) is placed within the fonts, below the viewer in two works and above the viewer in the third. Two of the fonts have steps, the other none. The steps are only marginally functional as they are too short for average domestic stairs and as such are difficult to ascend. One of the set of stairs is completely superfluous as the viewer could easily access the stainless steel inset without them. This lack of functionality in relation to the steps and other aspects of both bodies of work place the artefacts in a position that is somewhere between art object and domestic fixture, between ritual object and bathroom accessory.

Together these two bodies of work make up the exhibition component of this thesis, *Ablution*.



c h a p t e r 1
c o m p o s t i n g

Discussed in this chapter are the salient points regarding the background theoretical positions that gave rise to my present work. I will discuss the explorations and investigations into existing research and artefacts regarding two notions, that of dichotomy and hybridity.

I use the idea of ‘composting’ in this chapter to describe the way I obtain and digest knowledge into useful material for the production of art objects. It is a process that includes the methodological approaches of Data Collection and Historic Enquiry.

data collection

I chose a Heuristic methodological approach to this aspect of the research because I saw it as a way to encourage breadth and depth in my research project. To this end, I found Kleining and Witt’s Heuristic model of research most appropriate. Kleining and Witt outlined four rules, the first of which is that the researcher must be ‘open to new concepts’ (Kleining and Witt 2000). This suits my process, because I need to be open to seeing new relationships and connections. I have kept my methods for data collection broad, including photography, internet and library searches, immersion into conceptual contexts (e.g. churches), etymological searches, dialoguing from memory (I was brought up Catholic and my memory of this experience is pertinent to my research) and the collection of applicable visual artefacts. This process allows me to gather resource material that is fecund and therefore supports the maximum opportunity for the discovery of relationship across the binary signifiers.

Interwoven into the gathering stage of data collection is my second method, that of historic enquiry.

historic enquiry

It is essential to my project that I have a thorough understanding of the historic and social roots of my conceptual interest. I found Foucault’s genealogical approach to history useful here. Foucault’s preference for a non-linear, non-hierarchical, and discursive approach to history and the inclusion of local and discredited knowledges (Sarup 1993) affords me the necessary flexibility in my research. It would be impossible and inappropriate for me to document a linear history of the sacred and profane dichotomy. My primary purpose for this research is to understand discourse that have been attached to the binary of the sacred and profane in the past, how this affects a contemporary reading of these terms and how my new hybrid objects may be viewed because of that history of meaning. Using a genealogical approach allows me to review the binary’s historic discourses in a discursive way that includes unofficial histories that attach meaning to objects, for example, my memory of being Catholic and my experience of Catholic ritual and belief operates as an important starting point for my research. Useful also are everyday perceptions of mundane household objects. These objects have no ‘official’ history, few books have been written about them, yet they have meanings and dialogues attached to them beyond their functionality. It also allows me to make connections across a wide range of texts without the need for the discussion of chronological progression.

The genealogical search happens simultaneously with my data collection. It is an approach that informs the direction of my data collection but is not bound by it.

positioning dichotomy

The main purpose and focus of this research project has been to construct sculptural objects that critique the hierarchical and divisible nature of dichotomies. This project has focused on the specific dichotomy of the sacred and profane, however, as the project progressed the discussion of dichotomy expanded to include the related binaries of pure and impure, and clean and unclean. I approach the current research available on the discussion of dichotomy with the intent of

finding a model that displaces the hierarchical and divisible view of the binary system.

My investigations into the dichotomy has been informed and enriched by the theoretical discourses of feminist writers such as Julia Kristeva, Marina Warner, Elizabeth Grosz and Masha Meskimmon. Julia Kristeva in her book *Powers of Horror - an essay on abjection* (1992) discusses the origins of the construct - the abject, relating it to the binary of purity and impurity. She demonstrates that dualistic constructs are primarily a vehicle to define subjectivity through the displacement of other. Marina Warner explores the dichotomous relationship of the Virgin Mary and Eve in her work, *Alone of All Her Sex* (1985). These texts gave me a foundation of understanding concerning the notions of the sacred and profane, it's historical context and a critical analysis of dichotomy and it's place in current Western constructs. The work of Elizabeth Grosz further expands my understanding of the corporeal, specifically in relation to the corporeal as a site of power and discourse for women (1994). Most salient for my own research project is her critique of the hierarchic and divisible nature of binaries. "*Dichotomous thinking necessarily hierarchizes and ranks the two polarized terms so that one becomes the privileged term and the other its suppressed, subordinate, negative counterpart*" (Grosz, 1994, p3). Grosz challenges traditional understandings of duality by proposing that this binary relationship could be seen as an interdependent relationship, where one side of the duality is in a constant state of flow to the other side. She uses Lacan's model of the Mobius Strip to illustrate her vision of binary constructs (refer fig 1).

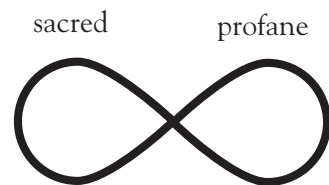


FIG 1

She describes the Mobius Strip operating as: *...the passage, vector, or uncontrollable drift of the inside into the outside and the outside into the inside.* (Grosz, 1994, pxii)

I have utilized this model to investigate situations, sites and events where the sacred and profane come to reside together, where they are in transit from one state to the other, or have become indivisible (i.e are unable to be separated). One of these sites was domestic altars.

Kay Turner in her book *Beautiful Necessity* eloquently reflects on the relationship between the sacred and the home when she addresses the topic of domestic altars. "*Home altars are abundantly populated with sacred body images indicating women's essential desire to bring the spiritual and physical together through the body as the chief source of knowing and being known*" (Turner, 1999, p113). Turner here speaks of embodiment. The idea that the sacred can be manifested through a bodily representation, as Turner indicates here, seems to immediately displace the absolute separateness of body and spirit, sacred and profane. I saw the indivisibility of the later dichotomy in numerous ways. A simple example being the flowers placed on the altar as a sacred offering that slowly decayed. Thus the once sacred gift irreversibly began it's journey into the profane through the process of death and decay. Another example is the cheap plastic statues of Saints, Madonnas and Crucifixes common to altars in the home (refer plate 1). I saw the plastic mass produced figurines as ordinary, banal and profane in their kitschness, yet they were regarded by some of the devotees of these domestic altars as embodying the very presence of the holy personage they represented (Turner, 1999). The profane, through the power of faith, was transformed into the sacred.

The recent writing of Marsha Meskimmon in her chapter on 'embodiment' in the book *Women Making Art - History, Subjectivity, Aesthetics* (2003) challenges existing binaries to claim that corporeal identification is not made through its relation to it's opposite but through it's relationship to other corporeal bodies and is also site specific. Thus I find her relevant to my exploration of the sacred in the site of the domestic. This gives me a wider scope to investigate corporeal and spiritual identities. These writers have highlighted for me, the need for further exploration through visual mediums, to create work that critiques the symbolic order, and offers new ways to view the corporeal as a sacred and powerful site in it's own rite.

domestic worship

The notion of domestic worship was brought to my attention through research into home altars. The term 'domestic worship' highlights the relationship between the signifiers of the sacred and profane. The word 'domestic' suggests that which is ordinary, banal, mundane and even profane. To then couple this with the word 'worship', suggestive of something sacred, extraordinary and potentially supernatural, seems to be a juxtaposition that critiques the divisibility of this duality.

I see domestic as having a strong relationship with the body and notions of the body. The term domestic conjures feelings of familiarity, comfort and the ordinary. It could be said that the domestic environment is the hub of earthly life, the place in which the needs of the body are primary. In Western culture whole rooms are dedicated to specific bodily requirements, the kitchen for food, the bathroom for cleaning, the bedroom for rest, intimacy and sex, and the lounge for relaxation and entertainment. I would propose that nowhere else is there such consideration for the needs and compulsions of the body than in the modern home.

Ablution makes use of these sites. The objects that occupy these sites become beginning points to discussing the greater subjects of the profane, banal and the abject. I find myself attracted to the most functional, ordinary and abject objects found in the home. The attraction to these objects could be because of their bodily nature. The domestic fixtures I choose are those that involve the act of cleansing the body, in the site of the bathroom.

Worship on the other hand suggests that something sacred is being considered. It suggests an act of reverence that acknowledges something as being beyond the everyday, something supernatural. The sacred is a term often associated with spiritual or religious experiences and objects (Collins, 1985, p428). Catholic ritual objects become the signifier for the sacred in *Ablution*.

My exploration of dichotomy within the context of domestic worship, gave weight to my argument regarding the indivisibility of duality. The question remained however, how was I to bring this discussion into my studio practice? To this end I began to engage with the methodology of Intertextuality and to explore notions of hybridity.



PLATE 1

Home Altar - Amatenango De Valle, Chiapas, 1999

Photographer - Robert Lewis

From *Divine Humility - Jesus Icon in Contemporary Mexico*

retrieved from www.sunsite.utk.edu

c h a p t e r 2
s e e d l i n g s

Here I discuss the germination of the work itself. I cover the construction of prototypes and finished works that aided me in making decisions for future work. It is where the previous research and experience has helped me to clarify my focus and take a theoretical position within my studio practice. The predominant methodology for this phase is Intertextuality, the search for relationship.

the search for relationship

There are several components to this task the first I have named mapping. I have introduced this task keeping in mind Kleining and Witt's rule four where they suggest, "...Procedures that are not linear but dialectical. We 'ask' our material 'questions' in a similar way one may ask a person, receiving 'answers' and questioning again..." (Kleining & Witt, 2000). Laying out the collated material in my studio space allows me to begin mapping connections between the eclectic material. I am critically reflecting on the material with a view to finding relationships.

This search for relationship between the 'texts' is encapsulated in the theory of Intertextuality (cited Agger 2004). For the purpose of this research, I find the following definition of Intertextuality relevant, "Relating to or deriving meaning from the interdependent ways in which texts stand in relation to each other." (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2000) For this research the term 'texts' refers to visual as well as literary texts, as previously used by Agger in his work on Intertextuality. Intertextuality values and seeks relationship between texts previously seen as unrelated as a way to develop new understanding (Agger 2004). In my work I am seeking relationship, not just between unrelated texts, but between texts that traditionally are diametrically opposed.

hybridity in sculptural practice

For the purpose of this thesis project it is necessary to define hybridity within the context of my sculptural practice. In order to understand what I mean when I use the term hybrid, I will use the example of hybrid from its horticultural roots. "Hybrid (n.) 1. offspring of two plants or animals of different species" (The Collins Compact English Dictionary, 1985, p240). My sculptural hybrid will have recognisable attributes from its contributor objects, but will still be able to be viewed as a new object unto itself. The Nashi pear for example, is a hybrid of an apple and a pear (refer figure 2). The Nashi adopts the shape of the apple and the texture of the pear, but has its own unique taste. I intend my hybrid objects to operate in a similar manner. The hybrid object, in order to be considered a successfully resolved artefact, must engender some of the characteristics of its 'parent' objects, but also be able to be viewed as a new object with a unique position. I use the term 'parent object' here to reference the origin objects that have been selected for their relationship to the binary of the sacred and profane.

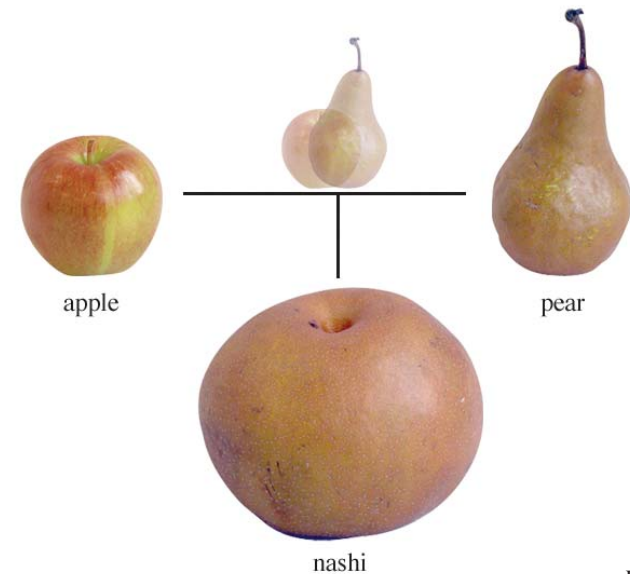


FIG 2

The term ‘parent’ is particularly pertinent to my practice because parents, in the traditional sense, refers to two people who historically have represented the duality of male and female. The union of this duality can produce a new being, a being that carries the gene information of the parents, but is in itself a unique being. My hybrid object comes from this union of dichotomous parent objects, just as a new child is born within a family.

The parent objects, once selected, were analysed in relation to the following qualities: material, form, scale, historical and philosophical context and function. By way of example I will briefly discuss this process in relation to the work *Elevate*.

Elevate began with the identification of a relationship between the physical act of taking shower and the ritual act of Baptism. My experience of Catholicism in New Zealand is the Baptism of babies and in this context Holy Water is poured from a bowl over the head of the child. It is this movement of water over the head that for me linked the everyday act of taking a shower with the sacramental act of baptism. In order to further explore this connection, I compared the physical and philosophical positions of the shower cubicle and the baptismal font. The focus was on finding relationship, but the contrasts and conflicts were also important in order access the tension inherent in dichotomy. Figure 3 illustrates the relationships and conflicts I discovered.

Initially I made several prototypes, experimenting with scale, form and materials (*refer plate2*). I concluded from these explorations that using the scale of a common Catholic Baptismal Font proved problematic in that it allude to basins, laundry sinks and bird baths. These readings brought unnecessary ambiguity to the work. This led me to explore scale in relation to the body rather than either artefact specifically. Materially and in form my prototypes pushed the work progressively toward either a more domestic or ecclesiastical reading I decided that the white tiles, which seemed to sit somewhere in between, were the most appropriate choice. I added the ready-made shower tray to the work, and then abandoned it in preference for a completely constructed artefact. The shower tray, however, remained a strong reference in the work.

Shower Cubicle



retrieved from www.comparestoreprices.co.uk

Material:
stainless steel, fibreglass, plastic, glass & lino

Form: cubicle

Scale: approx 2400x1200mm

Historical and Philosophical Context:
Originates in American bathrooms in the early 20th Century. Used mostly by males in the beginning. Was seen as invigorating to the skin. Was an efficient way to clean whole body relatively quickly (Lumpton & Miller, 1992). Associated with hygiene and the advent of daily washing.

Function:
For washing the body

Baptismal Font



retrieved from www.heavenlywood.com

Material:
wood, stone, ceramic, stainless steel

Form: unlimited. In a Catholic context mostly freestanding, plinth like, often octagons

Scale: higher than domestic sink, about 1200x600mm

Historical and Philosophical Context:
Baptism is mentioned in the Gospels as being first enacted by John the Baptist, who baptised Jesus. Full emersion is not practised in traditional Catholic sacrament. It is intended to initiate a person into the church and is said to cleanse a persons soul of the stain of original sin (Catholic Encyclopedia Vol II, 2003)

Function:
Hold Holy Water font for the sacrament of Baptism

FIG 3

beyond the ready-made

The ready-made has been an important resource for my studio practice. Some of my early prototypes used the ready-made of the stainless steel shower tray accompanied by some constructed elements (*refer plate 2*). The combination of the ready-made alongside the constructed did not operate as a hybrid, however, because the ready-made was not able to be absorbed into the new object effectively. It retained its integrity both materially and conceptually, and therefore was resistant to referencing anything beyond itself.

The ready-made served to accentuate the polarization of dichotomy rather alluding to relationship and integration. The work operated in a similar way to Tania Kovats work *Virgin in a Condom* (1994) where the profane could be literally and metaphorically removed from the sacred. The condom could be taken off the statue of the Virgin Mary and they are once again they are in their original states. In this art work the artifacts retain their integrity even in their combined state. Consequently the ready-made remained in my practice as reference material, rather than being elemental in the work.

In this way *Stations* and *Elevate* references the ready-made but are not ready-mades. The objects are a re-interpretation of ready-made and mass produced items. My water stoup multiple *Stations* is similar to the sink and urinals of Robert Gober (*refer plate 3*). At first glance Gober's bathroom fixtures look authentically ready-made and are reminiscent of Duchamp's *Fountain* (*refer plate 4*). But upon closer inspection the items he produces are clearly not the result of industrial intervention. The imperfections and undulating quality of Gobers work quite clearly reference artist as maker and the marks left behind individuates the works themselves. Gober's interpretation of the ready-made object clearly distinguishes it from the multiples of the minimalist movement, or from simply repeating the conversation that Duchamp's ready-mades began.

My multiple does not push the point of artist as maker as far as Gober does. *Stations* is a multiple made up of individually fabricated fibreglass constructions. The process individuates the works, because each work, once laid up needs to be

joined by hand. The works are not strictly an exact copy of each other displacing industrial replication, yet they are visually close enough to allude to it. *Stations* sits in between art object and commercial artefact.



PLATE 2

Font prototype 1, 2 & 3 - april 2005



PLATE 3

*Broom, Sink
and Urinal
Robert Gober -
1984*



PLATE 4

*Fountain
Marcel Duchamp - 1917*

c h a p t e r 3
m a t u r a t i o n

In this chapter I discuss specific contexts in relations to *Ablution*. At this stage new dialogues emerge as clarity and focus are gained. Artefacts begin to become resolved and the process of making becomes primary. As the title to this chapter suggests the art objects become substantially more grounded in specific theoretical and philosophical discourse.

the abject: purity and impurity

“That opposition, [purity and impurity] even though it is not absolute, is inscribed in the biblical text’s basic concern with separating, with constituting strict identities without intermixture” (Kristeva, 1992, p93). Julia Kristeva’s discussion on purity and impurity in her book *Powers Of Horror: an essay on abjection*, cites this duality as a social construct concerned with the claiming of a social and religious identity. “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, position, rules” (Kristeva, 1992, p4). Kristeva’s critical analysis proves useful in the discussion of the sacred and profane. Kristeva’s writing exposes the underlining ideology of dichotomous philosophies as that of monotheism. Monotheism’s singularity of view necessarily creates dualism by the simple act of claiming one side so absolutely. Once a certain set of values has been laid claim to at the expense of any other, an opposition is created. The absolute rightness of God made any possibility of intermixture within the sacred and profane duality equal to blasphemy. This is clearly illustrated by artists who have challenged the dichotomy of the sacred and profane within a Catholic context.

blasphemy

Artists such as Andres Serrano and Tania Kovats have used references to body as a site for the profane and abject in their works. Serrano uses the bodily fluids of urine and blood in his piece *Piss Christ* (1987) (refer plate 5). In this work he has submerged a plastic effigy of Jesus on the Cross into a vat of his own urine laced with bulls blood. Likewise Kovats places a condom over a small statue of the Virgin Mary in her work *Virgin in a Condom* (1994) (refer plate 6).



PLATE 5
Piss Christ
Andres Serrano - 1987



PLATE 6
Virgin in a Condom
Tania Kovats - 1994

The works of these artists juxtapose an object or substance that signifies the profane with an object that signifies the sacred. This juxtaposition critiques the hierarchical nature of dichotomy by giving both sides equal weight. Both pieces outraged members of the Catholic Church who complained about the content being blasphemous and wrote letters asking that the work to be removed from public exhibit. In the worst cases the works were vandalised and the Virgin and the Condom was stolen, (Sapa, 1998). This reaction from the Catholic public seems to indicate that old binary values are still very much active in a contemporary context.

Kristeva’s critique, however, disturbs the absolute certainty of the existence of the sacred and profane duality as anything other than a social construct. That being the case, it necessarily calls into question what, if anything, can be truly regarded as sacred. The body’s association with the profane in Catholicism must certainly then be a fiction, a construct designed to fulfil a purpose associated with order, rather than objective reality. It is the argument of this thesis that what is considered to be sacred by any religion, culture or social order is essentially fabricated through the human desire to name and categorise, rather than from any essential difference between what is considered to be profane and what is considered to be sacred. *Ablution* embodies the principle that the sacred could very well exist in objects associated with the profane and abject aspects of human nature.

It was curious to me, for example, to discover that I was able to purchase a set of plastic Rosary beads for \$1.50 in the Catholic shop. It highlighted to me that a set of Rosary beads, regardless of their monetary value, are essentially a set of mundane and ordinary beads. They are offered import only by virtue of the owners belief in their sanctity, I asked myself if this \$1.50 set of Rosary beads can afford me the same promise of spiritual enlightenment as a more expensive set, what exactly is it that makes these beads sacred and not profane in the constructed Catholic ideology? If the plastic beads are my link to salvation of the soul, then why can't any string of plastic beads be used for the same purpose? Logic tells me that the item itself is significant by virtue of a constructed ideology, and is within and of itself essentially a mundane, ordinary object, capable of being mass-produced and affording little value in the market place. *Ablution* therefore selects very ordinary and functional domestic objects to embody notions of the sacred through its construction, rather than its materiality.

It is my intention that my work will elevate (using the visual language of Catholic iconography) aspects of corporeal life and afford them the kind of reverence that previously would have been reserved for spiritual life.

a minimalist aesthetic

"The avant-garde poet or artist tries in effect to imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms, in the way nature itself is valid...Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or part to anything not itself" (Greenburg, 1939, p8)

Greenburg's ideology of formalism underpins the philosophical and aesthetic concerns of the American minimalist movement in the 1960s (Conland, 2004). I use the vocabulary of a minimalist aesthetic in my work. This is evidenced through my choice of geometric form, the multiple, a restricted colour palette and highly polished surfaces. My primary concern in using this aesthetic is as a vehicle for accentuating notions of purity and ablution that have become central themes in my work. I have used a minimalist aesthetic to introduce and reiterate content, not displace it.

In *Elevate* the formal qualities of the manufactured tiles are given value as they are the dominant material used, influencing the overall dimensionality of the forms. In this way the materiality of the work has had an important role to play in the end product. It is not, however, my sole concern. The overall form of the three forms in *Elevate* reference both the shower cubicle and Baptismal Fonts. The material quality of the tile, i.e its vitreous surface and whiteness has been selected for its reference to domestic bathrooms and its allusion to purity. So although the material itself has earned considerable consideration in its own right, my intent to use it, to reference content, transcends the singularity of formalist concerns.

My work also critiques the non-relational objecthood of minimalism as *Stations* and *Elevate* operate not only as art objects but also as sites. I invite to the audience to interact with my work, both literally and metaphorically. In this way I have found a relationship between my work and the practices of Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Wolfgang Laib. Pertinent to this discussion is the writing of Klaus Ottman in his 2002 article on *Spiritual Materiality*. Ottman discusses the two artists work as being both highly concerned with materiality and equally concerned with connecting and communicating with the audience.

He cites Felix Gonzalez-Torres work, *Placebo* (1991) (refer plate 7) and Wolfgang Laib *Milkstones* (refer plate 8) as example of his notion of 'Spiritual Materiality'. Gonzalez-Torres work *Placebo* is an arrangement of individually wrapped sweets. The work's materiality is absolutely fundamental to the work, yet as Ottman points out the work also evokes emotive responses from the audience. Gonzalez-Torres invites the viewer to help themselves to sweets. This participation by the audience is what Ottman argues give the work its transcendental qualities. He defines transcendental as being that which is "*Inspired by the other, it exists through the other and for the other without losing its original identity*" (Ottman 2002, p2).

Materiality in Laib's work *Milkstones* is equally fundamental. The marble stone and the milk are related to each other through their formal qualities. One is the container, the other the contained. The milk is contained, by the stone yet it is nearly imperceptible to the audience. It is the near invisibility of the milk that Ottman believes engages the audience. According to Ottman the audience is

asked to have faith in the presence of milk, even when they may strain to perceive it within the work. It is the request of faith from the audience that brings the viewer into relationship, and therefore displaces a purely formalist concern.

In a similar way, my work asks something of the audience. The invitation to come into relationship with the work happens in several ways. In *Elevate* the dimensionality is deliberately bodily, setting up a relationship between the viewers own body and the fonts. Both *Elevate* and *Stations* make reference to ready-mades that are normally involved in bodily activities. The shiny surfaces of the work entice the viewer to come into a sensual relationship with the work through touch. Likewise the stairs in *Elevate* are directive, asking the viewer to ascend them, to become a part of the work, to experience the work through interaction.

My work is overtly concerned with formalist and clean aesthetic and is used as a vehicle to discuss conceptual concerns.

the gallery or the showroom

I use multiplicity in my work to reference the industrial production of domestic fixtures. It also serves to make an allusion to the relationship between the gallery as the exhibitor of art objects and a commercial showroom as the exhibitor of consumer branded products. The reference to the consumer market is emphasised by my choice to attribute product numbers to each of the individual works in both *Elevate* and *Stations*, as is shown in the catalogue. I am employing a similar strategy to Derek Cherry in his work such as *Supralux Suite* (1992) (refer plates 9 & 10). Cherry's iconic beds, all white, dressed in padded vinyl and formica, are presented in formation, in much the same way as a commercial bed store would do. My intention for *Ablution* is that the viewer consider my works both as art objects and as a comment on commercially produced artefacts.



PLATE 7

Placebo - 1991

Felix Gonzalez-Torres



PLATE 8

Milkstones - 1998

Wolfgang Laib



PLATE 9

Supralux Suite - 1992

Derek Cherry



PLATE 10

Supralux Suite (detail)

Derek Cherry

whiteness

I have used white in my work for three specific reasons. These are: to reference common bathroom fixtures, to accentuate the form and materiality of the work and to access notions of purity.

I use white to reference common bathroom fixtures, such as toilets, basins, baths and shower cubicles. In this way white is common, banal, ordinary and recognisably domestic. It is not, however, friendly or comfortable in the way other colours used in domestic décor can be. White references the potentially unfriendly and unclean parts of the domestic environment such as the bathroom or kitchen. It references the parts of the home that need to be kept clean in order to preserve good health. Both domestically and in broader social contexts, such as hospitals, white signifies a concern with sanitation and hygiene. *“Hygiene, rather than bodily comfort determined the evolution of the ‘bathroom aesthetic’. Non-porous vitreous china, enamelled iron and ceramic tile were favoured over potentially moisture and germ gathering materials as wood, marble and wallpaper”* (Lupton & Miller, 1992). My use of white and the stainless steel accentuates the cold modernity of these domestic environments.

The second reason is reductionist in its approach. To accentuate the forms, I have refrained from any decoration, including in this case, colour. It is a paring back, a getting rid of anything that is not essential to the reading of the work. This echoes minimalist concerns and also makes comment of the industrial aesthetic of simple form and shapes, that was popularised by early bathroom designers. They preferred to celebrate the functionality of bathroom fixtures rather than continuing with the previous habit of highly decorative domestic furnishings (Lumpton & Millar, 1992).

In this way I am using white to carry the notion of functionality, simplicity and origin. Simplicity, in its lack of decoration is minimizing the superfluous. By origin, I mean specifically the state of the origin of object. That is the state before decoration. That state that comes directly off the production line and is never individuated through the hand of the artist. I use it to reference a pre-state, in a

sense, nakedness. Like a child when it is born, before it is wrapped in blankets, before it is dress appropriately according to gender, age and ethnicity. I intend to reference a state before judgements, before identity.

The third reason is to access notions of purity. I make a tentative connection to white as signifier of spiritual purity. It is a colour often used in relationship to figures who are considered spiritually pure, such as Jesus and Mary the Virgin. White is also the colour of salt, which is added to Holy Water in Catholic custom for the following reasons: *“...[to] help to wash away the stains of sin, to quench the fire of our passions, [and] to preserve us from relapses into sin”* (East Lewis County Catholic Community, 2005, p3). White is also used in advertising material to indicate cleanliness. Countless laundry powder adverts use white to demonstrate the cleaning power of their products. White references cleanliness and purity both domestically and spiritually.

the presence of water

Both *Elevate* and *Stations* are bodies of work made up of forms that language the notion of container. They are empty containers, but if they were to contain anything, the materiality and the form of the works would suggest that that something would be water.

The objects reference domestic bathroom fixtures that require water to function, the toilet and the shower. Water in this context is the carrier of waste, removing hair, skin, faeces, urine and dirt from the body and from within the bodies vicinity. Water removes the abject. Water in these sites, (the toilet and the shower), has a temporal relationship with the object and the user. What makes the toilet and shower functional is the fact that they are plumbed into their site permanently. Water pours into them and then pours away along with the users waste. The works in *Elevate* and *Stations*, however, are not plumbed. Whatever they might contain cannot escape, except through evaporation. The function of these artefacts more closely resembles the traditional function of Baptismal and Holy Water fonts commonly found in Catholic churches.

Holy Water is held in water stoups which, in New Zealand churches, are often situated at the church door, for the congregation to bless themselves with when they enter. Water in this context is precious and is intended to be preserved. It was common for parishioners to take Holy Water away in containers to bless their houses, fields, food and so on (Catholic Encyclopedia Vol II, 2003). Holy Water is precious, something to be contained and used with deliberate and conscious intent. Holy Water, once blessed by the priest, has the power to purify and is in itself considered to be incorruptible (Catholic Encyclopedia Vol II, 2003). Holy Water is sacred, waste water from a shower or toilet is profane. In *Stations* and *Elevate* these two notions of water reside together. The metaphorical allusion to water becomes the vehicle for the intermixing of the sacred and profane, the pure and impure, the clean and unclean.

ablution

Remove my sins and I will be clean; wash me and I will be whiter than snow.
(Psalms 51:2)

My work discusses the notion of abjection. Not through the presence of a substance that may allude to the abject, but through the lack of it. My work is clean and pristine. Its cleanliness is fragile and can only be maintained by the act of cleaning. It is this act of cleaning that has become central to the works in *Ablution* both in its literal and metaphorical context. *Elevate* specifically plays with the notion of ablution for the intent of cleaning the body as well as the sacrament of baptism, that clean and purifies the soul. “*In ecclesiastical usage...the terms Baptize, Baptism are employed...to signify the sacramental washing by which the soul is cleansed from sin at the same time that the water is poured upon the body*” (Catholic Encyclopedia Vol II, 2003, p3). I would argue here that ‘ablution’ is the state of movement between clean and unclean. That the act of cleaning is an effort to obtain a state of sanitation, yet once the desired state is achieved the movement back into a state of unclean has begun. Hence ablution is a repeated act, that languages the trajectory between the states of unclean and clean.

Clean is a state we seem to strive for, both morally and physically. It seems that in our Western culture we believe that without the human intervention of ablution we would naturally fall into states of uncleanness, profanity and immorality. Lupton and Millar cite a reference to this connection between morality and cleanliness in gentility manuals in existence around the early nineteenth century in America that “...specified appropriate behaviour for polite society, religious teachings that connected cleanliness with morality, and a growing body of medical opinion” (Lupton & Millar, 1992, p17).

Continually in a domestic household there seems to be a natural trajectory toward impurity. Housework, for the most part is deemed a necessary activity both for physical wellness and for moral rightness. Many an advertisement on television selling cleaning products make the analogy between cleanness and moral standing. They play on an emotional tie between uncleanness and shame. One advert comes to mind where a woman with a new baby is asked by a visitor to use her toilet, there is the suggestion in the advert that were the toilet not clean the mother of the young infant would experience a public shaming and that her moral standing may well be affected.

Just as we are convinced in the Western culture that cleanliness is essential for maintaining good bodily health, so too in Catholicism the act of cleansing the soul is important to maintain spiritual health. It is a Western notion that the body naturally accumulates dirt and must continually be cleaned to avoid infection and disease. Similarly in Catholicism our soul is continually soiled by the affliction of accumulated sin, (Warner, 1985), so it is essential to cleanse your sins through conscious acts such as Baptism, blessings with Holy Water and attending confession.

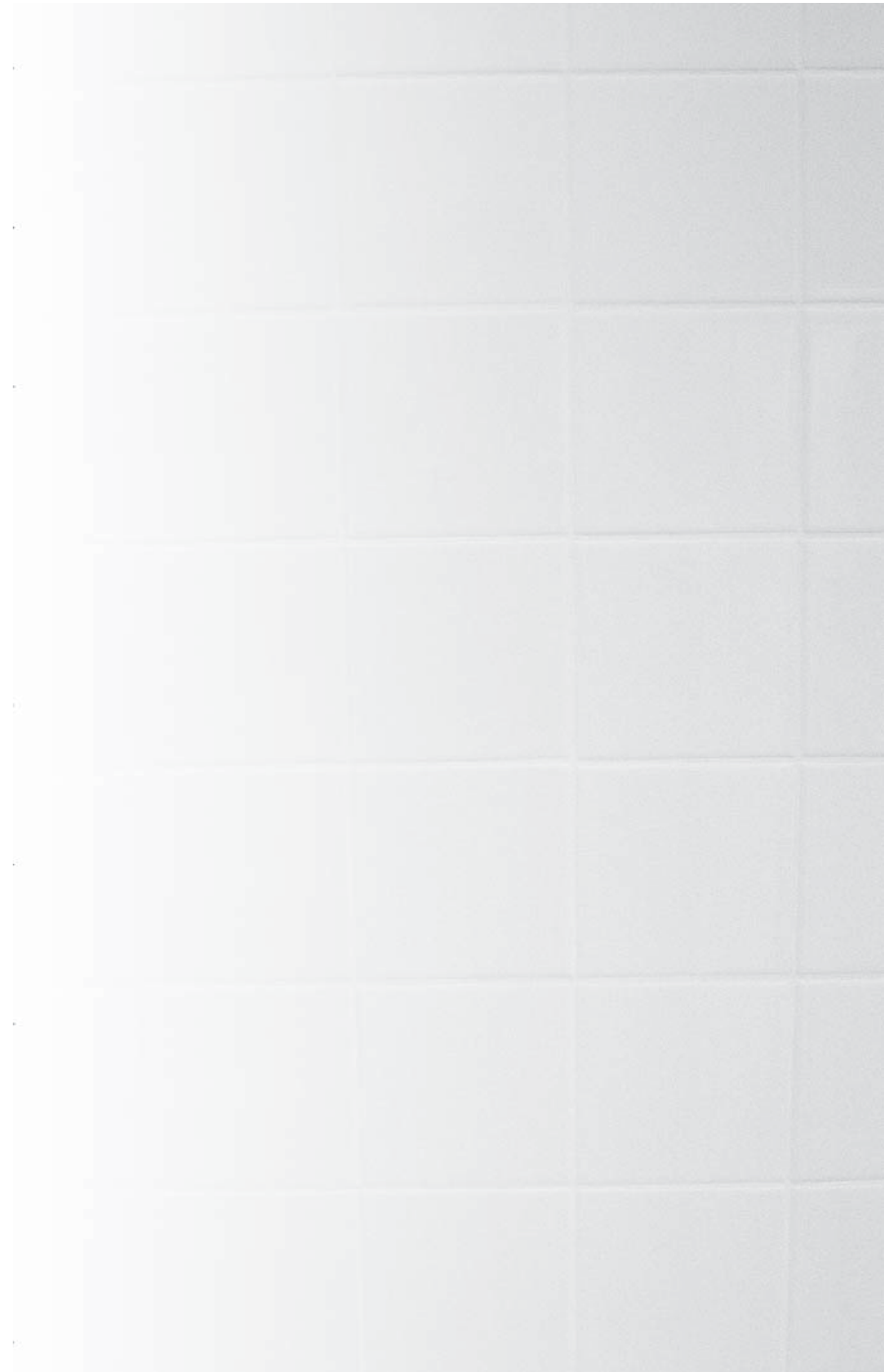
conclusion

In *Ablution* I have proposed that a single artefact can be a hybrid of dichotomous positions, displacing the hierarchical and divisible tendency of duality. In conclusion I will analyse where the work sits in relation to this proposal and summarise the new discussions the work has stimulated.

Stations and *Elevate* have embodied a middle ground between domestic fixture and ritual object. In this way they operate as hybrids of their parent objects. *Ablution* also activates discussion in the space between other binaries, such as form and content, object and site, ready-made and hand-made.

Stations and *Elevate* encapsulate notions of purity and cleanliness. The abject or the impure, although materially absent, is referenced in relationship to its opposite. The profane or abject exist cognitively for the audience, where, for example they may not ascend the stairs for fear of getting them dirty. It is the implied act of cleaning in these works that links purity to impurity interdependently.

For the future I am wanting to continue exploring the contexts and concepts discussed in this exegesis. I have more ideas for work that plays with these notions. I will, in the future, as I have done here allow the production of the work to open intended and unintended dialogues, allowing my studio practice to grow and mature. I have plans for a group exhibition early next year, and am contemplating other proposals for future exhibitions.



d o c u m e n t a t i o n

selected early works

These early works were my first attempt at exploring the dichotomy of the sacred and profane. I am using Byzantium and Orthodox iconography to inform aesthetic and in this way signify the sacred. To reference the profane I was exploring the depiction of lesbian relationship and representations of ordinary everyday women. *Couple*, *Couple 2* and *Mother of God* are all unfinished as I became aware of difficulties early on. I was unsatisfied with the works literalness and struggled to achieve a sense of fluidity and intimacy within the medium.



Couple - march 2004
1200 x 700 x 12mm
MDF, paint.
(unfinished)



Couple 2 - march 2004
230 x 95 x 12mm
MDF, paint.



Mother of God -
april 2004
340 x 120 x 120mm
White Chestnut

Vulva Virgin juxtaposes the profane depiction of female genitals with an image of the Virgin Mary. This work deals with dichotomy in a literal way. The binary elements of the vulva and Virgin Mary, sit side by side with not intermixture occurring. I believe this work is aligned to Serrano's *Piss Christ* (1987) and Kovat's *Virgin in a Condom* (1994) in the way it deals with dichotomy. As such this work does not gain new ground in the discussion of this dichotomy and does more to reinforce it rather than critique it.



Vulva Virgin -
may 2004
180 x 110 x 20mm
White Chestnut, Virgin
Mary Card, Topaz, gold
paint

Immaculate I & II is the first body of work that begins to explore dichotomy as an indivisible relationship. This is achieved by elevating the ordinary and everyday through the application of devices that language the sacred or significant. The wallpaper in these works is the signifier for the domestic everyday, where the frame and shelf operate as signifiers for the sacred. *Immaculate I*, for example, uses a strip of wallpaper with an embossed flower pattern. I have painted the wallpaper white and highlighted one of the embossed flowers with gold pen. This, along with the placement of a white shelf beneath the gold flower, elevates the floral wallpaper pattern from ordinary to sacred object.



Immaculate I
(detail)



Immaculate II
(detail)

Immaculate I & II - june 2004
variable
Wallpaper, shelf, frame, gold pen, material,
white paint

Year 1 exhibition

I regard *Rose* as my first hybrid art object. It is hybrid of a drain hole and Rose window. I feel this work a successful hybrid of these artefacts. It opened up new dialogues that I had not previously considered. I placed *Rose* close to the gallery wall with the intention of creating an intimate space for the viewer. It was the first time my work had operated both as an object and as a site and I decided



Rose - 2004
1200 x 2400 x 600mm
Stainless Steel, gib, wood framing, white paint, skirting and scotia.

to continue with this. My tendency toward a minimalist aesthetic also became evident with *Rose*, and I began to ask myself questions about how I might work with it. This was the largest work I had constructed to this point and it gave me confidence in methods of construction I had not before considered. This work is significant in that it precludes *Ablution* in style, form and design and represents the potential for future works operating within similar contexts.

prototypes and development (Elevate)

These prototypes follow directly after *Rose* at the beginning of the new year. I was looking at making a hybrid of a baptismal font and shower cubicle.



Font prototype 1 - april 2005
approx 1100 x 500 x 500mm
MDF, white paint, stainless steel shower tray,
lino, aluminium.

Prototype 1 is the most domestic of these prototypes due to the materials and cubic form. It is visually aligned with kitchen or bathroom cupboards. It is too domestic for my purposes.



Font prototype 2 - april 2005
approx 1100 x 450 x 450mm
MDF, white paint, stainless steel
shower tray, plastic tiles.

Prototype 2 (see previous page) is more religious in connotation. The sloping lines of the design and the centralised tiles reference the ceremonial robes of a Catholic priest. The design is less functional and more decorative. It implies meaning and significance beyond its function. This prototype it is too much on the side of the sacred.



Font prototype 3 - april 2005
approx 1100 x 450 x 450mm
MDF, white paint, stainless steel shower tray,
ceramic tiles.

Prototype 3 proves to be the most successful regarding materials. The white tiles place the prototype somewhere in between domestic and religious. White tiles appeal because they simultaneously evoke notions of the sacred and domestic. This piece in particular conjured in the audience notions of morgue and surgical procedures. This is where conceptually I begin to reference hygiene and purity.

The shower tray as a ready-made was not permanently attached to these works. It 'floated' on the base, giving it a sense of impermanence and eminent removal. This was problematic because my intention was to create a single object and the ready-made and constructed elements interacted as separate elements assembled, rather than one single object. I abandoned the ready-made shower tray after these prototypes were completed



Font prototype 4 - may 2005
approx 1100 x 500 x 500mm
MDF, white paint, mild steel

My next step was to make a shower tray like inset. I used the same profile of the ready-made but changed the dimensions to suit the cubic unit I was already using. I left out the drain hole. Constructing the element myself enabled me to reference the ready-made but also have complete control over the form.



Font prototype 5 - june 2005
approx 1600 x 500 x 500mm
MDF, white paint, mild steel



I decided to elevate the font because it was too strongly referencing domestic sinks. Elevating it and including stairs helped the work begin to reference ritual. I felt the piece was now beginning to approach the space between domestic and ritual object.

prototypes and development (Stations)



*Interlocking system
for stairs*

#6963
September 2005
220 x 550 x 1210mm
MDF, white ceramic tiles

For the purpose of having the audience safely ascend the stairs in *Elevate I* invented an interlocking step system. The steps are individual components that fit together and are then bolted in place. This makes them stable, can be easily dismantled and moved, and when assembled appear to be one piece.

Overall I am happy with the progress of this work. The white tiles and stainless steel inset are working conceptually and formally.



#6963 & #6636
September 2005
MDF, white ceramic tiles



Wooden stoup prototype
August 2005
480 x 330 x 190mm
MDF, glue, screws



In order to understand the shape I was wanting to produce for the water stoup work, I made the above prototype out of MDF. I was happy with the overall design, and used this prototype to make templates for my next step, carving a stoup out of high density foam (see below).



High density foam stoup prototype
September 2005
480 x 330 x 190mm High Density Foam



White enamel prototype
September 2005
480 x 330 x 190mm High Density Foam, resin, white enamel

Here the foam stoup has been covered in resin and coats of white enamel have been applied. The semi-gloss finish is effective as it alludes to ceramic, without being glossy enough to be mistaken for it. The prototype meets the criteria for my finished work and so I have used it to make moulds for the multiple. The multiple will be fabricated in fibreglass and finished in white enamel paint so as to replicate this prototype.



Plaster mould brushed with Gel Coat
October 2005

I began by making plaster moulds from the White Enamel Prototype. I chose this method because it was cheaper and I had more experience with this method of mould production. Unfortunately plaster proved to be very difficult to use. It is heavy, difficult to seal properly and lacked any flexibility for releasing the cast.



Fibreglass mould
November 2005

I decided instead to make a fibreglass mould. Although more expensive this method ultimately proved to be easier to produce. The advantage of this approach was that I was able to join the two halves of the mould together by the flange.



A fibreglass cast from the fibreglass mould
December 2005

This enabled me to cast both sides of the mould at the same time and join them together before the fibreglass had cured, creating a secure join in the cast that required less finishing work and a more accurate overall form.

a b l u t i o n

exhibition december 2005



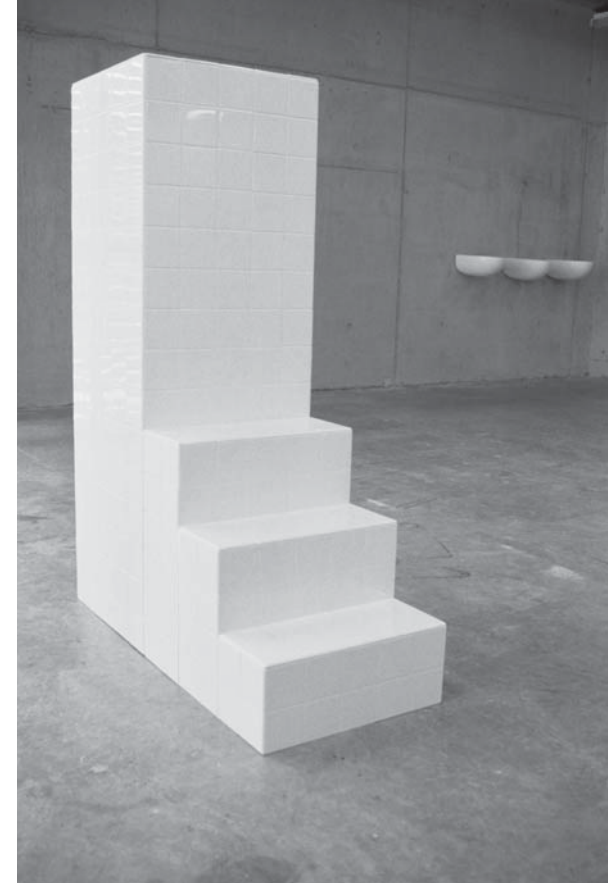
Part view of Ablution exhibition
from right *Elevate* #6636, centre *Elevate* #9363, left top *Stations* #9336,
#6936 & #3963, left below *Elevate* #6963



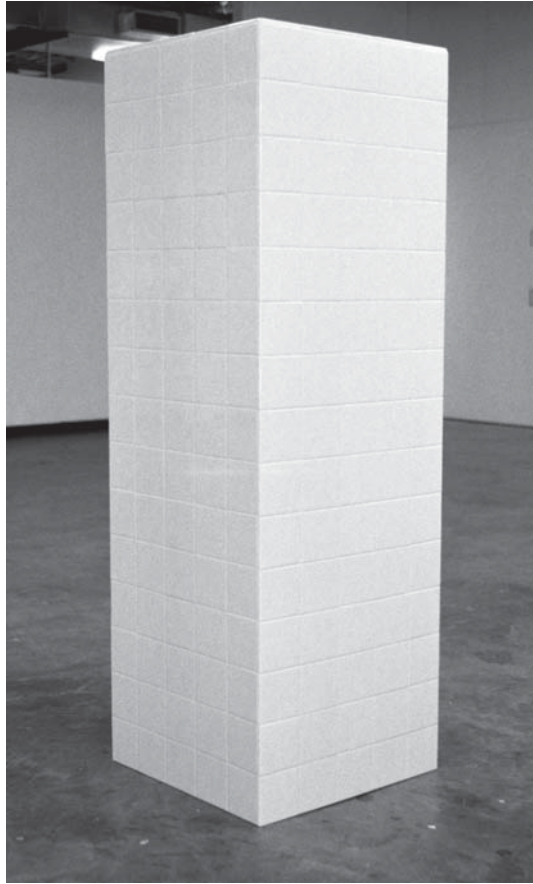
Elevated view of Ablution exhibition
from right *Stations* #9936, centre *Elevate* #9363, left top *Elevate* #6636



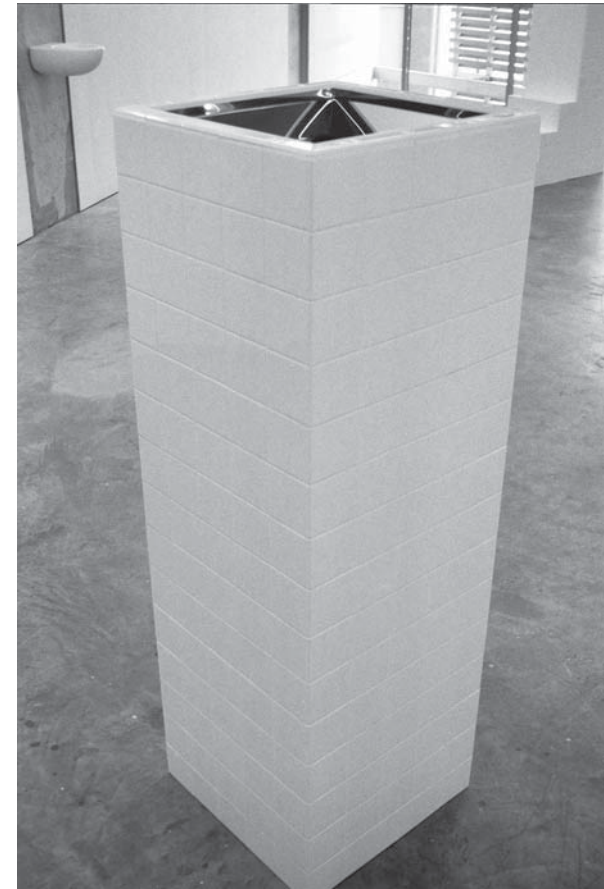
Part view of Ablution exhibition
 right Stations #9336, #6936 & #3963 centre Elevate #6963,
 left Elevate #9363



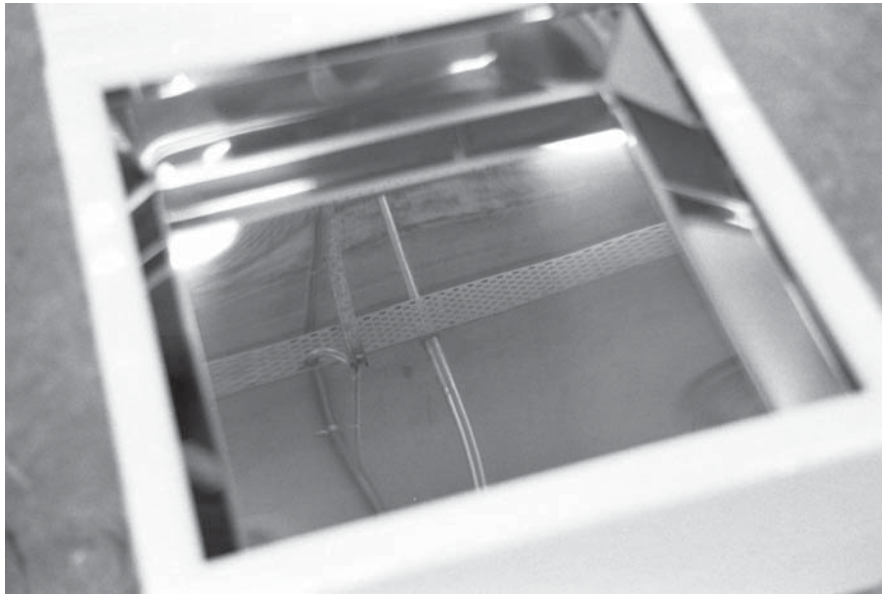
Foreground Elevate #6636
 background Stations #9336, #6936 & #3963



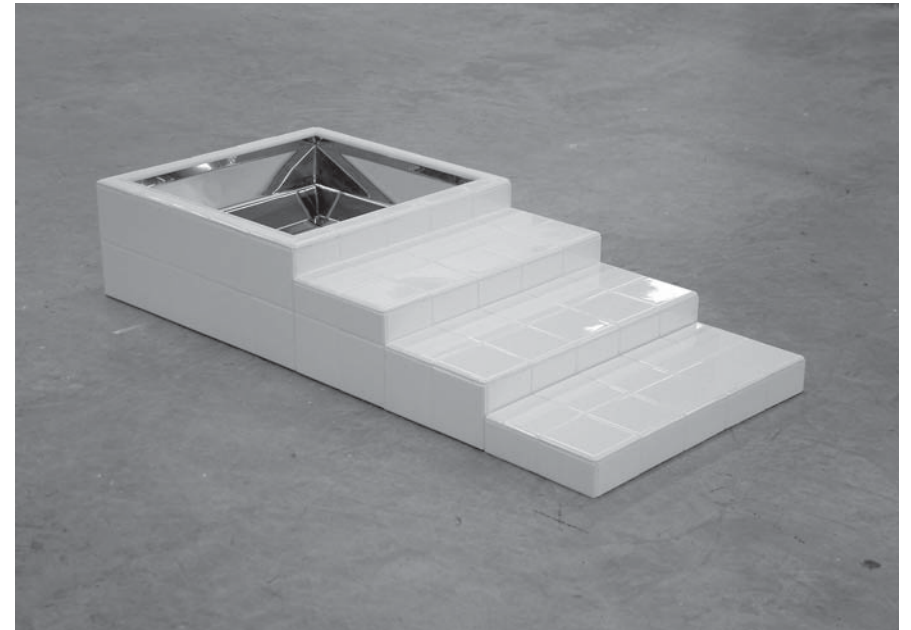
Elevate #9363
(view from ground level)



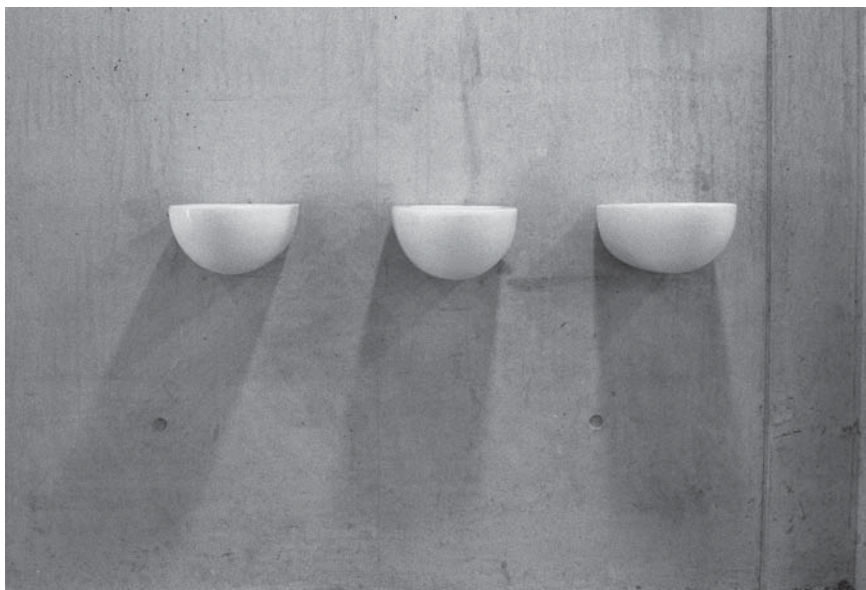
Elevate #9363
(view from above)
Stations #9936 and Elevate #6636 in background



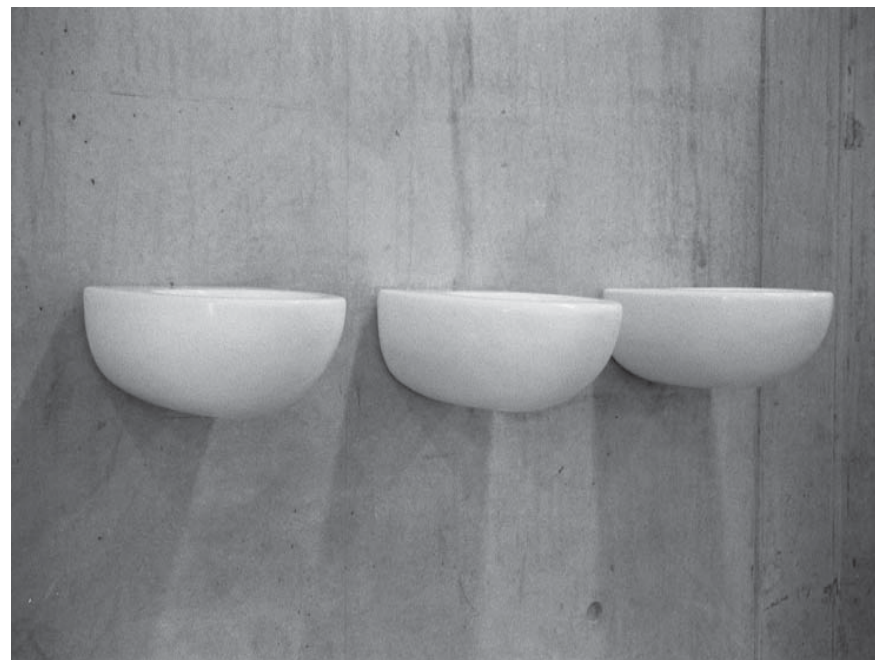
Elevate #6963
(detail of reflection in stainless steel tray)



Elevate #6963
(viewed from left)



*Stations #9336, #6936 & #3963
(viewed from front)*



*Stations #9336, #6936 & #3963
(viewed from left)*



Stations #9633
 (viewed from left)
Stations #9936 in background



Stations #9936
 (viewed from below)

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