

# poetic displacement

journeying through an installation-based practice

An exegesis submitted to Auckland University of Technology in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of Master of Art and Design

Art and Design | Visual Arts

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**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 (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of stylized, overlapping loops and a long horizontal tail stroke.

**acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my supervisors, Eu Jin Chua, Dr Janine Randerson and Dr Rachel Carley, for all their guidance, inspiration, encouragement and knowledgeable input into my work. I would also like to acknowledge the financial contribution of post-graduate scholarships from AUT and Unitec: thank you for enabling me to pursue this journey.

Thank you to Toni, for introducing me to Pico Iyer, for our lengthy discussions on all things related (and not) to this research, and for following, and being a part of, the journey.

And of course, thank you to my parents, for their adventurous migrations which brought us to New Zealand, for all the French, Swiss and Sri Lankan influences in my life, and for their unfailing love, support and encouragement.

**abstract**

This research project is about *poetic displacement*. The reference here is to the hope and possibilities associated with the specific peaceful voluntary act of displacement (migration) as opposed to forced exile. The *poetic* also pays homage to the whimsical: the visionaries, the dreamers, the ambitious: these are those who seek to migrate.

My personal experiences of migrating journeys inform this research, which is expressed in an installation-based practice. While one might associate movement and change with ideas of migration and displacement, there is, as writer Pico Iyer suggests, an underlying desire for seeking home in stillness and contemplation, accommodating the soul as one's own portable home.<sup>1</sup> In exploring the complex discourse of migration and displacement, a subtle shift has occurred; ideas of home, suspension, shadow, place and experience have emerged as a contemplative response, woven from those initial parameters. The realm of this research is therefore focussed on a conception of space that celebrates these more ephemeral qualities, in order to consider an installation that is experiential rather than representative.

This research utilises an action-based learning approach: the work is based on a theoretical premise and unfolds from a direct engagement with the material. Development of my practice is underpinned by cycles of defining, generating and refining. The outcome is a series of installations as a response to home, place and yearning of the human spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> Angie Brenner, "Literature – Interview – Pico Iyer – Global Writer, Heart & Soul," accessed 30 November, 2013,



**introduction** | pre-journey





This research will seek to express migration within the realm of installation; it will focus on one strand of the many complex ideas and connotations of migration and displacement. Rather than unpacking or pursuing the vast myriad of sub-themes having to do with displacement, an exploration of the ideas of home, temporality, stillness and shadow will be quietly offered through the work itself, within specified parameters. Contemplation will be sought throughout the research: the reflection and consideration shall be the thread of intent; the practical and the theoretical intertwined shall bear these marks. I shall seek to create an experience which speaks not *of* the cosmopolite, but *to* the cosmopolite.<sup>2</sup>

While the particular aspects of migration and displacement to be explored — home, temporality, stillness and shadow — are in themselves entire bodies of research, I am interested in the coming together of these parts. Individually they may mean a vast number of things (not necessarily specifically to do with migration and displacement), but in combination together, like a layering of these ideas, they suggest a near-cohesive perspective on understanding and expressing migration and displacement and invite discourse around this theme.

The research is framed with the idea of situating it within a relevant critical context, which will be achieved by utilising a number of methods. One such direction will be exploring and questioning current theoretical positions in order to gain greater insight and understanding. Another aspect will be identifying and analysing the work of other kindred practitioners in order to further my own awareness and comprehension. And finally, I will be coupling a practical exploration into ‘making’ with critical reflection and actively engaging with this as a way to inform and develop my work.

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<sup>2</sup> Cosmopolitanism is discussed in further detail in the chapter site |place|displace. What I am interested in is expressing the lived affective experiences of cosmopolitanism through my work.

For the purposes of clarity this exegesis will loosely be structured around chapters as themes or discussions. I invite the reader to consider these groupings in a holistic, encompassing approach and to negotiate the unstable periphery of these categories; the reading may thus become a subtle translation and contemplation of overlays and overlaps.

**narrative** | background



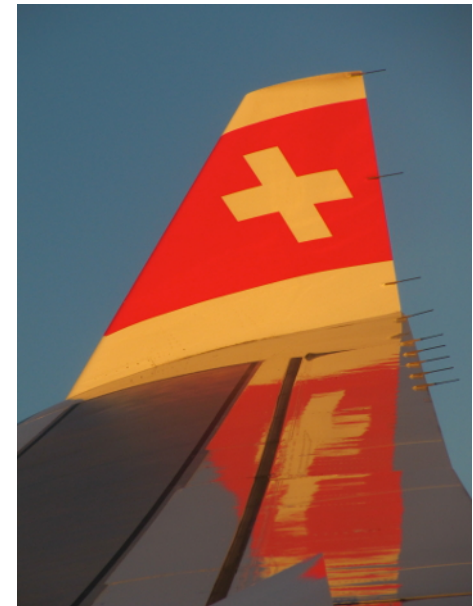
In 2013 I returned to New Zealand after living five years abroad. Part of the impetus to return 'home' was to embark on a new trajectory: there was a desire within me to translate the conceptual design explorations from my architectural background into an installation-based practice.

But this journey doesn't start in 2013. Let me retrace my steps to another beginning...

My maternal grandmother was born in Switzerland but left Europe during the 1930s for Sri Lanka, where she met and later married my grandfather, who was born in Sri Lanka and educated at a tertiary level in London. Together they brought up four children. The eldest, my mother, immigrated to Switzerland when she was twenty-one, never to return to her home country. On my father's side, my paternal grandfather left peaceful Switzerland during World War I for wartime France. When my father was about seventeen he himself emigrated from France to Switzerland. A few years after my parents were married, they decided to migrate to New Zealand with three children under the age of five, a country they knew little of, and had no connections with.

At a young age in New Zealand, my cultural identity was influenced by those around me: I was seen as a foreigner and so that perception became part of my own. During my formative teenage and university years I began to realise that I felt very 'Kiwi' and with it developed a strong sense of belonging and identification, without denying my Swiss, French and Sri Lankan heritage.

In my late 20s I left New Zealand for Switzerland, in part to discover and explore my origins. I lived and worked there for five years, in the French-speaking part, and considered settling there permanently. During that time I was exposed to certain cultural conventions, as well as a geographic displacement, that I was unfamiliar with. I was confronted with variances in beliefs, traditions, language, seasons, climate and landscape (amongst others). The



**Fig. 1** Sophie Hermann, *Swiss-air flight home* (2011)



**Fig. 2** Sophie Hermann, *Packed up* (2013)

combination of these more apparent differences became interwoven with a more philosophical aspect of self-reflective analysis, which seemed to operate on a subconscious plane: *who or what was I a product of? Where did I belong?*

My return to New Zealand in late February 2013 added yet another node of displacement in my timeline of migratory journeys. The sense of displacement generated by repatriation — by having to pack up one’s life and begin it again in another country, albeit it this time in my ‘home country’ — is ongoing and still fresh in my mind. Changes that have occurred both in New Zealand and in myself since I last lived here contribute to an ongoing ‘unwrapping’ and discovery of myself and my surroundings, re-finding and re-defining my place here.

I think it is worthwhile to pause here a moment to reflect and clarify what the terms *migration* and *displacement* mean with regards to my own life, and I shall do so with reference to James Wood’s essay “On Not Going Home.” I was not born in New Zealand and my parents are themselves of mixed ethnicities, but the move here was neither violent nor disruptive to me in any way. Wood writes of “*homelooseness*,”<sup>3</sup> defined more by its references of “voluntary homelessness”<sup>4</sup> and “softer emigration”<sup>5</sup> as opposed to the tragedy of exile and forced displacement, “in which the ties that might bind one to Home have been loosened, perhaps happily, perhaps unhappily, perhaps permanently, perhaps only temporarily.”<sup>6</sup> While refraining from over-indulging in lamenting one’s loss of home, Wood does consider loss to be involved, if a somewhat diluted, privileged loss which one has voluntarily submitted oneself to. It is this aspect of migration that I identify with: the subtle differences in cultural understanding, the sometimes awkward misuse or transposition of a word, the snatched memories of place (I find that sometimes these are not even places which hold significant

<sup>3</sup> James Wood, “On Not Going Home,” *London Review of Books* Vol. 36 No. 4 (2014), accessed 26 February, 2014, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n04/james-wood/on-not-going-home>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

personal associations, but rather gritty ambiances, fragments of streets, familiar faces, idioms or even cloud formations which conjure up feelings of home)... These memories or losses may lead to a certain sense of nostalgia or very occasionally, a feeling of impairment, yet predominantly, I live these as rich intersections of my culture, like positive nodes of diversity which instil in me (sometimes with amusement) a certain sense of pride in my cultural inheritance and identity, as if these occasional deviations are a subtle nod to a somewhat exotic background. So perhaps Wood's term of *loss* is lived positively for me: a loss becomes a gain, a deficiency becomes an advantage, a confusion becomes an often humorous idiosyncrasy.

I return then, to question whether *loss* is a word used correctly in my experience of moving and re-settling. Or am I prematurely underplaying a sense of loss without reflecting on it or acknowledging it? I have always been aware of the island-like condition of our family, isolated and far from our origins. Arriving in 1981, my parents had chosen New Zealand based on its lifestyle options and had no connections with anyone here. As children, we left behind our cousins, aunties, uncles, grandmothers and godparents. My parents left behind mothers, sisters, brothers, nieces and nephews, friends and colleagues. Once here, the five of us was all we had. We spoke French, we did very family-oriented excursions, we discovered our new country on every summer holiday and our Christmases were small and celebrated the evening before everyone else. I think the greatest loss (which was probably our gain in some equal-and-opposite way) was the fact that all we knew intimately as family was the five of us. I suggest then, that the term *loss* as Wood intends it, is indeed an experience I can relate with; however, having grown up with, and adapted to, cultural diversity, this loss is something which has become in some ways intricately linked with my identity. So while I recognise aspects of loss, I do not see them as contributing to a negative or disadvantaged state: they are part of my life and I would much rather embrace this aspect of my upbringing, for to do so allows me to experience the positive cultural privileges of my heritage and makes me who I am. My conclusion is therefore, that I would be hesitant to

utilise the term *loss* with regards to my experience, other than to view it a bit like a  $\pm$  symbol, where the loss is intrinsically and simultaneously linked with the gain.

Positioning myself, and understanding how my journey has influenced me, is an important aspect of my work vis-à-vis the concept of migration and displacement. It is worth considering that my artwork itself may be perceived as migratory in the sense of being a reflector of multiple cultural influences and therefore perhaps can be received within more than one location or frame of reference. However, the corresponding inverse of a too-general artwork that can be universally understood, is an individual response that loses itself by becoming *too* personally contextual, to the point that it is only of relevance to myself and perhaps my immediate family. Does the appropriate solution to this problem lie within the level of personal detail which is included (or excluded) from the works? Or should the work try to refer or allude to the experience of other migrants, or to the general experience of migration, yet without creating stereotypes or applying superficial associations? Art critic and historian Hal Foster, in his essay “The Artist as Ethnographer,” warns artists of the impossible complexities of the ethnographic mode in which one identifies with, projects upon, or romanticises a cultural or social group.<sup>7</sup> As an artist working in what could potentially be read as an ethnographic — perhaps autoethnographic — realm, there will be a duty for constant self-reflection and a conscious questioning of (re)positioning.

Aside from my own personal narrative, the wider theme of migration and cosmopolitanism is to be addressed; just as the local and the global have become two spheres forced closer and closer together over time, so the individual is to the collective, acknowledging, overlapping and recalibrating. Accordingly, my body of work will comprise of a number of aesthetic interventions that emerge from personal experience, yet will provide a means of critically reflecting on a global phenomenon.

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<sup>7</sup> Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1996), 306-307.



**suspension** | non-grounded | vulnerability | temporality



My primary school teacher, a burly local who took a keen interest in ensuring I achieve that which I am capable of, motioned me up to his desk after school one day. Aged twelve, I had written a story the day before in class, and this he held in his hands as he looked up at me. He pointed to two instances on the page where I had transposed the subject and the adverb, something not altogether unusual for me (even today). When read aloud, or shown, I can see there's something amiss, but more often than not, the dissonance might just slip by like a subtle underlying accent. My teacher had an answer though, and this he proffered willingly: "It's because you're not native to the land."

And so, with occasional reminders that my belonging was in fact to some other distant land, I made my way through younger life in New Zealand not altogether sure that my roots here were any deeper than two degrees above the ground.

That is not to say that I felt at all unwelcome or alien — quite the contrary. But, on occasions, just when I felt my path was assured, a few slips in the landscape opened up, throwing me off balance, and leading me to requestion the very depth and solidity of the cultural plane I had positioned myself on. This sensitivity faded the longer I remained in New Zealand and the deeper I felt connected to the land, the people, the culture; until innately I felt I belonged, strongly, without having to abandon my ancestral ties. This seemed to resonate no greater than at the age of eighteen, the legal age of adulthood, and the casting of my first vote in the New Zealand general election. I recall we were out of town that weekend. We stopped at an out-of-electorate voting booth. A queue had formed and an electoral officer cut a solemn figure, a large pounamu hanging from her neck, clipboard in hand, walking slowly up the line. She was observing people, searching their faces, but moving on silently. Her eyes eventually stopped at mine. "Will you be voting in the Maori electorate?" she asked. I attempted my finest nonchalant expression, but I am sure my initial surprise could not be disguised. In the

*Sometimes it feels like walking on an even surface, and every now and then you make a faux pas and it feels like you question the surface you walk on, or the reliability of the surface you are walking on... The surface or ground can also feel like you are in suspension a bit — not like higher than everyone else, but perhaps not as grounded. That you are more an observer than a participator. Until the more time passes, the more you feel like you are touching the ground.*

**Author's writing, 5 August 2013**

space of six years, so it seemed, I had now become ‘from round here’. My feet were now firmly anchored to the land: grounded.<sup>8</sup>

Ten years later, and that was to turn on its head. I was now in Switzerland, the land of my birth, the land of my maternal grandmother and my paternal grandfather. The land we were from, so I had heard my Papa say many a time to curious Kiwis. The exclusive Swiss passport was mine, my French passable, and my surname authentic. Yet I was aware that I wasn’t really from here. My first introductions often included a mention of recent arrival. Nouvelle-Zélande became the new exotic, and I tried to carefully tread the balance between the dual citizenships. I was Swiss when I needed to be, but for the most part I was Kiwi. The French and Sri Lankan had equal smatterings of exposure just for good measure, usually when the subject of conversation turned to my parents. My undoing came in the form of a friend and colleague, himself born in Portugal and raised in Switzerland by two Portuguese parents intent on returning to the ‘homeland’ one day. He was educated at a tertiary level in Portugal, but resided and worked in Switzerland, where his future prospects seemed more assured. “You’re not really a New Zealander at all,” he said. “You’re no more ‘Kiwi’ than I am Swiss.”

And so, once again, I was hovering two feet off the ground. Suspended.

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<sup>8</sup> This feeling of finding one’s place is resonant with other cultural notions of feeling at home; consider the Maori concept of *Tūrangawaewae*, literally *tūranga* (standing place), *waewae* (feet), commonly translated as ‘a place to stand.’



**Fig. 3** Sophie Hermann, *Dwell* [maquette] (2013)



**home** | sanctuary | stillness | soul





“For more and more of us, home has really less to do with a piece of soil than, you could say, with a piece of soul.”<sup>9</sup>

Essayist and novelist, Pico Iyer, having lived amongst multiple cultures (Indian, English, American, Japanese), is well known for his writings on home, identity and displacement. His discussion in his TED talk “Where is Home?” and his way of relating to place resonates with me. *What characterises home?* The notion of ‘home’ as defined in English is an all-encompassing term that is not translatable in French; several different words or phrases would need to be used to cover the multiple meanings of the singular word in English. Home as dwelling, as place, as belonging, as family, as country, are multiple facets of this concept. So how do we navigate these diverse definitions, rendered even more complex when we have more than one ‘home’? Is home a specific place (or places), or is there a broader perspective? Iyer’s response to this reflects an element of contemplation: “I am not rooted in a place, I think, so much as in certain values and affiliations and friendships that I carry everywhere I go; my home is both invisible and portable.”<sup>10</sup> Home in this definition is less concerned with the physical or the tangible, and seems more suggestive of the soul.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, an appropriate artistic response to home and place as plural may need to address the human spirit.

In keeping with this way of approaching the concept of home as something more ethereal and immaterial than we usually tend to think, note how Iyer discusses the aspect of calm: “...I do think it's only by stopping movement that you can see where to go. And it's only by stepping out of your life and the world that you can see what you most deeply care about

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<sup>9</sup> Pico Iyer, “Where is Home?” talk presented at the TED conference TEDGlobal, Edinburgh, Scotland, June 2013, accessed 30 November, 2013, [http://www.ted.com/talks/pico\\_ier\\_where\\_is\\_home](http://www.ted.com/talks/pico_ier_where_is_home).

<sup>10</sup> Angie Brenner, “Literature – Interview – Pico Iyer – Global Writer, Heart & Soul,” accessed 30 November, 2013, <http://www.wildriversreview.com/INTERVIEW/Pico-Iyer/PEN/angie-brenner/2-10>.

<sup>11</sup> See Gaston Bachelard’s definition of the home pertaining to the soul, dreams and poetry in his book *The Poetics of Space*.



**Fig. 4** Sophie Hermann, *Suspended paper* (2013)

and find a home.”<sup>12</sup> So there is this idea that stillness may be the antidote for the chaos of today’s globalised world, ruled by connections, speed and information. While this era is defined in part by increased migration and movement, the opposite is also seemingly significant. The act of moving, of relocating, of resettling, are often stressful, busy times; correspondingly there must also be room for moments of contemplation, of thought, of deeper inquiry. Perhaps this element of silence and rest and repose is as important to find in my work, as the element of movement and displacement. They may seem at odds with each other, but I see them as intertwined: in order to appreciate silence we must have had noise and rapid change; in order to make important decisions, these would have been pondered during moments of thoughtfulness and quiet. They are indeed complementary and necessary. In another essay entitled “Chapels,” Iyer summarises very well this tension between chaos and repose: “...I started to see that no movement made sense unless it had a changelessness beneath it; that all our explorations were only as rich as the still place we brought them back to.”<sup>13</sup> Which evoked the idea for me of an object or space poised in a potential moment of displacement, or captured in a still moment between movements.

Korean artist Do-Ho Suh has created a number of nylon installations which seem to have this essence of dream-like stillness. *The Perfect Home II* (2003) is worthy of examination to understand how this artist expresses his life commuting between different countries (see Fig. 5). The nylon replica of his Manhattan apartment, stitched together in a traditional Korean style, allows viewers to ‘walk through’ the dwelling, light diffusing through the sheer fabric and details of sockets, plumbing and hinges adding to the false sense of reality. Art critic Adrian Searle sees the impermanent poetic materiality of Suh’s work as reflective of his itinerant, non-grounded lifestyle: “The apartment is weightless and translucent, like the house of an invisible man... Perhaps this insubstantiality reflects the mind of a man who is yet

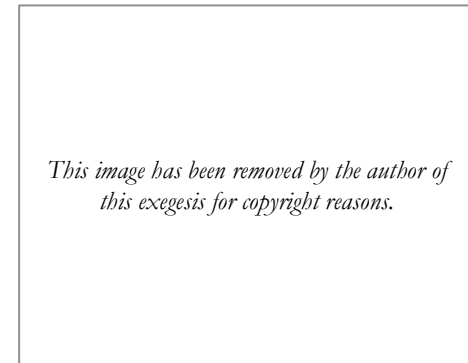
<sup>12</sup> Pico Iyer, “Where is Home?” (talk presented at the TED conference TEDGlobal, Edinburgh, Scotland, June 2013), accessed 30 November, 2013, [http://www.ted.com/talks/pico\\_ayer\\_where\\_is\\_home](http://www.ted.com/talks/pico_ayer_where_is_home).

<sup>13</sup> Pico Iyer, “Chapels,” in *The Best American Essays 2011*, ed. Edwidge Danticat and Robert Atwan (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), 93.

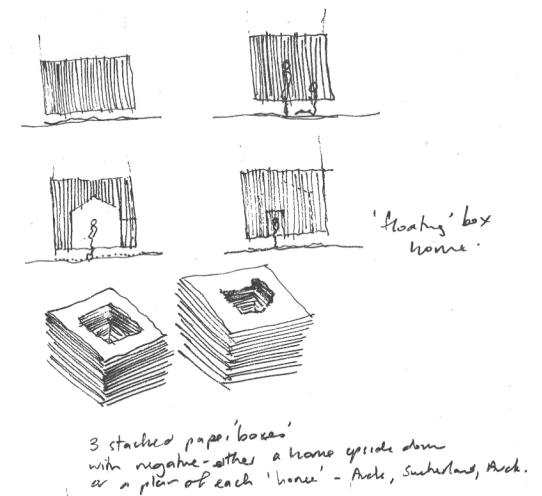
uncertain where he is, a life not so much in exile as in transit, between countries, cultures, languages.”<sup>14</sup> The mobility of the work, which can be packed into a suitcase and displayed elsewhere in the world, is reflective of Suh’s constant displacement, and echoes Iyer’s perceptions of a ‘portable home.’ Suh’s ‘home’ speaks clearly of a poetic displacement in its material form, method and subject matter. The literal work acts as a metaphor for Suh’s life, conjuring up images of personal space, attachment to home and longing for place within a life of movement.

So what then, would be a metaphor for my life? How have my own thoughts of home, belonging and moving impacted on the way I approach life? And how does this impact on my making? I am mindful of a subconscious awareness of my current living situation and my future. While it is not so much a lack of commitment to place or situation, it is a reflection of a more transient lifestyle, the potential to easily pack up my belongings and move on, either within the same country or elsewhere. Packing my boxes to return here from Switzerland I also had a sense of the tangible reality of my personal belongings: all my energies became focussed around the mass of objects in order to send them by mail without incurring expensive postage costs, and also to keep the boxes into manageable sizes and weights (see Fig. 2). This contrast between weight and weightlessness, bound and free, object and void were very palpable for me. The presence of the cardboard packing box is still vivid in my mind... During this vein of thinking I encountered Rachel Whiteread’s installation, *Embankment* (2005), cubes of plastic cast out of used cardboard boxes, commemorating the artist’s experience of packing up her deceased mother’s belongings. In my case however, the question was more one of inhabitation: what would it be like to ‘inhabit’ the box as a temporary space or home? Layers of paper may become the container, as if wrapping up an object in tissue paper and placing in a box; the space created is negative space, suggestive of an occupation, or a trace of a previous object. The space carved out inside is intimate; it is

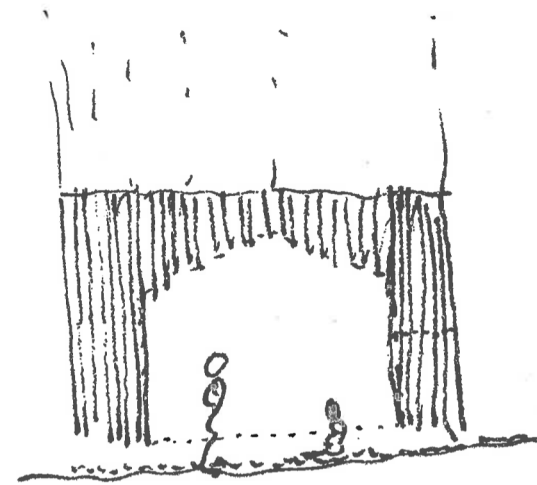
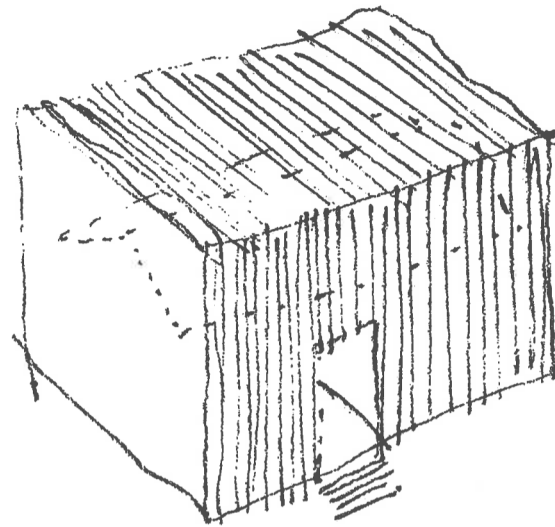
<sup>14</sup> Adrian Searle, “Have you Ironed your Room Yet?” *The Guardian*, last modified April 23, 2002, <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/critic/feature/0,1169,728487,00.html>.



**Fig. 5** Do-Ho Suh, *The Perfect Home II* (2003)



**Fig. 6** Sophie Hermann, *Dwell* [sketches] (2013)



'HOME' xsection

WILKOMMEN  
BIENVENUE  
WELCOME  
HABERE MAI

WELCOME  
MAT  
AT DOOR -

Fig. 7 Sophie Hermann, *Dwell* [sketches] (2013)

of a scale that suggests a small room but at the same time an entire house. The space-for-one invites contemplation and reflection on notions of home, of one's own home, either near or far. It references place but at the same time a non-place; it is equally suggestive of specific place as it is generic.<sup>15</sup> But what is this space? If not a home, what then? A sanctuary? A place for contemplation, for repose, for stillness? *Dwell* (2013)<sup>16</sup> is an attempt to visualise this space and to capture the essence of ephemerality which seems to be echoed in the contemporary theoretical and creative contexts discussed (see *Figs. 3, 6, 7, 9*).

When reading Iyer's essay, "Chapels," I was reminded of an alpine chapel in Switzerland that I wandered into during a tramp: I was struck by the profound sound of no sound, of no background hum or white noise, the absence of those noises to which we have so become accustomed. Being in a space like that reminded me of how little silence we experience in our lives, how we have adjusted to living in a noisy world... or at least become used to. An interpretation of this in my practice may be seen in the salt carpet in *Dwell* and *In transit* (2014), which, while it acts as an attempt to ground the suspended installation and to define it in a sense, also has a quality of acoustic regulation: it is reminiscent of how falling snow in Switzerland dampens and muffles all extraneous sound (see *Figs. 3, 8, 9, 20, 26*). The transition from the existing ground surface onto the salt surface will create an audible contrast; one's pace will no longer echo, and there will be a greater awareness as the body crosses this threshold.

In sum, to consider displacement and migration without considering the issue of home (with all its corresponding connotations) is to detach the concept, reducing it to mechanics and leaving it devoid of soul. If modernity, as academic Nikos Papastergiadis claims, gave rise to the idea that "home was no longer something you returned to, but rather a place you could

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<sup>15</sup> See Marc Augé's book *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, the title of which gave currency to the term 'non-place.'

<sup>16</sup> *Dwell* (2013) is an unrealised installation to date, yet exists in the realm of sketches, maquettes, photographs and images.

never quite reach,”<sup>17</sup> then in our contemporary globalised era, home and cultural identity are not static, confined, inaccessible states, but a fluid, portable renewal of ideas.<sup>18</sup>

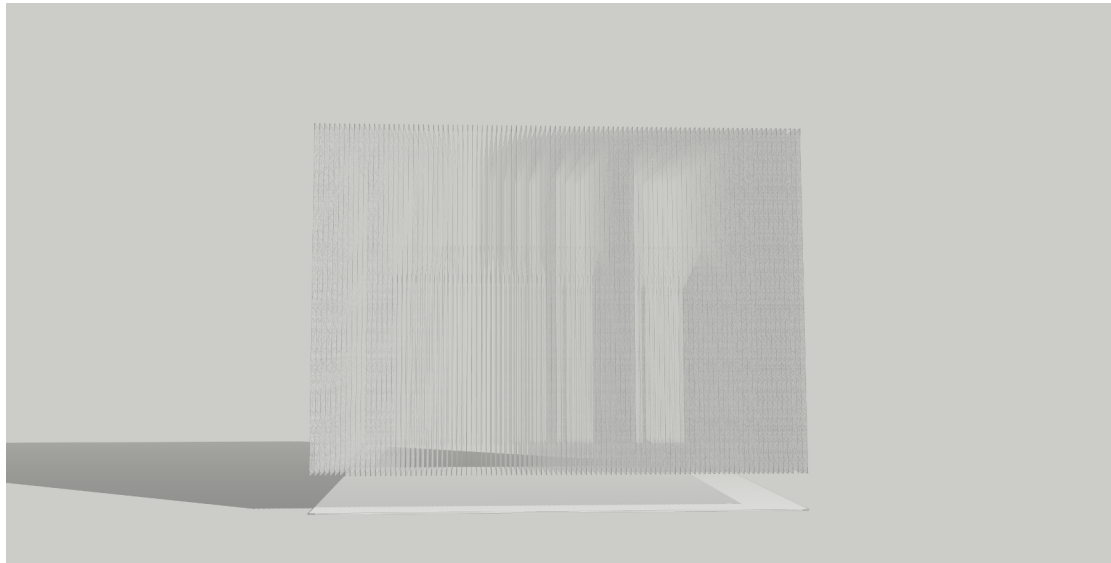


**Fig. 8** Sophie Hermann, *In transit* [detail of snow-like salt] (2014)

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<sup>17</sup> Nikos Papastergiadis, *Spatial Aesthetics: Art, Place and the Everyday* (Amsterdam, Institute of Network Cultures: 2010), 46.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 51 – 52.



**Fig. 9** Sophie Hermann, *Dwell* [computer render] (2013)





**shadow** | lightness | skin | wrapping



When exploring material, the honouring of that element requires one to consider the material in a contemplative manner, for it is with renewed examination and wonder that we may discover the very qualities that further activate and complement the work as a whole. And so it is this celebration I seek with my tissue paper investigations.

Tissue paper always seems to have a permanently slightly wrinkled effect, like an aged skin bearing the marks of maturity and life experience. Constant re-use only adds layer upon layer of further marks, bends, folds, embedding new stories of packing and unwrapping to the paper each time. In itself, the paper is not considered precious; it is often discarded or set aside for future re-use. However, its value lies within its purpose as a means of protection and preservation of precious, often fragile, belongings.

In exploring this material as an artistic medium, I am unpacking the idea of what is wrapped and what is unwrapped; what is protector and what is protected, what is weightless and what is heavy, what is unbreakable and what is fragile. Notions of what is inside and what is not, reflect also the idea of belonging to place as opposed to experiencing place as an outsider. There is a condition of fragility present in the translucency and lightness of the tissue paper, representative of the status of migration and suspension, of mobility and transience, of past and present. The subtle shadow, the almost-visible, the hint of a background or perceived depth...

An early work, which I consider to be the first installation in the series, was a simple hanging of four sheets of tissue paper in the studio, set off from the wall behind it (see *Figs. 4, 12, 13, 14*). What was an exercise in observing the movement of the paper, its relationship to itself and the sheet beside it, and the effect of the sheets becoming one grouped object, became much more poetic when, unexpectedly, the sun came out and ‘activated’ the work. Immediately the installation took on a life of its own: the natural light through the paper



**Fig. 10** Sophie Hermann  
[experiments with tissue paper]  
(2014)



**Fig. 11** Sophie Hermann  
[experiments with tissue paper]  
(2013)



**Fig. 12** Sophie Hermann, *Suspended paper* (2013)



**Fig. 13** Sophie Hermann, *Suspended paper* [under various light conditions] (2013)



**Fig. 14** Sophie Hermann, *Suspended paper* [detail with site and self] (2013)

*“Each material has its own shadow. The shadow of stone is not the same as that of a brittle autumn leaf. The shadow penetrates the material and radiates its message.”*

Sverre Fehn, “Has a Doll Life?” *Perspecta*, vol. 24 (1988): 47

highlighted its weightlessness and translucency; shadows played on both the sheets and the wall behind; a light air current through the space made the installation appear to ‘breathe,’ and this movement was echoed on the wall with a darker shadow. The intensity of the sunlight was not constant, creating a dimming and sharpening of the shadow. Sound came into play as the breeze rustled the paper. There was a moment of awakening, both of the work and from the artist within.

I was reminded of Japanese writer Jun’ichiro Tanizaki and his appreciation of the half-light, the poetry of the shadow and the ephemerality of the in-between condition: “We find beauty not in the thing itself but in the patterns of shadows, the light and the darkness, that one thing against another creates.”<sup>19</sup> This simple installation was just that: the material form of the work itself became in a sense a ‘shadow’ to its own shadow; its completeness was made whole by the gain of light and shadow. The mirroring of the shadow movement with the gentle swaying of the paper created a duet, each half coexisting with the other. At times when the light was at its most subtle, the gaze was refocussed upon the paper. Conversely, when the light became very intense, the darkness of the shadow came into prominence. Further depth was created when the site itself became projected into the work: the shadow of the windowpane frames of the studio became a grid within which *Suspended paper* (2013) was located. In one documented photo, the body also wove its way into this projection: the shadow of my own presence (see Fig. 14). This image is of some importance as much is revealed about the work: the time and space in which it exists and the creator behind it. The physical suspension of the work is mirrored by a metaphorical suspension of time and place.

<sup>19</sup> Jun’ichiro Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*, trans. Thomas J. Harper and Edward G. Seidensticker (Sedgwick: Leete’s Island Books, 1977), 30.

These early explorations with suspended tissue paper were a major influence in the direction of my work. Larger installations were conceived based on these ideas of light and shadow, skin and wrapping, and *Journey/Memoir* was one such work, installed in June 2014 for *Talkweek*. Due to constraints with time and space, I did not manage to push this work further with lighting experimentation, but a later work, *In transit* (2014), was conceived, in part, to consider the paper under various lighting conditions and witness the accompanying shadow plays, celebrating the use of the tissue paper (see Fig. 20).

If paper is to be my craft, then it is necessary to understand and exploit the intrinsic qualities in that material which will bring the poetry into the work. Its lightness, epidermal translucency and shadow plays will not only breathe life into the work; it will breathe a greater sense of depth into the associations of temporality, vulnerability and fragility.



**Fig. 15** Sophie Hermann [experiments with tissue paper] (2014)



**Fig. 16** Sophie Hermann, *Journey/Memoir* [detail of paper laminations] (2014)



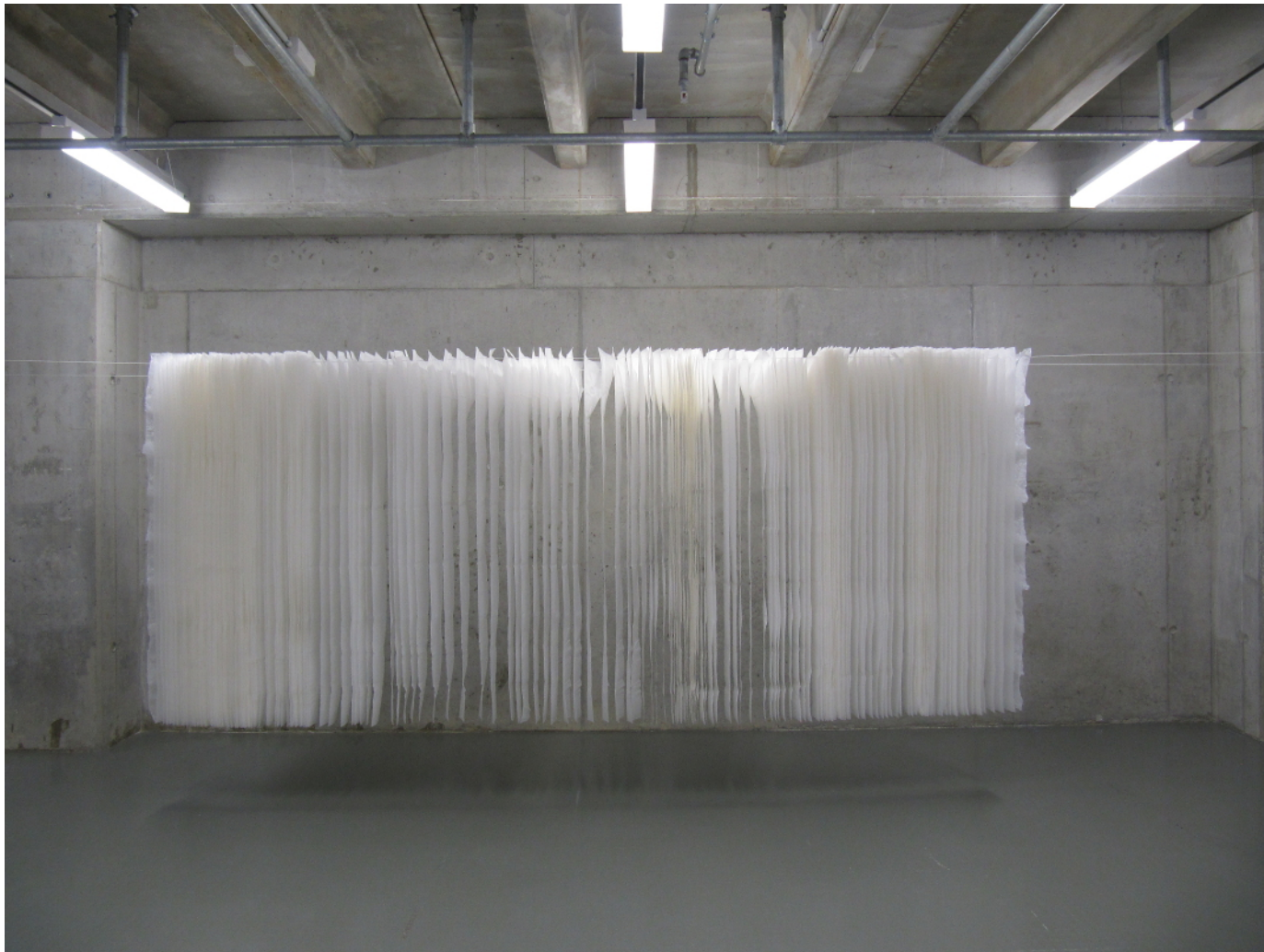


**Fig. 17** Sophie Hermann [experiments with hanging tissue paper, salt] (2014)

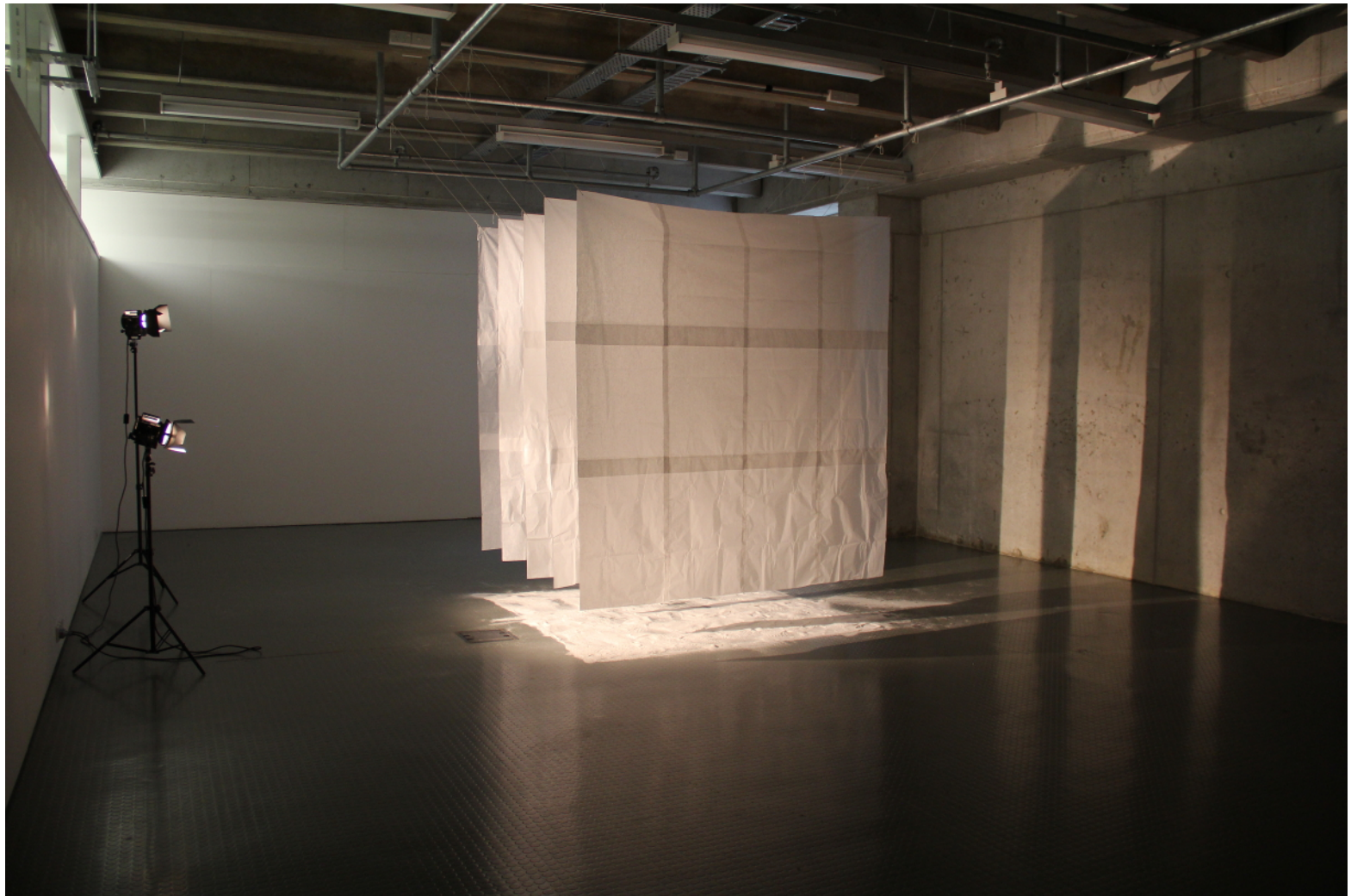


**Fig. 18** Sophie Hermann [experiments with hanging tissue paper] (2014)





**Fig. 19** Sophie Hermann, *Journey/Memoir* (2014)



**Fig. 20** Sophie Hermann, *In transit* (2014)

**migratory aesthetics** | meaning-making | exposing process



With regard to discipline, installation art by its very nature has qualities which allow it to not only represent certain subject matter, but also to express this subject matter in its process, from construction through to the experience of the works. It is this expression of, and experience of, process which is of personal interest within the realm of this research. Writer and critic John Potts, in his article “The Theme of Displacement in Contemporary Art,” suggests that “the most striking art works... expose the processes of meaning-making.”<sup>20</sup> He uses examples of contemporary artists engaging with ideas of migration and displacement to demonstrate this role of process: Francis Alys’s nomadic performance works (see Fig. 21), Ai Weiwei’s mass transportation of Chinese citizens, Allan Sekula’s maritime photographs of global trade, Santiago Sierra’s replaying of inequality in human interventions and Oscar Munoz’s ‘disappearing drawings’ in his video installations.<sup>21</sup>

Theorist Sam Durrant and artist Catherine M. Lord in their introduction to *Essays in Migratory Aesthetics: Cultural Practices Between Migration and Art-making* expand on this idea, suggesting that the judgement or success of a work is dependent on the level of engagement with the process of migration and that it may figuratively (and in some cases, literally) become a product of migration: “The art work itself *becomes* migratory, the degree to which it mimics — at the level of form rather than content — that which it sets out to represent.”<sup>22</sup> The examples offered by Durrant and Lord to illustrate this concept concentrate largely on moving image or literary works; to understand how this might be expressed in an installation-based practice, I explored Marcel Duchamp’s *Boîte-en-valise* (1935-1946), and more recent examples: Rene Yung’s *Changes and Disappearances* (2004), Do-Ho Suh’s *The Perfect Home II* (2003), Mona Hatoum’s *Map* (1998) and Doris Salcedo’s *Shibboleth* (2007). These case studies — whether it is Duchamp’s ‘portable museum’; Yung’s words of migrant

<sup>20</sup> John Potts, “The Theme of Displacement in Contemporary Art,” *E-rea*, no. 9.2 (2012): 4, accessed March 24, 2013, doi:10.4000/erea.2475.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 5-9

<sup>22</sup> Sam Durrant and Catherine M. Lord, *Essays in Migratory Aesthetics: Cultural Practices Between Migration and Art-Making* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007): 13, Ebray e-book.

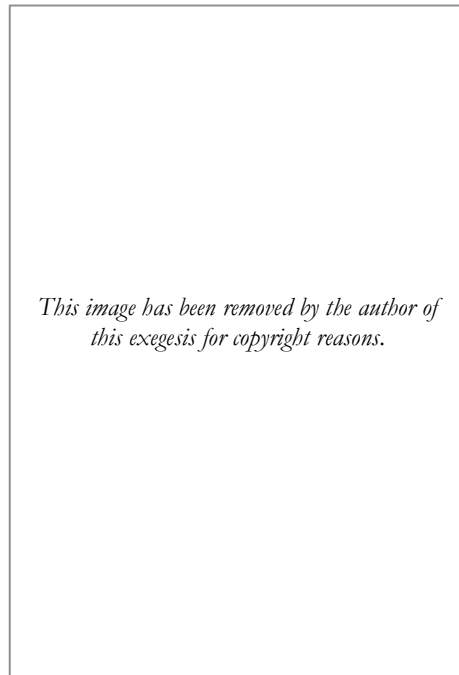
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**Fig. 21** Francis Alys, *Paradox of Praxis 1* (1997)

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**Fig. 22** Mona Hatoum, *Map* (1998)

workers wearing away and disappearing; Suh's mobile 'home' (see Fig. 5); the glass marbles underfoot in Hatoum's *Map* deconstructing borders (see Fig. 22); the fissure of Salcedo's work creating a sense of negotiation, navigation and segregation across this divide (see Fig. 23) — illustrate how the strategy of exposing and aesthetically making visible the process of the idea is not merely concerned with *representing* the notion of displacement, but by the art itself *being* displaced or causing a displacement.<sup>23</sup>



**Fig. 23** Doris Salcedo, *Shibboleth* (2007)

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<sup>23</sup> John Potts, "The Theme of Displacement in Contemporary Art," *E-rea*, 9.2 (2012): 5, accessed March 24, 2013, doi:10.4000/erea.2475.

**site** | place | displace





For the cosmopolite, place may be both here and elsewhere. It may be one's immediate surroundings, and simultaneously not. Site may be considered an abstract home which one carries within oneself; to place and dis-place, to root and uproot. To consider the notion of site and place for those with more than one home is to potentially recognise these as multiple vectors of personal reference, acknowledging both the familiar and the foreign (or perhaps, the intimate and the familiar). If we are to consider this from a contemporary perspective, there is a need to examine site and place on both a local and a global scale.

The concept of displaced art sits within the wider context of the globalisation of art and the increasing dispersion of art in all of its mediated forms: art biennales, travelling exhibitions and availability and diffusion of video installations. Cultural theorist and video artist Mieke Bal, in her essay "Lost in Space, Lost in the Library" discusses the impact of globalisation on art and the effect of this on site and place.<sup>24</sup> She declares that globalisation is the antithesis of context and cultural location, and asserts that art historians who have resolutely remained firm to analysing art practices as expressions of genius loci have failed to keep pace with contemporary life.<sup>25</sup> Bal recommends these art historians or literary critics modify their positions in parallel with global transformations, as "such a commitment to stay engaged with the present seems to me to be the only responsible way to be historical."<sup>26</sup> I find this statement intriguing: is Bal challenging the idea of only reading works as appropriate to provenance or context? Is it not specifically within the local that these works are intended? Or is Bal pronouncing precisely the importance of transcending the boundaries of the local? If we were to agree with Bal's position, we would have to concede that there are implicit challenges with such an endeavour. Durrant and Lord, in addressing the issue, acknowledge that the ambiguities associated with site-specific artworks being displayed to global audiences should not be ignored, which potentially include resultant loss of social, cultural

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<sup>24</sup> Mieke Bal, "Lost in Space, Lost in the Library," in *Essays in Migratory Aesthetics: Cultural Practices Between Migration and Art-Making*, ed. Sam Durrant and Catherine M. Lord (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007): 25, Ebray e-book.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

and political understanding.<sup>27</sup> They also draw attention to the dilemma of language barriers where “the artwork’s cultural and political currency requires translation, or indeed may not be open to such transformations, as there may no ‘original’ to keep intact.”<sup>28</sup> These points raised frame the territory of this research in order to consider the site, context and dissemination, and indeed how much is understood by the audience in terms of the cultural symbology in my works such as *Keeping time* (see Figs. 27, 35 and related discussion in the chapter chronicle / methodology / documentation / process).

The arguments by Bal, Durrant and Lord acknowledge art in a wider global ‘place’ or context. However, to take a step back and inward, there is a yearning to acknowledge and site the self in relationship to the wider world. My position as a citizen, not of one place, but several, is increasingly common and the implications of this may signify positive outcomes of being displaced. Greek philosopher Diogenes of Sinope’s famous assertion “I am a citizen of the world”<sup>29</sup> is one which many immigrants may identify with. The global ethical principle of cosmopolitanism is expanded on more recently by philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah. In his essay “The Case for Contamination,” Appiah extols the benefits of belonging to a global world, and not limiting oneself to parochial views of belonging, beliefs and place.<sup>30</sup> Rather, he advocates a respectful embodiment of inclusive relationships and diversity, not just of the present, but as an evolving condition reflective of globalised societies.<sup>31</sup> “I am urging that we should learn about people in other places, take an interest in their civilizations, their arguments, their errors, their achievements, not because that will bring us to agreement but because it will help us get used to one another – something we have a powerful need to do in

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<sup>27</sup> Sam Durrant and Catherine M. Lord, *Essays in Migratory Aesthetics: Cultural Practices Between Migration and Art-Making* (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2007): 15, Ebray e-book.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Global Citizenship,” *Fordham Law Review*, vol. 75, issue 5 (2007): 2375, accessed April 30, 2013, <http://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/flr/vol75/iss5/3/>.

<sup>30</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, “The Case for Contamination,” *New York Times*, last modified January 1, 2006, [http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/01/magazine/01cosmopolitan.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/01/magazine/01cosmopolitan.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

this globalized era.”<sup>32</sup> This concept is relevant in considering what displacement and migration might mean in today’s globally connected world and the impact on how cultures evolve and the way we perceive these changes. Appiah’s principles also imply an avoidance of over-sentimental, nostalgic, or parochial views of identity and place. This is a strong argument advanced by social scientist and geographer Doreen Massey in her essay “A Global Sense of Place”.<sup>33</sup> Time-space compression, she maintains, is a current phenomenon due to globalised exchange and movement, and affects our perception and understanding of place and locality.<sup>34</sup> I find this of interest because immigrants, especially in ethnically-diverse centres, have a pivotal role in contributing to the character of place and community, and Massey’s definition provides for a very inclusive model for those displaced: “It is a sense of place, an understanding of ‘its character,’ which can only be constructed by linking that place to places beyond. A progressive sense of place would recognize that, without being threatened by it. What we need, it seems to me, is a global sense of the local, a global sense of place.”<sup>35</sup>

So with these relevant global and local perspectives in mind, how does this translate to my installation practice? Initial deliberation centred around the concept of multiplicity of place. On the one hand, I am siting myself and my work in Auckland, yet open to the possibilities that as my own personal story goes beyond the Kiwi narrative, there may be, accordingly, references to other ancestry, culture and place. Would my work transcend the boundaries of the built environment? Would it be mobile, adapting to new spaces, mimicking the life of a migrant? If it exists beyond Auckland, New Zealand, (or regardless of this), would there be any complications of translation in both a literal and figurative sense? These questions were

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<sup>32</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, “The Case for Contamination,” *New York Times*, last modified January 1, 2006, [http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/01/magazine/01cosmopolitan.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/01/magazine/01cosmopolitan.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

<sup>33</sup> Doreen Massey, “A Global Sense of Place,” in *Space, Place and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 146.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 155



**Fig. 24** Sophie Hermann, *Journey/Memoir*  
[detail of provisional fixing] (2014)

my companions as I began my explorations, yet they did not necessarily foreshadow or become the driver of the work. These ideas became interwoven with the echo of Potts<sup>36</sup> and Durrant and Lord's<sup>37</sup> premise of exposing process, and as a result of these musings, *Journey/Memoir* was conceived as a migratory installation: one which would adapt to its site temporarily, but would then flat-pack down to essential components, go into transit, and then move to the next phase of the journey (see *Figs. 19, 25, 34, 37*). A site was chosen for the 'birth' of the journey: a large room in the bowels of AUT's WM building, known as Testspace. This site was chosen as it responded to some of the key spatial and pragmatic requirements for the work. As it was, adaptations to the 'ideal' or 'imagined' installation were necessary when occupying this site; decisions were made based on the conditions available. The concrete wall provided an aesthetically strong backdrop to the white tissue paper upon which shadows could fall, but was inconvenient insofar as holes could not be drilled into it. The solution was to string the cords between one length of the space to the other (a distance of about 11 metres). The left-over length of cord was not cut, but left dangling, suggestive of its future site which may have a whole different set of variables (see *Fig. 24*). And if one looked closely, the arrangement of the metal hook eyes in the concrete wall were randomly placed, due to utilising the position of pre-existing threaded holes. This installation has been conceived with these pragmatic concerns in mind: the language of temporality and portability are read throughout the process of making, installing and displacing *Journey/Memoir*. The materials and process reflect this: the supporting structure (cord and line) from which it hangs is designed to be collapsible and lightweight in order for ease of transport; the paper which forms the laminations can be quickly threaded onto the tensile structure, but equally rapidly disassembled and folded down into parts (see *Fig. 34*).

<sup>36</sup> John Potts, "The Theme of Displacement in Contemporary Art," *E-rea*, no. 9.2 (2012): 4, accessed March 24, 2013, doi:10.4000/erea.2475.

<sup>37</sup> Sam Durrant and Catherine M. Lord, *Essays in Migratory Aesthetics: Cultural Practices Between Migration and Art-Making* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007): 13, Ebray e-book.



**Fig. 25** Sophie Hermann, *Journey/Memoir* (2014)

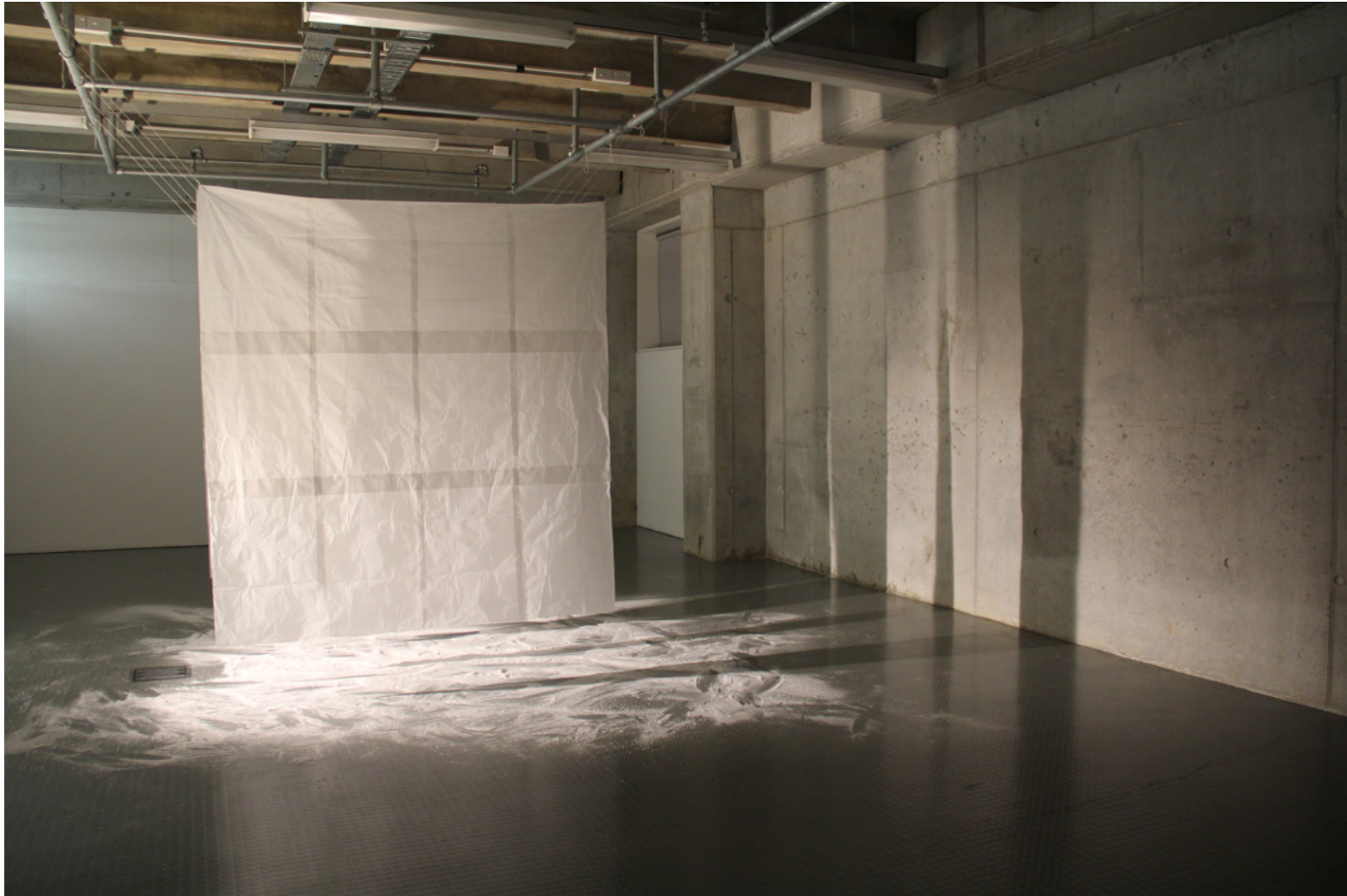
With these aspects in mind, I consider site as temporary but specific. Due to its migratory nature, *Journey/Memoir* may be responding to site, but not necessarily address place per se, and therefore lacks specific cultural or historical references. But I think this is precisely what the work is about: by trying to be featureless or generic in order to be universal and adaptable, it expresses something of what it might be like to those displaced who can fit in anywhere, nomad-like. But to achieve that, it has to be light and almost bodiless: there, but not fully. *Journey/Memoir* inhabits the space, even adapts to the space, but is then freed to move on to another space, to migrate and adapt to a new condition elsewhere. Each time, the work, because it isn't completely bodiless, bears the traces of its own migration, extra crinkles in the paper, markings of its journey. This opens up possibilities for the (re)configuration of the work in a new environment, the prospective site somehow impacting on the way a future iteration of *Journey/Memoir* could be installed and experienced.

Site in contemporary art practices, as curator and art critic Miwon Kwon asserts in her essay, "One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity," can be understood to operate on a number of levels concurrently.<sup>38</sup> There is the reference to the physical site and location of the work, a more grounded and tangible space, a framing of place even; and there is the site of discourse, an implied trajectory that is fluid and overlapping, a plane of exchange which is more conceptual in nature, and which has become the prominent definition and position of practice in most recent decades.<sup>39</sup> Thus *Journey/Memoir*, while pertaining (at least temporarily) to a specific location, its site for cultural discourse opens up possibilities for the

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<sup>38</sup> Miwon Kwon, "One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity," *October*, vol. 80, spring (1997): 92. Also see Kwon's book-length expansion of this essay, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.



**Fig. 26** Sophie Hermann, *In transit* [detail of experimentation with salt extended beyond object to acknowledge installation within site] (2014)



operation of site beyond place.<sup>40</sup>

An earlier installation, *Keeping time*, sought place not necessarily through site, but through materials (see Figs. 27, 35). A 'visual calendar' of time and place, this was an autobiographical work, referencing seasons and the notion of time across hemispheres. Small mounds of soil, salt and pohutukawa stamen told the narrative of my own memories and references to place. While soil and salt have personal associations, to the casual observer they may be read as 'global' materials or surfaces. The crimson pohutukawa stamen however have no such distant or universal connotations. I wished to celebrate the idea of the global and the local co-existing in a similar formal arrangement but engendering quite different responses. Site in this installation was referring to another place, such as the origins of the material and the allusions to memories of elsewhere.

The idea of displacement (or dis-placement, with the prefix signifying an apartness, or reversal of place) can literally refer to a transposed or shifted item, a changeling. To consider displacement in this way is suggestive of the rogue element which occasionally emerges in the migrant, awkwardly translating some alien characteristic into a new context. One such illustration in practice is to consider introducing a 'foreign' element into my work (foreign of course being subjective: to some, the 'exotic' is familiar and vice versa). When contemplating *Dwell*, there was the idea of bringing something from the current site or installation locality into the next stage of the journey. For example, a pohutukawa 'carpet' may be exhibited in Switzerland, referencing the location of the previous New Zealand location of the work; whereas the installation in its post-Switzerland journey could comprise of larch needles; and

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<sup>40</sup> Likewise, the site-specific artwork, *L Blocks* (2014), commissioned to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the University of Waikato (see *Appendices*, Figs. 52, 53, 54, 55, 56), sought to ground the work by referencing immediate site surroundings through text carved into large timber L-shaped blocks. However, its site of exchange — the recognition of genius loci, of belonging and welcome, of reflection and repose, of time and timelessness — is the primary platform for which this installation is created.

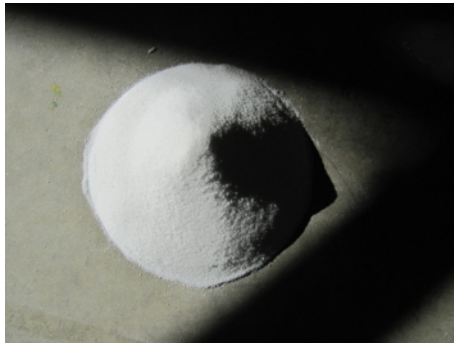




**Fig. 27** Sophie Hermann, *Keeping time* (2014)



**Fig. 28** Sophie Hermann [pohutukawa stamen] (2014)



**Fig. 28** Sophie Hermann, *Keeping time* [detail of salt mound] (2014)

so on and so forth. Even regional or highly-specific local references could be celebrated: an urban installation in Auckland may be referenced in a future coastal setting in the same city, for example. In this way, the transposition of a material from elsewhere indicates a displacement of some sort, in a true sense as well as symbolically, reminding us of what we leave behind and what we take with us when we are ourselves displaced. With this strategy, there would need to be a careful and somewhat reasoned approach to the choice of material, and to ensure the presence of this is not merely an appropriation of culture or place, but in some way intrinsic to the narrative. To navigate this, the selected matter may have a collaborative aspect in the decision-making process, where the element is not imposed on a site or culture, but sought. Moreover, the very nature of the installation being a fragile, weathered object as opposed to a bold, assertive mass indicates a delicate proposal, a temporary inhabitant, freed from the imperial overtones of an unwilling intrusion.

Li Xiaodong's installation in "Sensing Spaces: Architecture Reimagined" (2014) at the Royal Academy of Arts in London utilised this sense of displacement of materials to contrast with the experience of the works (see Fig. 30). His use of vertically stacked twigs to create a sequential impression of space, references the Liyuan Library, a project he completed in 2011. The setting for this library is in the rural environment of a Chinese village, surrounded by tranquillity and nature. The use of this local material in his London installation however, had quite a different perspective in this urban environment. Li's interest in bringing the twigs into the gallery space was to consciously create "a de-familiarised environment"<sup>41</sup> with a natural element from rural China contrasting with the metropolitan textures of stone and concrete. The intent to 'lose' the participant with this displacement served to highlight the orientation one may subsequently sense in the Zen Garden, which was revealed at the end of

<sup>41</sup> *Sensing Spaces: Architecture Reimagined*, directed by Candida Richardson (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2014), video (online), accessed July 4, 2014, <http://www.archdaily.com/475585/siza-souto-de-moura-kuma-reflect-on-their-sensing-spaces-exhibitions/>.

the journey through this installation.<sup>42</sup> Li's use of material to create a sense of displacement referenced his Chinese cultural background, but was also a key element in the experiential understanding of the work.

The issue of representing site, place and displacement is complex; knowing where the limits of personal reference to these exist, and where the global context is significant, will be important in order to draw meaningful parallels with the local setting for the work and the understanding of how this work transcends that territory.

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**Fig. 30** Li Xiaodong, *Sensing spaces installation* (2014)

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<sup>42</sup> Rory Stott, "Siza, Souta de Moura, Kuma Reflect on Their 'Sensing Spaces' Exhibition," accessed July 4, 2014, <http://www.archdaily.com/475585/siza-souto-de-moura-kuma-reflect-on-their-sensing-spaces-exhibitions/>.



**experience** | sensory | space | body



“It’s not possible for an architect to design a space – such a concept does not exist. Instead, we design the thresholds and the limits: the walls, windows, doors and so on. I’m interested in designing the elements that give the impression of space.”<sup>43</sup>

Architect Souto de Moura’s assertion rings true: architects are in the business of creating the elements which *delineate* space, rather than space itself. This statement goes beyond the obvious; to consider these elements as frames or separators of environment leads to a re-thinking of space itself. Equal attention is given to the positive space (for argument’s sake, the built components) as for the negative space (the space either side of those components). The *impression of space* de Moura speaks of could also be interpreted as an *experience of space*.

Likewise, *Journey/Memoir* and *In transit* (while not architecture per se) were considered in equal parts built material (sculptural) as non-built space (experiential). The created form (layers of tissue paper, suspended) results in an experience of space, of light, of sound, of emotion. The lightweight nature of the paper reflects any air movement present: a displacement of subtle currents of air beside and around the paper equates to a physical displacement of the paper (see *Figs. 31, 32*). Sheets hung vertically appear to ‘breathe’, their shadow mirroring this motion. In this way the presence of a body becomes an integral part of the installation; without this interaction, the work could be seen as still or lifeless, yet its ‘breath’ arrives in the form of an actor / interactor. I see the presence of a body in this installation as vital: it is the emotive response, the catalyst, or the breath in the work. It enacts the poetic displacement. Within the passage of *Journey/Memoir* one would become aware of the body as generator of air movement and therefore the movement of the hanging sheets. Perhaps we might be tempted to adjust our own movements as we see the installation reacting subtly to our displacements. There is an awareness and emphasis on the

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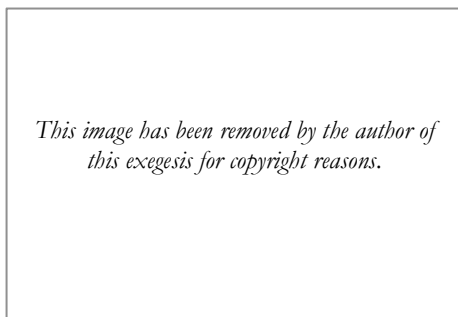
<sup>43</sup> Royal Academy of Arts, “Sensing Spaces: Architecture Reimagined, Exhibition in Focus,” 25 January - 6 April 2014, accessed July 4, 2014, <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/exhibition/4>.



**Fig. 31** Sophie Hermann, *In transit* (2014)



**Fig. 32** Sophie Hermann, *Journey/Memoir* [video still] (2014)



**Fig. 33** Ann Hamilton, *The event of a thread* (2012-2013)

performative aspect of the body as acting on an object, even as an unconscious participator. Equally there is a heightened awareness of the senses: sound, touch, visual movement. The movement of the paper creates a soft, whispering echo; this may be juxtaposed with the sound of our own body moving in space, and the footfall on ground.

Finnish architect, Juhani Pallasmaa, in his book *The Eyes of the Skin* examines this role the senses have in our experience of space and architecture, particularly the non-visual senses.<sup>44</sup> He argues that modern architecture panders to the ocular as our prime tool of understanding space, yet deprives us of a deeper, more spiritual connection that is associated with the haptic and the aural experience of place: "...modernist design at large has housed the intellect and the eye, but it has left the body and the other senses, as well as our memories, imagination and dreams, homeless."<sup>45</sup> There is a need, then, to return to the embodiment of ourselves as spiritual beings, to celebrate our emotions and associations that we bring and discover in such significant places.

Ann Hamilton's *The event of a thread* (2012-2013) is suggestive of such a restoration of spirit (see Fig. 33). This gloriously rich installation is full of sensory experiences: the motion of participatory swings, the corresponding swaying and dipping of the great white curtain suspended in space, the sound of text being read out and from radios in paper bags, and various other elements. This work seems to take art and mélange it with theatre, play and participation. Hamilton pushes the extent of sensory stimuli to an extreme level, but the balance and harmony of these elements ensure the entire experience is not one of over-intensity by allowing space for contemplation. Likewise, Hamilton's work in the United States Pavilion for the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale, *Myein* (1999) — with a framed glass grid veiling the neo-classical building, a wooden table with knotted fabric in the patio, and inside, fuchsia-coloured powder falling down walls with Braille dots and audio recordings referring to the

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<sup>44</sup> Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Academy, 2005), 19.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.



grief and suffering in the history of the United States — also captures these qualities of repose and meditateness, and tension between stillness and movement. My own work is concerned with the delicate interplay of displacement and of stillness, of light and of shadow, of grounding and suspension, and there are elements of Hamilton's work, including her earlier pieces, which interest me: the poetry and ephemerality which emanates from these, the consideration to various methods which create movement and displacement, and the role and trajectory of the body within space.

While the discussion of an experience of installation art has focussed so far on the moment in which the viewer approaches the work and the subsequent relative spatial journey, there is a wider experience of process which may be interesting to consider. When de-installing *Journey/Memoir* I was reminded of flat-pack components of various pieces of furniture purchased in both Switzerland and New Zealand as a direct result of my being in a transitionary space (both literally and metaphorically). In this way, the entire process of *Journey/Memoir* took on a performative aspect in my mind: the labour-intensive cutting and installing, the experiential moment of the work, and the relatively brief packing away, all became individual moments that were part of an entire process in which the artwork enacted a displacement (see *Fig. 34*). Initially I thought the de-installation would be a 'deflating' moment, but it actually felt like a culmination of the work itself (insofar as relevant to that specific space). The packing away and classifying into components into a box felt like the work was now somehow complete. This also contrasted with the installing and de-installing often considered as 'private' moments, where the audience are not privy to this part of the works. There may be, in future, consideration given to whether these aspects of the work should be exposed as parts of the overall process and experience, and if so, what medium would be appropriate for this.

The case for an immersive, interactive quality in my installations suggests an experience which complements and draws awareness to the notions of vulnerability, lightness,



**Fig. 34** Sophie Hermann, *Journey/Memoir* [detail of de-installation and packing process] (2014)

suspension and temporality. In his essay “Blurring the Boundaries: Installation Art”, art historian Ronald J. Onorato supports this definition: “the aesthetic power of installation art does not reside in the singular, commodified object but in an ability to become, rather than merely represent, the continuum of real experience by responding to specific situations.”<sup>46</sup> I have sought to express my practice through the medium of installation precisely for the reason implied by Onorato: namely that it offers an excellent means for exploring ‘the continuum of real experience.’

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<sup>46</sup> Hugh M. Davies and Ronald J. Onorato, *Blurring the Boundaries: Installation Art 1969-1996* (San Diego: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997), 13.



**chronicle** | methodology | documentation | process



The transition from architectural-based production methods to art installation techniques is an engaging part of this journey of discovery. Sketches, maquettes, photography, video and writing are tools utilised during the course of the project, often in combination with other processes, some which reflect my formal architectural training, and others more akin to an overtly experimental approach. These action-based approaches operate also in parallel on a more theoretical plane, with a self-reflective response allowing for the defining, generating and refining of my work and thinking.

However, creating art is not often a smooth linear process. My journey sometimes leads me down some fractal-like path, where I go and explore, make, and then step back to evaluate. One such process of development was in early 2014 with the decision to move on from the tissue paper explorations and attempt to branch out with other responses and materials, in order to consider a body of work. This led to the floor installation *Keeping time*, an autobiographical work referencing time and place (see Figs. 27, 35). While there may have been formal characteristics of interest (carefully prepared and arranged mounds of soil, salt and pohutukawa), the feedback from this work indicated that there was some confusion about the qualities of the structure and organisation of the work, and I suspect this is an illustration of the personal narrative being too subtle and without it (at least in this case), the work loses cohesion. *Keeping time* was an example of an unresolved work which became a catalyst for re-questioning and re-looking at where I have been and where it may lead me. It was at this point that I looked back to the early tissue paper explorations and sought to develop those further and use the essence of what was working in those to create more work in this vein. It also prompted me to lean more heavily on my architectural background and understanding of space, material and experience in order to bring these aspects into my installation practice.

My background as an architect has led me to a certain way of designing and creating, often based around developing an idea further in a non-material form, aided by sketches and



**Fig. 35** Sophie Hermann, *Keeping time* (2014)

*This image has been removed by the author of  
this exegesis for copyright reasons.*

**Fig. 36** Carlo Scarpa, *La tomba Brion/Brion cemetery* (1970-1972)

maquettes (see *Figs. 3, 6, 7, 9*). The visualisation of the final work is often part imagined / part represented until another player in the process enters to craft the architectural piece. Aspects of this trade have translated into my art practice. One such method of 'architectural thinking' resides in dividing the whole into smaller, more manageable parts. Section details in architectural drawing function as one segment being examined closely and represented in larger form for clarity and understanding. The idea is to explore the junction by bringing some logic into that detail, often working temporarily in isolation from other adjacent details, yet bearing the trace of the original intent and concept of the larger whole. The 1:5 detail, for example, speaks equally of the work as the 1:100 view. Carlo Scarpa is one such architect who mastered the art of the detail as a clever and poetic expression of a functional need (see *Fig. 36*).<sup>47</sup> If we look at images of his documented work, we are often looking at close-up details of junctions, mechanisms and building elements belonging to a much larger picture (of which we sometimes do not see). How beautiful and deliberate these details are, the fragments taking on a prominence in their own right. I find myself so intrigued by these sculptural annotations that I almost prefer the ignorance of what larger whole they belong to. On their own of course, they are almost meaningless and functionless, but they are suggestive of something greater, and that is enough for my imagination. So much so, that *it may be that the deconstructed works or part-details become more interesting than the assembled complete work*. Why? Just as an architectural section detail may hint at a greater picture, or at a larger scale not seen, so these fragments too require the use of one's imagination to conjure up what that whole is. Or, perhaps the whole becomes secondary to the experience, which takes on a larger meaning due to the separation of the detail from its original context. Our attention is drawn to what might otherwise have been overlooked; with less information, our senses are not overloaded. More attention may be given to the part, even if we read and understand it as a whole.

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<sup>47</sup> See Marco Frascari's article, "The Tell-the-Tale Detail," which was the source of renewed interest in the expressiveness of the architectural detail, and in Carlo Scarpa as the best example of this.



This approach became the generator for *Journey/Memoir*. Originally, a larger installation, *Dwell*, was envisaged, with a space carved out, within one could enter into and occupy (see Figs. 3, 6, 7, 9). This idea was conceived quite early on in the research, but due to the scale of the proposal (including financial, time and spatial constraints), this was not considered for immediate development. In some ways, there was an unconscious hesitation to tackle the ‘whole’, as if the dream-like image and space should only remain in the realm of one’s imagination. In this moment of hesitation and cautious exploration, the section detail emerged. As if the ‘burden’ of attempting to create a work of heroic proportions (at least in my mind) had been lifted, I began anew with the idea of creating a section detail. Inherently, when creating the ‘part’, careful consideration was given to proportion and scale: the detail would not be the recognisable box it started out as, but should take on a sculptural form of its own and function autonomously. Would meaning be lost through this action? Would there be a need for the viewer to be aware that the installation was a section detail (such as hinting of this in the title or an annotation somewhere)? Would it lead to the anticipation of something greater? Or should the experience of the ‘part’ be equally significant to that of a whole and full experience, and therefore no need to suggest this was a ‘partial’ experience (and in fact, there should not be such a compromise)? These questions helped frame my approach and intent, and eventually, in installing *Journey/Memoir*, it was decided to treat this work as a complete piece rather than a fragment. There was however, some uncertainty as to whether to insert a second ‘part’ of the installation: a floor piece of stacked, crumpled tissue paper, lightly inscribed with texts (see Figs. 37, 38, 39). Upon deliberation, this was included, with careful consideration as to how it might contribute to the other part of the installation (the suspended laminated sheets). While I initially felt that it added an aspect of repose and groundedness to the space, set up a trajectory through which to access the hanging element, and formally responded in a similar material manner, the overwhelming feedback was that it became insignificant beside the more interactive piece. In light of this, I felt that I could now confidently install *Journey/Memoir* as a singular element made up of the

*“Fragments, like ruins, allow space for the imagination to enter into play – you don’t give the whole story, so you provide space for the spectator to try to imagine what you are wanting to do, what might be intended.”*

**Grafton Architects, Royal Academy of Arts,  
“Sensing Spaces: Architecture Reimagined,  
Exhibition in Focus” (2014)**



**Fig. 37** Sophie Hermann, *Journey/Memoir* (2014)



**Fig. 38** Sophie Hermann, *Journey/Memoir* [detail of floor piece] (2014)



**Fig. 39** Sophie Hermann, *Journey/Memoir*  
[detail of floor piece] (2014)

suspended tissue paper, which could command the space without having other components detracting from this.

The contrast between architectural methods and installation art methods may be subtle, but there have been some interesting discoveries about process. The role of documentation has been influential in the advancement of the work. Photography, video, sketches, maquettes and writing have been tools which have sat alongside the physical material explorations. Making, getting one's hands involved with the material (often tissue paper), and viewing the material in different light conditions, was an invaluable action. Artist and academic Barbara Bolt refers to Paul Carter's "material thinking" where the material is an active component of the interaction with the artist's own creativity;<sup>48</sup> it "involves a particular responsiveness to or conjunction with the intelligence of materials and processes in practice. Material thinking is the logic of practice."<sup>49</sup> Moments of serendipity occurred on several occasions in this zone that no amount of abstract modelling or sketching or imagining could have generated. Likewise, the development or evolution of a work or way of thinking was often enhanced by processes parallel to the making.

One beautiful discovery was the power of writing as a tool to further my practice. What initially started as writing in order to have some relevant texts to include in my exegesis, became a valuable device to explore my work. Often these were written responses to my work and the ideas behind them, but sometimes a piece of writing took the form of an almost detached critique or analysis. This process of writing was on many occasions the catalyst for the birth of a new direction in my practice. Most studio sessions included working with paper, photographing it, writing about it, reflecting on it, sketching developed ideas, and

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<sup>48</sup> Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt, *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010): 29, E-brary e-book.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 30.

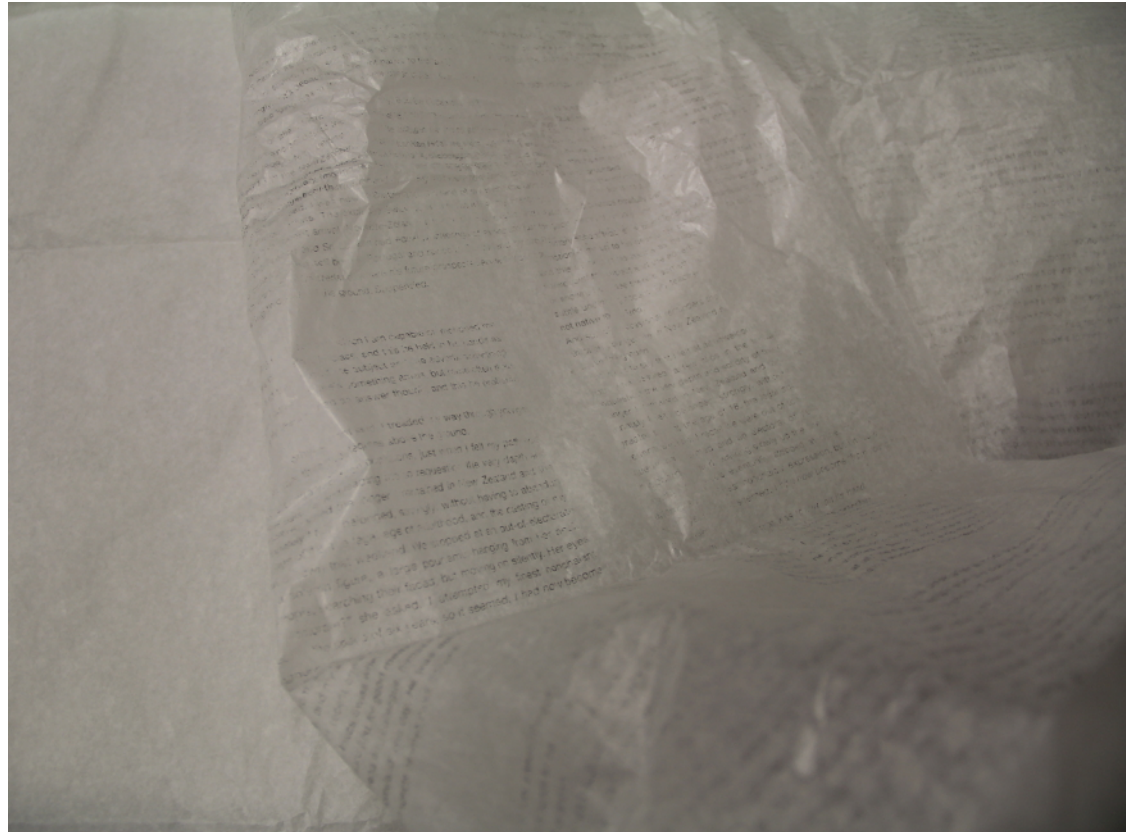


Fig. 40 Sophie Hermann, *In transit* [detail of text applied to tissue paper] (2014)



*It is through making and creating that I can see further than the ink on my page. It is through partial-making, that already the object in hand can be positioned, arranged, re-arranged and seen in a different light. It is this making through doing which is enlightening.*

**Author's writing, 31 October 2013**

further making. This became a loop of familiarity on which I could depend; if one method was failing to advance me in the manner I had wished, another tool was at hand.

Photographs, initially serving a utilitarian method of documenting installations or explorations, quickly became much more than this: the framing of the works through the camera's viewfinder became a process in itself. What to include and what to exclude in the photograph was a selective exercise and allowed me to put some distance between myself and the work, and to view it from a different perspective. On several occasions there was a direct influence on how I perceived the work and how I could develop it further, based on working from photographs. Likewise, video allowed me to capture the more ethereal qualities of my material explorations: movement, light, journey, shadow. However these videos tended to remain more archival in nature, as I found they lacked that interesting state of stasis which we find in photography, that sense that much more is being hinted at, and that any number of possibilities could be opened up if the photograph were released from its frozen state. Video as a development tool had less of this intrigue for me (although this may have been due in part to my own limitations in this area of technical expertise), and thus I found it less useful for my purposes.

The concept of documentation does raise the question however as to which medium is the artwork. I would suggest that the photograph of the first installation *Suspended paper* is a work in itself (see *Figs. 4, 12, 13, 14*). The installation was subject to changing light conditions which led to quite varied resultant effects. This has not only been documented as a moving image but also through photographs. The inclusion of both the original installation, as well as the photograph of it, as independent but related works, may blur the lines between original and representation, image and object, but it is also in line with contemporary practice, where the image and the diffusion of the image has become ubiquitous with art and transmission of art. The extent with which the object may be viewed simultaneously in multiple locations around the world via the photograph does add value to the weight of the

photograph as an oeuvre in its own right. However installation art is primarily experienced on multiple levels of sensory perception: engaging any of the spatial, visual and/or auditory senses, and in some cases even the olfactory or gustatory senses. To view a photograph of an installation and to imagine what this might be like, perhaps twenty thousand kilometres away from its origin, may be to deny complete comprehension and insight into the work in its totality. Consequently, it may be that a work exists in a number of realms: as an initial sketch or image; in an installed site or location at a given time; as a photograph or video of this installed position; or any other medium which, collectively, adds to the understanding and experience of that work.

The process of creating in my practice is a multi-faceted approach, with reading, thinking, sketching, making, photographing and writing all occurring at moments throughout the process, sometimes juxtaposed simultaneously with other methods in the studio. This leads to consideration of the work from multiple perspectives, which is invaluable not only for the outcome, but also for the development of my practice.





**conclusion** | arrival



Like any good journey, the road is not always straight and the decisions are not always rational. The destination, or arrival point, may bear marks of an ancestral lineage, referencing a point of origin; yet it may also undergo some inherent transformation or shift along the way, as if the journey itself has adapted, become displaced and taken on an identity of its own.

This journey is no exception.

What began as an exploration of migration and displacement lead me to down paths of stillness and shadow, of dis-place and suspension, of vulnerability and the soul. These explorations and meanderings allowed me to scope out the expanded limits that make up the wider research landscape. They became intersecting points of thought and reflection. They became interwoven avenues, and the further I travelled, the more they became an entire journey of their own. The destinations, or completed installations, spoke of their source, but had also picked up significant traces of their progress along the way. And it is in this way, that I allow the work to take on a life of its own and become imbued with its own *poetic displacement*.

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*This book, a collaboration amongst artists and art critics (Nicolas de Oliveira, Nicola Oxley, Michael Petry and Michael Archer) is a survey of contemporary installation art, with a good balance of relevant texts complemented by a large number of colour photographs of international examples. The body of the book comprises chapters of the multiple histories of installation art: site, media, museum and architecture. While one could contend that categorising works in such a manner is inconclusive, with overlaps invariably occurring across these sections, the examples are well-chosen and emphasis given to each individual work as a an entity in itself. A very good foundational study reference in particular for the comprehensive visual examples and of personal interest due to the inclusion of a chapter on architecture within installation art. While this book is somewhat dated now (1996), these authors have collaborated on a more recent book, Installation Art in the New Millennium (2003) with a focus on immersion, interaction, time, and the body of the audience.*

Durrant, Sam and Catherine M. Lord. *Essays in Migratory Aesthetics: Cultural Practices Between Migration and Art Making* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), Ebrary e-book.

*Theorist Sam Durrant and artist Catherine M. Lord compile several essays within this electronic book. Their introduction is a strong beginning for the ensuing essays, quickly arriving at the heart of the relationship between migration and art-making. They advocate for work which is not purely representational, but which goes deeper within the theme to explore migration within its process. Their introduction prefaces well the texts which follow, all involving contemporary art responses to migration across a range of mediums, from literary to fine art, photography and film. While not strictly installation art pieces, the concept of how practitioners address the themes of displacement within contemporary artworks is appropriate, revealing how this art itself "becomes migratory." I found this essay highly relevant in beginning to understand the broader issues and complexities when considering an artistic expression of this theme.*

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*This chapter within Foster's 1996 book is concerned with the dilemma artists are confronted with when working within a cultural / ethnographic setting. Foster evokes social critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin's treatise "The Author as Producer" as a foundation for his discussion of this predicament. Benjamin in 1934 questioned the role of the artist as "ideological patron" in remaining faithful and truthful to a community, cultural group or 'other'. Foster expands on this to subvert assumptions of the advantages 'the other' has within an ethnographic expression. His references to artwork within this ethnographic domain is often scathing, suggesting that much has yet to be revealed at a deeper, thoughtful level in order for the 'other' to be given just representation. This discerning essay raises relevant questions for me within my own research and how I perceive my migration experiences without over-identifying with other migrants, nor distancing myself so far as to not engage at all. The solution, Foster suggests, lies in a certain reflexivity on the part of the artist throughout the process. Personally I feel this explanation is lacking somewhat in substance; does this*

*imply the artists he critiqued therefore failed in their degree of reflexivity? Surely the bias of working within a cultural domain is inherent and intrinsic inasmuch as the artist as individual is involved? Or perhaps Foster is acknowledging an important problem; the debate is yet to continue to unfold in practice.*

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*Academic Alan Kirby declares that postmodernism is dead, and proposes that we now live in an era of 'pseudo-modernism'. Kirby defines this new paradigm as one*



*which places emphasis on the individual (viewer / audience as contributor) rather than the author. His rather convincing argument begins by examining post-modern texts which are no longer responding to current trends, particularly in the technology and communication sectors. Kirby asserts that this shift, which occurred during the late 1990s or early 2000s, changed forever the way the author, the audience and the cultural product interacted. Contemporary examples are chosen to illustrate these changes, including internet blogs, TV, music and film. Kirby points to the duality which may be seen within pseudo-modernism: on the one hand an era marked by freedom, independence and expressiveness, on the other the banal, ephemeral and consumerist nature so often associated with the products of pseudo-modernism. This essay has helped me locate the epoch within which I am working and to consider ways other practitioners are responding to such change. To remain objective and contextually aware I recommend this essay be read in conjunction with other academic theories dealing with the death of postmodernism and the search for what is defining this era.*

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*In her 1991 essay, Massey, a social scientist and geographer, calls for a new, progressive way of looking at place and 'time-space compression'. She suggests an inclusive, pluralist, global view of what shapes our sense of place, noting that authority, capitalism and development are acutely variable across the world and their relationship to context should be emphasised. Massey's site-specific examples illustrate well this concept of a globalised sense of place. The second part of her essay focuses on defining a global sense of the local. She investigates the identity of*

*place and refutes the assumption that places have singular, homogenous, coherent identities within a delineated boundary shared by the community. Rather, an open, complex network which adapts over time is upheld as a more innovative model. Massey's ideas are interesting in order to visualise the local from a global perspective, and the relevance of the impact of character, and people, to place. This essay opens cultural possibilities rather than narrowing them; I see migrants and cultural communities as included and contributing within this paradigm, and places this treatise firmly within the contemporary discourse of parochialism versus cosmopolitanism.*

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*John Potts' very recent essay explores the notion of displacement within a contemporary art context giving plentiful, relevant, contemporary case studies across a range of genres. It begins appropriately with a look at art within a globalised context and the links to migration, displacement and exile, with references to experts in the field (art theorist and curator Nicolas Bourriaud, critic Rex Butler and philosopher Giorgio Agamben). The body of the essay comprises in-depth commentary and analysis of several contemporary artists operating within the theme of displacement (Francis Alys, Allan Sekula, Ai Weiwei, Rosemary Laing, Oscar Munoz, Rebecca Belmore, Tracey Moffatt); these practitioners are exposing the processes of displacement as a means to address this phenomenon. An extremely relevant article, particularly for its contemporaneity, this is an insightful overview to start investigating this theme within the domain of contemporary art and considering how art may reflect displacement in an oblique manner.*

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**Fig. 55** Hermann, Sophie. *L Blocks*. University of Waikato Art Collection. Laminated timber, vinyl lettering, specimen tree. 2014.

**Fig. 56** Hermann, Sophie. *L Blocks*. University of Waikato Art Collection. Laminated timber, vinyl lettering, specimen tree. 2014.

**appendices**

*From here to here: du sel sur la neige*<sup>50</sup>  
AD14 Final exhibition November 2014

The introduction of texts transferred onto tissue paper in the work *From here to here: du sel sur la neige* has not been previously mentioned in the exegesis, however it is worthy of comment, being a reasonably significant recent development in the work. While text has been utilised previously and documented in the works *Journey/Memoir* (in the floor piece) and *In transit*, these texts were not entirely legible, and were not discussed in the written part of the thesis, as these were experimental in nature and not fully developed.



**Fig. 41** Sophie Hermann, *From here to here: du sel sur la neige* [detail of text applied to tissue paper] (2014)

In *From here to here: du sel sur la neige*, three newspapers reference key dates, each from the date of arrival of one of my migrational journeys: the *New Zealand Herald* 23 March 1981, *Le Nouvelliste* 15 February 2008 and the *New Zealand Herald* 20 February 2013. In this manner, the tissue paper bears marks of these papers, referencing time, place and culture. Snatches of English and French, present and past merge together (see Fig. 41). The rather dirty markings of the ink, which is confined to the ‘entry’ or first portion of the installation, contrasts and gives way to the whiteness and purity of the paper as one progresses through the work. The intention of the text applied to the paper in this way is twofold: firstly, to acknowledge the potential negative aspects of migration (such as loss, stress, broken dreams), and secondly, to provide a balance and link between the personal story of migration and the wider global context.

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<sup>50</sup> Supplementary text supplied to examiners.



**Fig. 42** Sophie Hermann, *From here to here: du sel sur la neige* (2014)



**Fig. 43** Sophie Hermann, *From here to here: du sel sur la neige* (2014)

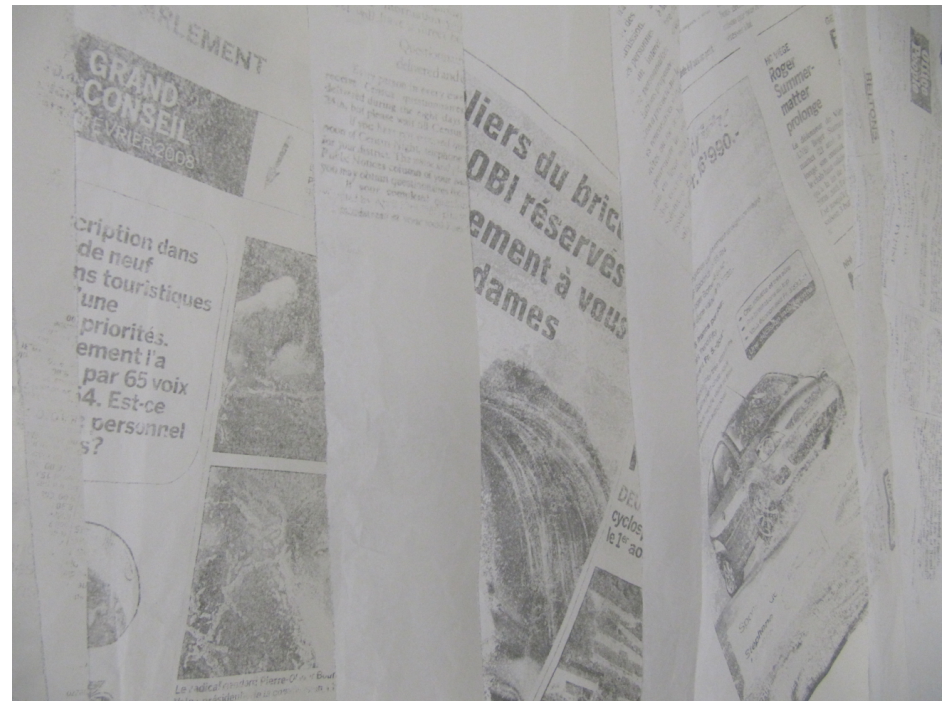




**Fig. 44** Sophie Hermann, *From here to here: du sel sur la neige* (2014)



**Fig. 45** Sophie Hermann, *From here to here: du sel sur la neige* [detail of newspaper text applied to tissue paper] (2014)



**Fig. 46** Sophie Hermann, *From here to here: du sel sur la neige* [detail of newspaper text applied to tissue paper] (2014)





**Fig. 47** Sophie Hermann, *From here to here: du sel sur la neige* (2014)



**Fig. 48** Sophie Hermann, *From here to here: du sel sur la neige* [detail of shadow effects on wall] (2014)



**Fig. 49** Sophie Hermann, *From bere to bere: du sel sur la neige* (2014)



**Fig. 50** Sophie Hermann, *From here to here: du sel sur la neige* (2014)





**Fig. 51** Sophie Hermann, *From here to here: du sel sur la neige* [detail of salt beneath tissue paper] (2014)

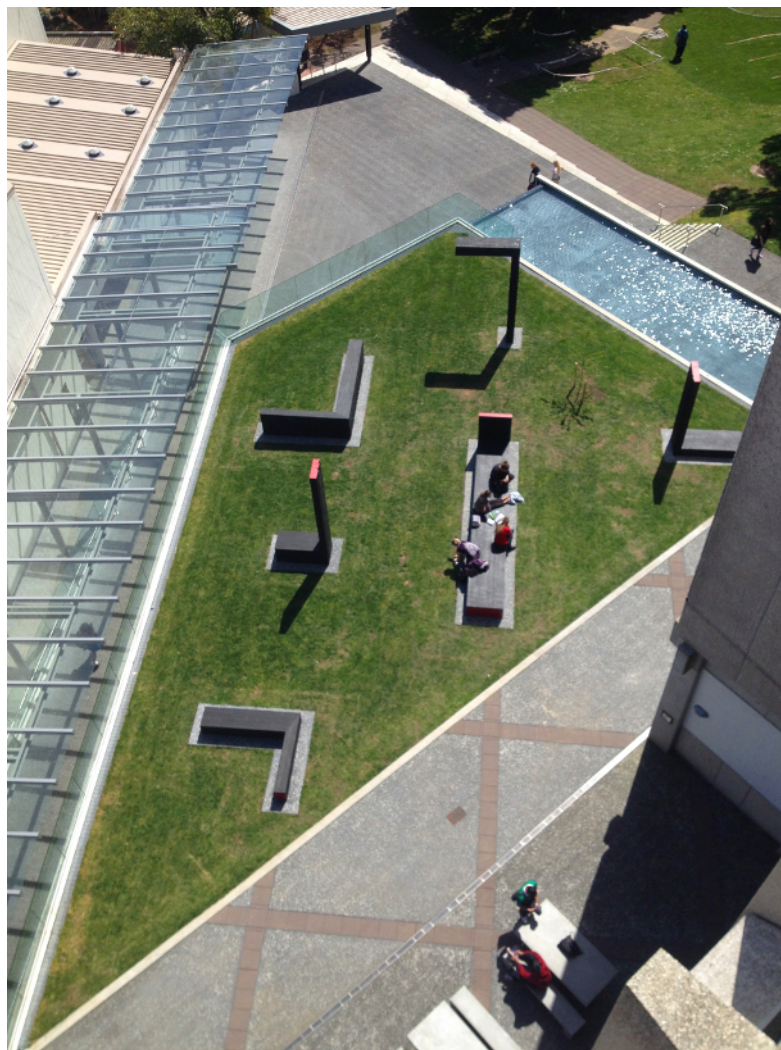


**Fig. 52** Sophie Hermann, *L Blocks* [dawn unveiling ceremony; photo courtesy of University of Waikato] University of Waikato Art Collection (2014)



**Fig. 53** Sophie Hermann, *L. Blocks*, University of Waikato Art Collection (2014)





**Fig. 54** Sophie Hermann, *L Blocks* [view from above; photo courtesy of University of Waikato] University of Waikato Art Collection (2014)





**Fig. 55** Sophie Hermann, *L Blocks* [detail of text carved into timber] University of Waikato Art Collection (2014)



**Fig. 56** Sophie Hermann, *L Blocks* [detail of vinyl text applied to balustrade] University of Waikato Art Collection (2014)

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