

# The Object of Labour

Unuseless Acts of an Itinerant Nature

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of the requirements for the degree of Master of Art & Design

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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, nor material which to a substantial extension has been accepted for the qualification of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning, except where due acknowledgement is made in the acknowledgements, or where I have previously written it myself under these same conditions.

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## ABSTRACT

This project explores the embodiment of physical forms engaged in futile acts of labour. It investigates the territories that operate between our conscious bodies and the mute and unfeeling realm of the object, opening up questions about whether the Western body has become an absurd anomaly motivated by the desire for physical comfort, rather than a tool for ultimate survival. It endeavors to expose the phenomenon of sweatshops as a clandestine construct driven by Western greed, while optimistically promoting methods of hand making and ethical sustainability as a way to diminishing inhumane practice. The research operates through a series of human/object combinations, titled *Extension Suits*, that explore performance by way of itinerancy, audience participation and chance encounter. The Extension Suits are built from objects and materials that reference the simple shapes and colours of Children's TV shows, comic theatre and the abject.

*Things men have made with wakened hands, and put soft life into  
are awake through years of transferred touch, and go on glowing  
for long years.*

*And for this reason, some old things are lovely  
warm still with the life of forgotten men that made them.*

D.H Lawrence, 1929



Figure 1. *Live.Repeat.Playback*, performance still, St Paul Street Gallery, 2010

# SISYPHUS'S SWEATSHOP

*The workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks, and this fate is no less absurd. But it is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious.*

The Myth of Sisyphus by Albert Camus, (1942)

In 1942, the French Philosopher Albert Camus introduced his Modern day metaphor of 'The Myth of Sisyphus', comparing mans futile search for meaning and eternal truth in a world devoid of God and values. As a figure of Greek mythology, Sisyphus was condemned by the Gods to push a boulder up a mountain, everyday, forever. And when he finally got to the top, the boulder would roll down again and he would have to repeat the same futile task, over and over again. Sisyphus's task is the stuff of a bad dream, but its message of futility in an uncaring world does well to mirror the conditions of a sweatshop worker and to some extent the role of industrial and administrative work within the Western world. Through my practical and theoretical research I have begun to recognise that notions of futility aren't just restricted to these practices; they hide in many of my daily endeavors. From buying broccoli at the supermarket, to searching for entertainment on the net, the act of contemporary living has moved way beyond a basic need to survive.

In this chapter, I will be unpacking the concepts, arguments and artist models that have brought me to identify futility as a key concern within my Masters project and my performance work. I will begin with a discussion about the concept of physical comfort established in the 17th Century as a crucial turning point in the development of a Western world intent on industry and progress. This will lead into an exploration of the unseen workforce of sweatshop labourers that prop up a consumer culture obsessed with the new and fashionable. Following that, I will identify futility as an unfortunate by-product of these practices, arguing that without the need to produce even the basic necessities for daily living, absurd acts of labour have the chance to grow and become acceptable. To conclude, I will argue for the notion of hope as a necessary template for change.



## Comfort



Figure 2. *Wave To The Nice Policeman* performance still, RM Gallery, 2009

In 2009, I performed a work at RM Gallery as part of their performance season. *Wave to the Nice Policeman* (figure 2) explored the intricacies of material comfort, in an environment stuffed with soft furnishings bedding and oversized objects. Dressed in a padded sequined tent and woollen blanket cowboy chaps, I moved around the 'set', engaging in sensuous contact with the environment. I mimed to a sentimental recording of Englebert Humperdinks *A Man Without Love* (1968), holding a giant stuffed microphone. I interacted with the set objects, including the microphone, two upholstered mattresses, sleeping bags and duvets cut and sewn into shapes, and a length of soft tubing made from Dacron and fabric, with a great deal of purpose, though it became clear to both myself and the viewer that the actions were essentially mundane and pointless.

Throughout 2009, I had been making suits and objects with textiles associated with the home and the pleasures of sleep, such as duvets, woollen blankets and sleeping bags. So I began to examine comfort as a social construct. The concept of comfort as a material end was established in the late 17th Century. Up till then comfort had been associated with a state of spiritual ease, but American President Thomas Jefferson remodelled the meaning to accommodate his vision of a more materially abundant world based on industry and consumption (Sorkin 2001).

By the 19th Century, Anglo-American thought, in its quest to eliminate discomfort and promote material consumption had firmly established physical comfort as a desired standard. In *Homely Pleasures*, an essay by John E. Crowley (2005), he discusses the forms of bodily comfort that have become so established in western thought; the inability to make "...distinctions between luxury and necessity, the acceptance of popular consumption patterns... and the demonstrability of respectability in family life by the presence of a comfortable domestic environment" (p. 86). As this taste for comfort developed, it became a fertile source for satire. The illustrations of W. Heath Robinson in the early 20th Century, address this through comic means. His ideas arose from pursuits of comfort and industry among humans during the lean times of the war. In the illustration, *Contraption for a Lazy Father* (figure 3), published in the thirties, Robinson shows a novel way of having, what looks like Sunday tea on a rare cloudless day in England. All the comforts of home are supplemented by ridiculous innovations, such as a foot pump

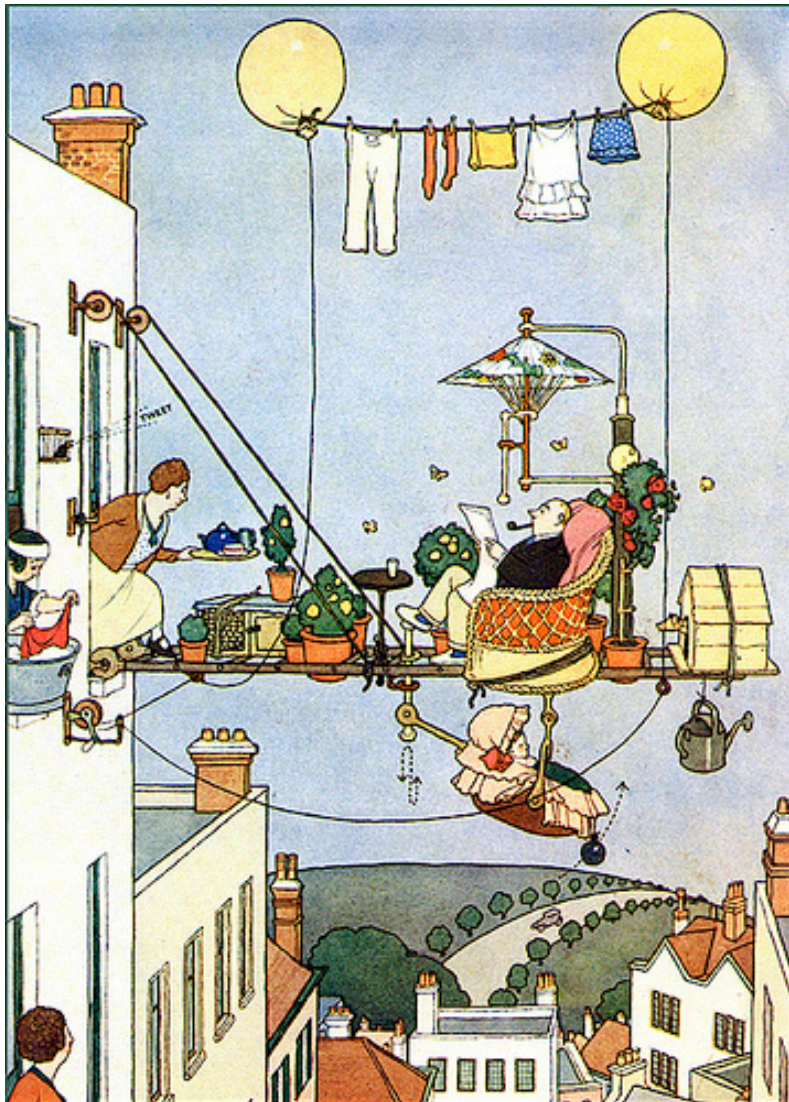


Figure 3. W. Heath Robinson, *Contraption For A Lazy Father*, Illustration (n.d.)

that gently rocks a baby in a basinet, all of which are perilously balanced upon and below a long ladder suspended from 2 vulnerable balloons way above the street below. The drawing includes directional arrows to show how things work, acting as a ridiculous proposal for something that can only fail. The proposal drawings I make for my performances operate in a similar way. They explore how an object or suit could be used, moved, or connected to another object. Like Robinsons illustrations, they have a ridiculous comic failure tied to the outcomes. I have always maintained a drawing practice. I am deeply influenced by the Illustrators of the late 19th and early 20th Century, especially Audrey Beardsley and Heath Robinson. To be exact, a great deal of the art and writing from this era interests me. With the advent of full-scale industrialism, artists were reflecting the loss of humanity in relation to labour. For example, D.H Lawrence in a series of poems he composed in 1929 wrote...

*for god's sake, let us be men  
not monkey's minding machines  
or sitting with our tails curled  
while the machine amuses us, the radio or film or gramophone*

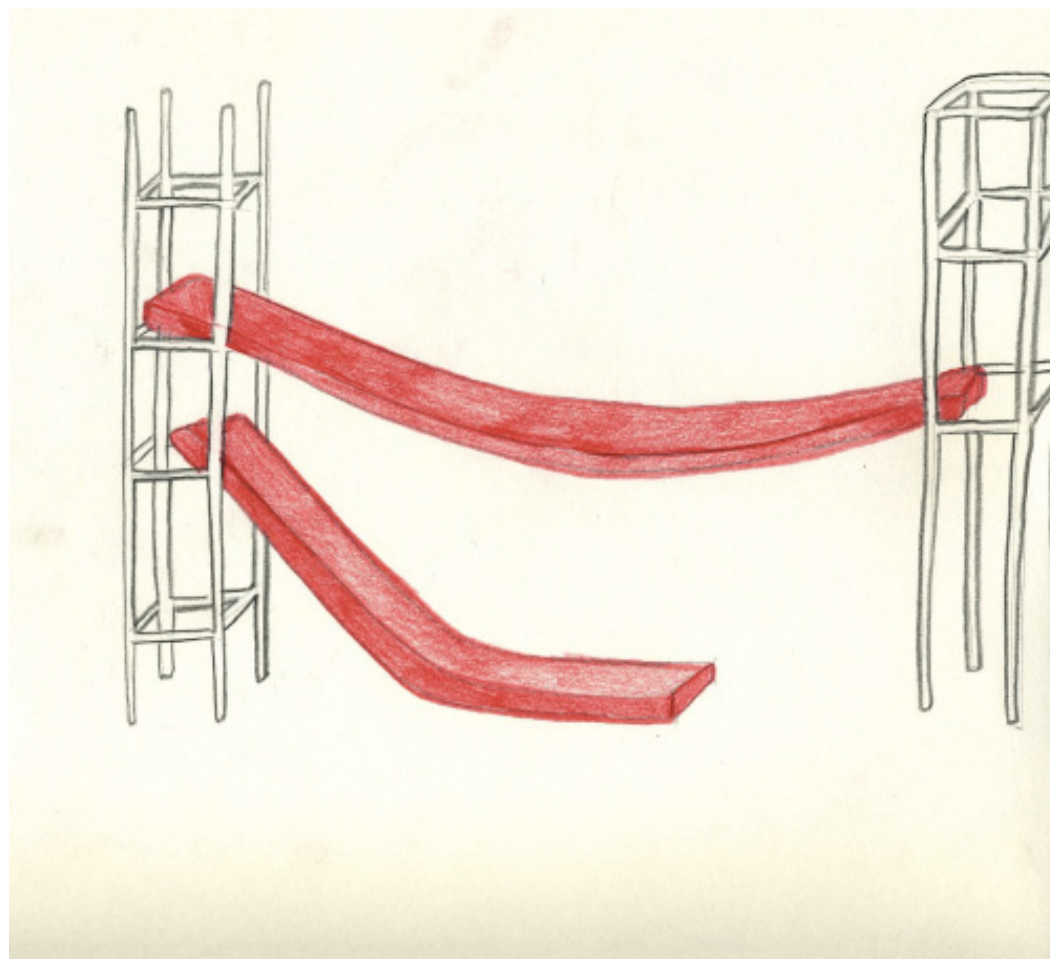
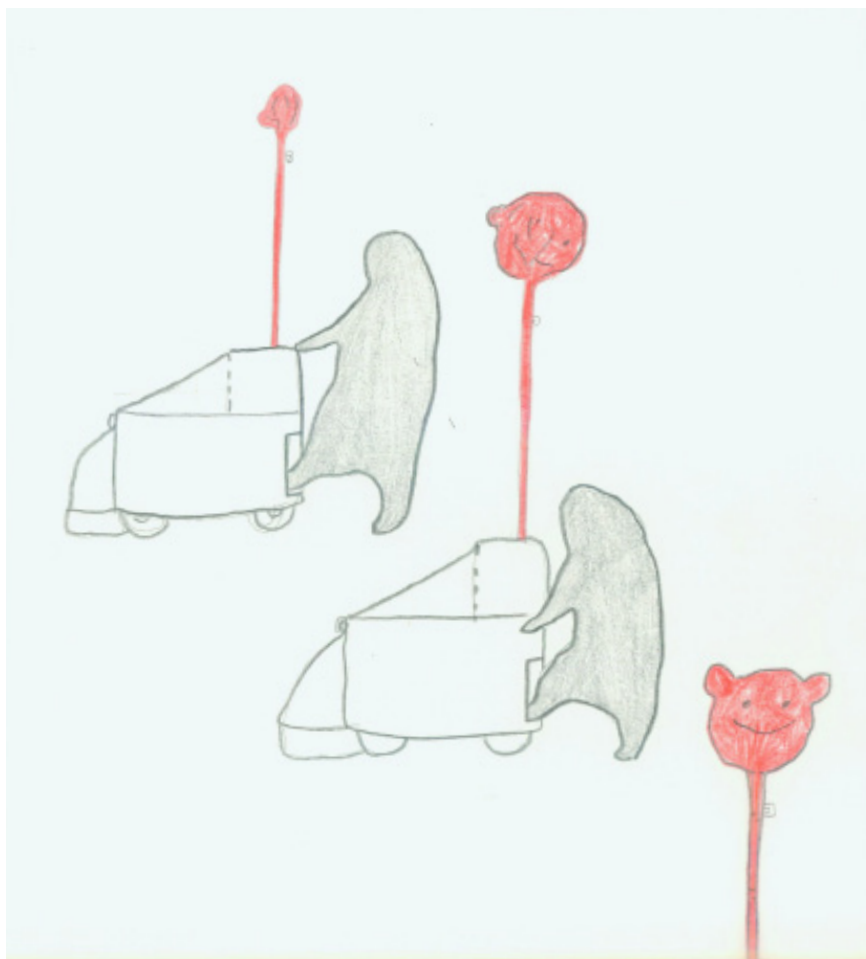
*monkeys with a bland grin on our faces*

In this piece, Lawrence emphasises blandness as a consequence of Industrialism. Ten years later, Albert Camus would compare the lives of factory and office workers with the absurd plight of Sisyphus hauling his rock up the hill, only to watch it roll down again. He is referring to the daily grind of repetitive labour with no creative input, poor wages and little hope of a change.

## Labour

The idea of Labour began to surface in my work in the first year of my Masters project. In *Auckland Society of Something (ASS) 2009* (figures 6 & 7) I performed a series of inventive tasks while dressed in a puffy golden gimp suit. The two objects I manipulated were abstract renditions of objects that appeared like they could be used in some way, but were largely pointless. Never the less, my character worked those objects with absolute purpose. It was around this time that I began to identify my suited being with the word 'character', suggesting that there was a theatrical element to the performance and that when I got into the suit, I took on a role. With this performance, I was





Figures 4 & 5. Proposal drawings for *The Object of Labour*, 2010



Figures 6 & 7 Auckland Society of Something (ASS) June 2010

intending to bring some kind of laborious intent to the table, but the comedic pointlessness of the objects negated the purpose. One of my tutors pointed out that the work read like the absurdity of life itself, another pointed me in the direction of the phenomenon of the sweatshop as a way to understanding futile labour in contemporary society.

The conditions of a contemporary sweatshop are much like those of the Victorian era; appalling- the wholesale abuse and exploitation of people and environments, employing children as young as six and forcing workers into inhumane hours and repetitive tasks which suck the life out of them. The sweatshop exists but the consuming world is conveniently blind to it. If we were to acknowledge it fully in the face, if it was on our news every night, would we condone it? Something of this intensity would potentially challenge the very fabric of the culture of comfort and consumption that has been building since the late 17th Century.

In an essay, *Piecework* (2007), Maureen Sherlock addresses this unseen labour force that props up the notion of fashion whose sole purpose is to maximize profit for investors, rather than bringing a meaningful life to the world population. She argues that the fleeting commodities on our shelves have a way of structuring our daily lives through gender, class and even self, which makes them inseparable from the way we identify ourselves. Sherlock pits the Western world's obsession with having new and fashionable things against the piece workers futile efforts to meet the demands. 'Pushing shit uphill' could be a good way to describe how Sherlock views the position of the pieceworker in the global market...

*"To clarify the position we find ourselves in historically, it is necessary to examine the internal operations of what now seems so unchallengeable: capitalism itself. It is plagued by an irresolvable conflict between supply and demand, usually defined in the terms of inflexibility of production and the flexibility of demand. Its conundrum is that the temporary relief of one side's conflict always results in the disruption, for or for bad, of the other..." (p.9)*

Lucy Siegal is one of Britain's leading writers on social and environmental justice. Her research explores the labour rights and conditions of workers in the developing world, and investigates ways to build a more sustainable way of consuming. In her latest book, *To Die For Lucy Siegal; Is Fashion Wearing Out The World?* (2011), she discusses the wholesale infiltration of 'fast fashion'





Figure 8. *Live.Repeat.Playback* performance still, St Paul St Gallery, August 2010

into Western consumption and discloses the terrible working conditions that support it. The information is overwhelmingly depressing...

*The pressure on that living, breathing human being is intense. It is hard to overstate how brutal the assembly line is for the average garment worker. Sixty first-year Fashion students at North Umbria University decided to have a go, spending a day in their own sewing room, set up as a simulated version of a production line producing T-shirts. From the outset it was deemed impossible for them to achieve the timings expected from garment workers...every slight slip - a dropped pair of scissors, a pause to re-align the seams - costs them dear. The team of students managed to produce ninety-five T-shirts in seven and a half hours. The daily target in an export factory such as in Bangladesh with the same 'line load' (the same number of machines and the same manufacturing conditions) would be nine hundred.* (p. 43)

It is at this point in my research that the effort to make sense of this desperate situation becomes hopeless. It seems that there is no way out of this absurd condition. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus expounds that to embrace the absurd is to accept all the unreasonableness the world has to offer. Without meaning in life there is no scale of values. He says that, "What counts in life is not the best living but the most living." This reasoning, to my mind, is why we are in the situation we are in. It reminds me of how the work I am making has something awfully passive about it. There is a submissive manner in the soft mute shapes, constrictive body suits and the depressed air of my characters.

## Futility

Pointlessness, or futility, constantly comes up in the criticism of my live performances; for example, in *Only One Day To Go Til The Next Day* a series of performance installations I exhibited in *Live.Repeat.Playback* at St Paul St Gallery in 2010 (figure 8), my character engaged itself in a chain of futile interactions with useless objects that brought the character repeatedly to the point of fatigue. At the time I was experimenting with abstract objects that were assembled from things I'd found in second-hand stores and upholstered in a way that obscured their identity. The suits I made were too hot, the shapes too cumbersome, objects too heavy. They were too long or too short. They didn't work or else they broke down. The subjects were depressed and slow and dumb. Covered from head to foot in a thick duvet suit, it



Figures 9 & 10. Chindogu. Kitty Duster, Hayfever Hat



Figure 11. Performance still in a test space, July 2010

took tremendous effort to perform the most mundane of tasks, for instance moving from one side of a room to another could take a few minutes versus a quarter that. As this aspect of my practice began to develop, I started to see how ridiculous that effort was, but I found that quality to be interesting. I realised that a sense of pointlessness accompanies a lot of my daily tasks; the hunting and gathering of food replaced by a visit to a café or supermarket; the sewing of my own clothes replaced by a visit to a mall for 'fashionable' garments I desire. In this respect, I am moved to argue that Thomas Jefferson's quest for a comfy world has replaced necessity with futility.

The comic art form of Chindogu plays with this idea of absurd creation. Chindogu as a phenomenon came into the public eye in the late 1980's, also known as the Japanese art of 'unuseless' invention. Unuseless is a term that aptly describes the point of a Chindogu; that it has to be able to exist as something that *could* be used, but not quite able to function. As a consequence many of the bizarre inventions fail completely. According to Designboom.com (2003)

*You are not allowed to use a Chindogu, but it must be made. You have to be able to hold it in your hand and think; I can actually imagine someone using this; Almost. In order to be useless, it must first be.*

Two good examples of this are the Chindogu kitty duster, where a cat has been fitted with mops to its feet and put down to run about the house. Another is the hay-fever hat, that allows a sufferer to access tissues from a roll that is attached around their head as a hat (figures 9 & 10).

Albert Camus addresses absurd creation in Chapter 3 of *The Myth of Sisyphus*. He states that explaining the absurd is impossible, that all that is available to the artist is to reflect the myriad of experiences in the world and that creation must always refrain from judging or alluding to the slightest shadow of hope. Camus claims that once Sisyphus acknowledges the futility of his fate, he is able to reach a state of contented acceptance.

## Hope

If what Sherlock suggests is true; that capitalism is irreversible, and in the case of Sisyphus, one should just accept the conditions and keep on, then I am moved to say, I don't agree. Camus (1942) theorizes that one must accept limits and refrain from false hope of a better future, but he also states that absurdity can never be accepted, that it requires constant revolt. To me, revolt *is* hope. By making by hand and reflecting on the futility of life in the Modern world and making this reflection visible, I am hoping to investigate change. This could be explored by forming a group that focuses on this kind of change by way of visual and performative practices, or organising shows that deal with this specific topic.

In the final chapter of Siegal's book, she discusses the ways in which a consumer can put a stop to the 'nasty' practice of sweatshop labour and the absurd obsession with acquiring things. Her advice is to buy less, buy better and buy from local, ecologically switched on businesses with ethical practices. But most important-make our own things. As Alfred Sohn-Rethel states, "The primary or ideal condition of human labour is a unity of head and hand. He who thinks and plans the appropriation of nature to transform it through labour into a human good finds satisfaction" (1955, p. 21).



Figure 12. *Live.Repeat.Playback*. performance still, St Paul St Gallery, August 2010





Figure 13. *The Object of Labour* performance stills, Prague Quadrennial 2010

## THE CROWD

*The buttons won't fasten. I can't do it. My body is tired and the heat generated by the padded interior of my suit is overwhelming. I give up, stand back and collapse.*

*A few moments later, I am blissfully sprawled out on the ground, focussing on a disk of white light that penetrates the eye hole of my suit and represents the ceiling of the Czech National Gallery. I breathe heavily. I can feel the sharp cardboard interior of my garb, cutting into my armpits. Footsteps appear at my side and two strong arms pull me to my feet. Through the eyehole I can decipher the large female form of the resident Security guard. She's been watching me go through this frustration for ten days now. She picks up the box that has the ruined buttons on it and sets about fastening them for me. Waving off my distress, she then unravels a mound of tangled lines. To finish she takes my hand gently and leads me back to the dressing room, shutting the door behind me.*

*Another day and I am lying on the floor again, tucked out from trying to string a bright orange tarp across the cavernous atrium of the gallery. I can hear a child's voice yelling to his father to come and look. "It's a lady", he says, then the walls of my suit reverberate as he delivers a swift kick to my side.*

*Performance of 'The Object of Labour', Prague Quadrennial July 2011*

Audience participation and itinerancy are an integral part of my performances. Viewers, though sometimes tentative, are co-erced into negotiating my space. This is because I am negotiating theirs. In the case of the Security guard, I was literally re-installing my work in her walking track. I did this every day. During the two years of my Masters project, I have begun to experiment with the amount of space I occupy in a gallery. I would set up my installation and pivot on a fixed point, but my roving instincts tended to push me in amongst the crowd (audience). As a result, I have proposed a final show where the shackles are off and I can roam the AUT Art and Design building as I like.



Figure.14 & 15. *Homeless*, 2010, coloured pencil on paper

In this chapter, I will be addressing how itinerancy creates audience participation and chance encounter in the viewing of my work, while exploring how my background in music and theatre has influenced the research and authorship of my performance installations. I will also be discussing how the making of work in public and the consequential blogging of performances, supports the ongoing lifecycle of my practice.

## Itinerancy

In June this year, I travelled to Prague for the International Performance Quadrennial. The event is a theatre based research environment and operates at odds to the contemplative air of the National Gallery it occupies. More likened to a trade fair, exhibitors set up their installations cheek by jowl and almost compete for attention. The energy is both electrifying and exhausting. When my proposal for the event was accepted, I was shocked to discover I was to share a 5x5 metre cubicle with five other student artists and a space-eating set of cardboard shapes. The work I had proposed required twice that floor space, and more if I had my way. But after some thought I decided the restriction could be valuable to my project. Through earlier works I had found that moving out into the foot traffic of the gallery cultivated a more interactive relationship with my audience. Instead of cramming my work into the tiny cubicle provided, I built a mobile set of my own (echoing the shapes represented within the cardboard landscape of our cubicle) that fitted snugly between a bank of boxes when not in use and which could be taken out when performing.

For my project, itinerancy is a form of rebellion, acting against conservative ways of viewing art. I have discussed in the first chapter of my exegesis, that the pointlessness and absurdity that occurs within my work has been informed by social constructs that require revolt in order to reform these notions. Itinerancy allows me to constantly renegotiate a gallery space and its audience.

## Gallery as home

In 2010, I was beginning to develop the practice of making objects that could be dragged around and manipulated by a suited character. Although I would often propose for a fixed space, I was finding that I wanted to involve viewers in my performances, wanting them to *have* to be a part of the work.



pushes my drawing practice of useless contrivances into the realm of public performance. Ideas that are proposed are actualised, pointless objects are used and possibilities are walked through in the world.

## A kind of theatre



Figure 17. Publicity photo of Amber Claire for the album *Great Escape*, Sony BMG, 2005

As a performer, a great deal of influence has come from growing up with actors and musicians. I began my career when I was 11 years old and became a professional singer 10 years later. As a singer I have toured all over the country, performed in cow byres, glittering ballrooms and floating pavilions. The bands I played in developed a persona of glamour and a repertoire motivated and cultivated by our clients expectations. It is hard to classify this as 'Art', because we were performing a service - I mean service in the way that we were employed to entertain. My experience of art performance is vastly different. I can perform in a body suit made from a stinky old duvet, manipulating useless objects, while an audience comes and engages with me for a moment, then leaves. Very little is expected of me. I think that the crossover occurs by way of theatrical objects like props, masquerade and playing to an audience. But there is something else that is more problematic and that is the idea that I may be entertaining in a gallery. I would liken this to an art-house band setting up and performing at an exhibition opening; they are not quite part of the show, but they are there performing. This feeds into the idea of the abject in my work, which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 3. It has been asked of me, why don't I research the situational performance art of the 60's and 70's. The simple fact is that I haven't found much of it that interests me or seems relevant, save the work of Laurie Anderson. Instead I have found particular relevance in the theatre and dance practices of the early 20th Century, including the Ballet Russe, Folie Bergere and the Russian avant-garde theatre. The relevance surfaces mainly in the aesthetics of my work, focusing on the rich and gaudy colours and the theatrical elements of design. More recently though, I have been looking at the work of contemporary performance artists and have found a resonance in the work of artists like David Cross and Larisa Kosloff

New Zealand-based artist David Cross creates performance installations that critique the grotesque body in contemporary art. His aim is to draw an audience into a "powerful and effective" relationship with his simultaneously attractive and repulsive representations (Cross 2006). I was lucky enough to witness one of his works, over the course of ten days, in the 2011 Prague





Figure 18. David Cross, *Pause* performance still, 2011

Quadrennial. As a part of the New Zealand national exhibition, his work *Pause* (figure 18) was shown for an hour of every day. The installation consisted of a huge black inflatable construction (kind of like a bouncy castle for architects) that was wedged onto the stage of the New Zealand pavilion and could be accessed by a ladder built into the side of the stage. Audience members were encouraged, or lured, by the gymkhana-like seductiveness, the hiss of the air being pumped into the giant lung and the anomaly of 'fun' in the sterile gallery. What was so disconcerting about the work was that once you climbed the ladder and hoisted yourself up onto the summit of the structure, you then were to lower your feet down, into a pair of human hands that stuck out of the side of the inflatable, underside facing up. These were meant to bare your weight over a sheer drop that thankfully, had a big bouncy nest at the bottom. At this point, the relationship between audience and artist became tentative but exciting, as a participator surrendered their feet to the hands (or not, as would be with many) and waited. Some took pleasure in bearing down on the hands; testing them, before being released into the void below. This kind of performance research has particular significance to my project in many ways. One of them being that the intentions of the work cannot be fully realized without participation. On some days during the Quadrennial, the gallery was very quiet and the big black inflatable hissed away unnoticed, the hands waiting for nothing. In a practice like my own that cultivates chance encounter, my audience shapes me and I shape my audience. Another way Cross' work overlaps with mine is in its playful, childlike incentive for participation. Rudimentary shapes, bold colours and absurd practices have a way of inviting a kind of playground bullying or inquisitive discovery.

## Documenting Performance

The documentation of my performances has been an interesting journey. Cultivating a life cycle for a work of art that cannot be hung on a wall, or stuck on a shelf has its problems. Representation is made possible through photographs, moving image and hearsay, but it can never be the original performance again. Re-performance has been the only way a performance could be experienced in its live and tactile format. Yet even then the original is lost.

According to Phillip Auslander (2006) there are two known ways of documenting a performance, which he calls *documentary* and *theatrical*. The first; *documentary* uses the method of trivial realism, in that we are presented with a photograph, or film that is meant to access the reality of a performance. Here he uses Chris Burdens *Shoot* (1971), where Burden has had someone photograph a friend shooting him in a gallery. The other, *theatrical*, deals with performances that have been deliberately staged for film or photography. In this case he uses Yves Klein's document *Leap into the Void* (1960) where Klein set up a false situation that was framed in a way that it looked like he was leaping out of a window into the street far below.

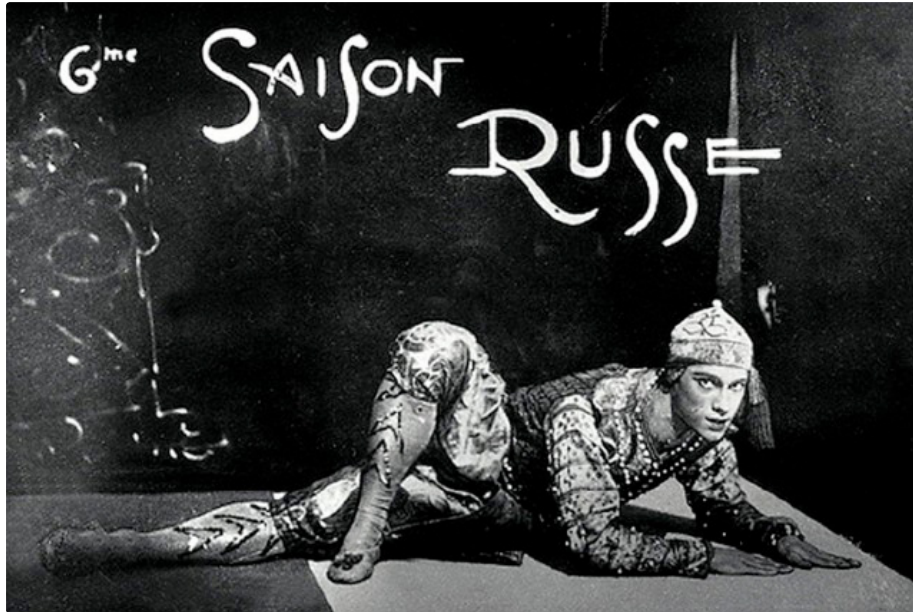


Figure 19. Ballet Russe, *The Right of Spring: Sixth Season*

During the course of my study I have experimented with both. However, I would like to bring another kind of documentation into the mix; a form of documentation that I will call *covert*. I am constantly given photos, gifs and short videos of my performances that I was unaware of. Because I am holed up inside a suit that covers my entire body, except for my eyes and mouth, (which are small holes that only allow myopic vision and basic breath) I am often unaware of people photographing me. As a result, the documentation is divorced from what I would prefer to be preserved. Instead it is what a viewer has chosen to preserve. This kind of documentation is very interesting in that it feeds well into my interest in audience participation, but when it comes to the self-driven documentation of my work, I prefer a theatrical style. To my mind, staging performances conveys my critical concerns more succinctly. Auslander asserts that theatrical documentation may not be performance at all and that the images aren't documents. Instead they are something else; he suggests the term 'performed photography'. I agree with this, because I give great consideration to the type of photographer I choose. Their skill, equipment, lighting and even the tone of colour that their camera and manipulations produce are of paramount importance to the outcome of the photos. I am not

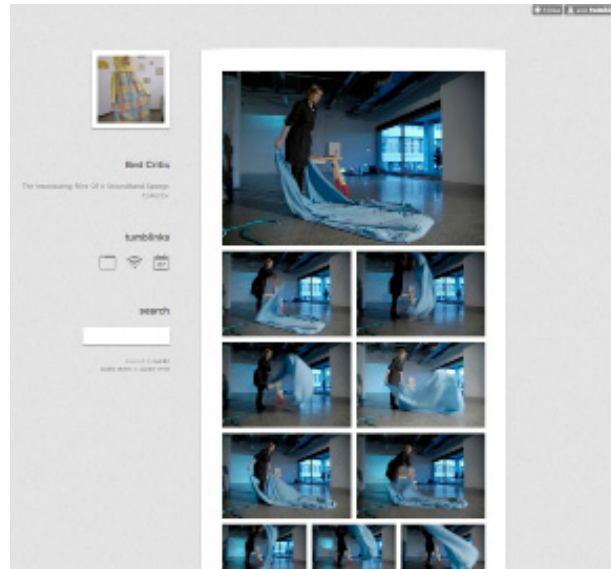


Figure 20. [bedcritic.tumblr.com/](http://bedcritic.tumblr.com/)

adverse to the discipline of photography being placed in equal importance to the performance.

One of the important developments of this project has been to blog my documentation regularly. I have a tumblr site; <http://bedcritic.tumblr.com/>. The form of a blog gives the work a chance to go on living and in this instance I am still working out what I want to share with an Internet audience. Given that my work is becoming increasingly based on live encounter, I have been very careful to keep the blog in a way that supports this intension. Through the course of these two years of postgraduate study, I have come to question how my two worlds of theatre and art can rub off on each other. At this stage of my research I am beginning to critique how each should be experienced or viewed by an audience, how I interact with that audience and how my performances go on living after the event.



Figure 21 - 29.  
*Showblow* performative photographs  
 May 2010  
 from left to right:

*assemble*  
*conquer*  
*hump*  
*kiss*  
*pass*  
*peer*  
*steady*  
*step*  
*tip*

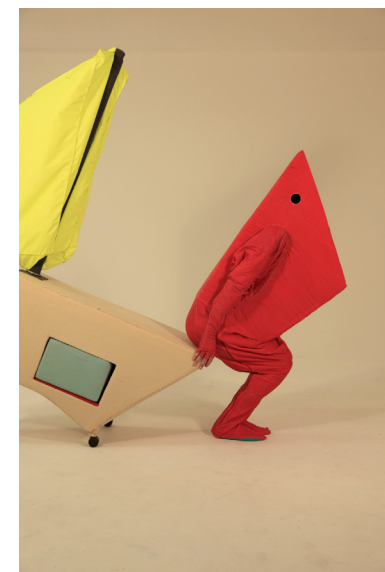




Figure 30. Proposal drawing for *Extension Suits*, August 2011

## EXTENSION SUITS

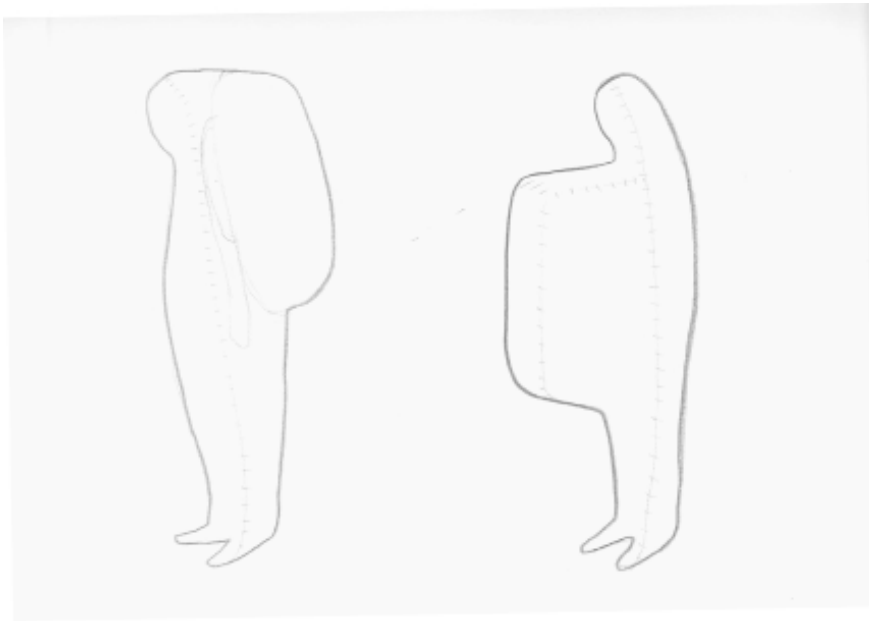
When addressing the notion of an Extension Suit, one could imply that there is a lengthening of a garment involved, to the point of an addition, or that the suit expands out to accommodate an addition. These possibilities could encompass a broader idea that there may be a connection to the addition. Over the past two years of this project, I have been moving closer to the suggestion that the suits I make for performance extend to incorporate the status of object. In this chapter I will attempt to establish how relationships between human and object form a significant part of my research. This will include examples of slippage between subject and object that encourage a position of ethical sustainability. The idea of slippage falls into other areas of my project too, where the suits present opposing positions; is it comic, or is it serious? Is it a costume or is it a disguise? Is it cute and cuddly or is it grotesque? It also relates to my proposal for my graduating show, where the movement between a collection of suits form on to another, requires the extra addition of a 'neutral' suit; an under garment that aids the distinction of a performance in progress.

### Object/Subject

*I look around my studio and I see the objects of my profession; the tools for effort and the manifestations of that labour. Objects that house other objects, that support, brew, penetrate, prop, cut and cover other objects; all lying in a kind of suspense between one encounter with my body and the next.*

*My fingers slip easily into the molded plastic handles of a pair of sewing scissors. I open my hand wide and the twin blades of the shears mimic the action. I close my hand and the blades snap shut, the perfect extension of my intention to cut. A clean cut my body cannot achieve on its own.*

Relationships between human and object is one of the key notions underpinning my project. It is my opinion that Western society is losing the ability to build sustainable relationships with the objects we amass for daily living. Through my practical and theoretical research, I have been attempting to locate areas of slippage between subject and object, as a way to cultivate a more ethical relationship with objects.



Figures 31 & 32. Proposal drawing for *Extension Suits*, August 2011

A way of re-installing this kind of association is to examine the notion of the abject. The idea of the abject I am describing is defined by psychoanalytic theorist, Julia Kristeva as a process that disturbs identity and order because it does not respect borders, (Cross 2006). In the case of my project, an abject relationship between subject and object suggests that the two are interconnected in a way that blurs established boundaries of materiality and implication.

I have a tendency to project a kind of subjective state into objects. For example, with my toys or my car, I am trying to project an independent personality into the thing, so that I can build a relationship with it. I acknowledge that the object does not experience thought or emotion the way humans do, but nevertheless, I make that connection as if it does. In this case, Peter Schwenger, author of *The tears of things* (2006), states that objects are unyielding, that they can never feel what we feel and the subjective state one puts onto an object is ultimately *for* the subject (p. 2). It is us that the object is reflecting back. A huge amount of the objects we covet and utilize in this capitalist environment are processed beyond recognition of their original composition and contain so many hazardous chemicals it is hard to categorise. Not to forget that the objects are often processed in sweatshops that exploit labour, used for a short period of time, then junked back into the environment to pollute land and waterways. If Schwenger is correct and the object is a mirror, then this is a dire picture of humanity.

In Jane Bennett's essay, *The Force of Things* (2004), she suggests that projecting a 'naive realism' into the political position one has around objects, can cultivate a more ethical and ecologically sustainable appreciation of things. She supports this idea by teasing out what she calls 'Thing-power materialism', stating that there is a non-humanity that flows around and through humans...

*...The particular matter-energy formation that is a human is always engaged in a working relationship with other formations, some human and some not. Deleuze and Guattari, in a similar vein, locate humanity within a single cosmic flow of "matter-movement". This autopoietic flow is capable of an astonishingly wide variety of mobile configurations: it is "matter in variation that enters assemblages and leaves them." (20) This is not a world, in the first instance, of subjects and objects, but of various materiality's constantly engaged in a network of relations... (p.354)*





Figures 33. Laressa Kosloff, *Spirit and Muscle*, 2006

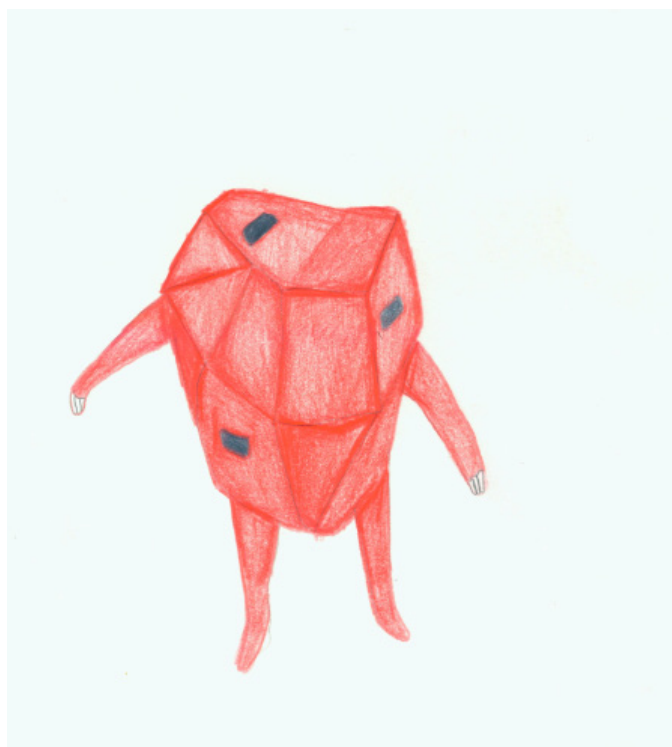
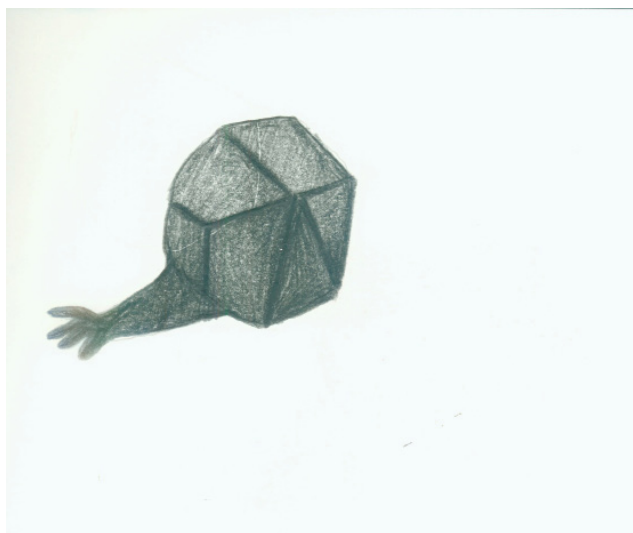
Considering that one cannot see this non-humanity that runs through everything, Bennett's notion of 'naïve realism' forces us to *speculate* that it is there, which is problematic. Nevertheless, her argument is compelling. I do believe there is a life force in all things, and this does inform the materials and ways of making within my practice.

To address the physical manifestation of the subject object relationship, my artwork deliberately employs a slippage that unites body and object material over time. The textiles I use for my work have a tendency, above all other objects, to receive, share and contain the body fluids, labours and messes of a human being. I prefer to use soft stretchy fabrics and bedding for my artwork as these fabrics have associations with leisure, comfort and sleep. They add to the cooped up and passive nature of my performances. According to Gregson and Crew, fabric is not just about adornment and fashion, or comfort and even functionality, "It is an extension of our corporeality. It becomes us; we personalise it with our own leakiness" (2003, p.171). In relation to bodies in the weave, D.H Lawrence acknowledges the notion of touch in the poem featured in the preface of this dissertation. He writes...

*Things men have made with wakened hands, and put soft life into  
are awake through years of transferred touch, and go on glowing  
for long years.  
And for this reason, some old things are lovely  
warm still with the life of forgotten men that made them*

This poem explores the role of time as a factor in building up the residue of human contact. It acknowledges the sweat and effort put into the making and consequently into the material, and celebrates old things as being desirable. The poem was part of a series written in 1929 that dealt with the effects of industrialism, consumption and the desire for the new. Its influence on my project has been exemplary.

A project that examines the way a body's image can be associated with an object is Xavier Leroy's *E.X.T.E.N.S. I.O.N.S* project (1999-2001) On his website, artist and choreographer Leroy, discusses his theories on incorporating objects into his choreographies. He describes our image of the body as extremely fluid



Figures 34 & 35. Proposal drawings top and bottom, for *Extension Suits*, 2011

and dynamic. So fluid that it is capable of integrating a large range of objects and discourses to the point that anything that comes into contact with the body image and stays there for long enough will become incorporated into the body image. Leroy's concept has helped me to form connections between my use of soft, stretchy and stuffed fabrics and my interest in comfort, labour and futility as discussed in Chapter 1. It also does well to connect external objects as a form of personal identity.

## Extension Suits

The work that I am proposing for the graduating show involves the incorporation of objects into the body image. It proposes that an object can be connected to the human body in a way that makes it an extension, or part of the body. The genesis of this aesthetic came about when I started looking at Australian artist Laresa Kosloff's work (figure 33). Although her theoretical concerns do not crossover with mine, I was very interested in her piece, *Spirit and Muscle* (2006), (figure 33), where she encased a female body into a three-dimensional cubist shape and videoed the combination performing gestures of strength. The effect that this particular work has had on my own is to encourage me to experiment with performing as, connected to, or part of, an object.

The resulting *Extension Suits*, have raised questions about identity. In my introduction I asked; Are they comic, or are they serious? Are they costume, or are they disguise? And are they cute and cuddly, or are they grotesque? The slippage that occurs in this instance, serves to dislodge any claims to identity. Instead I am interested in them being both, or somewhere in between. David Cross addresses this position in his PhD Thesis, *Some Kind of Beautiful: The Grotesque Body in Contemporary Art* (2006).

*I engage with beauty in tandem with the grotesque to build hybrid artworks that are appealing and repulsive because they are both beautiful and grotesque. The critical aim is not to elevate beauty or the grotesque to a privileged status, as was the goal of Kant and Bataille. Rather, the challenge is to blur the border between these categories by identifying and extending key points of connectivity. (p. 41)*

Cross suggests that the challenge with identifying key intersection points between binaries is to find the 'blind spots' in the spaces between. And that is where, potentially, the difference dwells.





Figure 36. Proposal drawings top and bottom, for *Extension Suits*, 2011

The blind spots between costume and disguise are particularly interesting to my project in that the suggestion of fashion within the namesake of a 'suit' alludes to the idea that these garments are signifying my interest in the rag trade.

Humour plays a significant role in my work, uniting audiences and opening a path to the serious issues that underpin this project. In the same way that the cute and cuddly seduces you with its Children's TV show softness, however there is always something alarming about my work. Maybe it is in the way I walk when I'm in the suits, or the slightly depressed air of the characters. A viewer said to me once that the sight of my suits made them want to scream and scream. And yet another just wanted to wrap their arms around me and go to sleep. This could relate to the idea of the uncanny, meaning that, something familiar unexpectedly arises in a strange and unfamiliar context, or something strange and unfamiliar arises in a familiar context. (Cross 2006). The very physical nature of the suits could bring up all sorts of deep undigested experiences.

The notion of the futile and comic that I introduced in Chapter 1, also feeds into the making and performing of the *Extension Suits*. It is like I have absorbed the uselessness of the objects I was making in the development of this project, back into the suits. What was once autonomous and futile, is now attached and futile, referencing the plight of Sisyphus and his rock.

As there will be several *Extension Suits* in my final show, the addition of a Neutral Suit has come into play. To move between the suits, I have created another 'undersuit' that will act as a go-between. I am intending to leave the *Extension Suits* in various sites around the Art and Design building and this, I feel, requires a special garment that signifies I am performing. This *Neutral Suit* could also serve as a way of enhancing the act of getting in and out of the *Extension Suits*, suggesting that there is transference from neutrality to character. There is also the issue of detritus. How will the suits 'occur' when they are empty? They will pick up the dirt and grime of the environment. How will this affect the way an audience view the suits? When I have completed the end of year presentation and examination, I will be adding a short text at the end of my thesis to address these issues along with documentation of my performing of *Extension Suits*.



Figure 37. Proposal drawings for *Extension Suits*, 2011

## IMAGE GALLERY 2010 - 2011

Abstract and futile objects for *Auckland Society of Something (ASS)*, June 2010



*Blue Movie* 2010



*Proquest* 2010



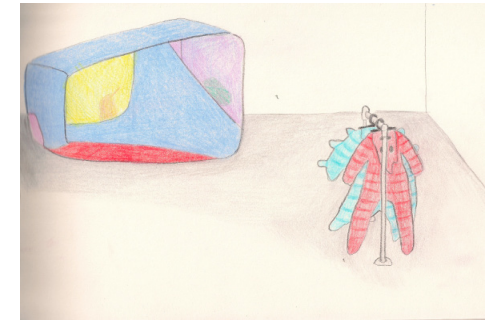
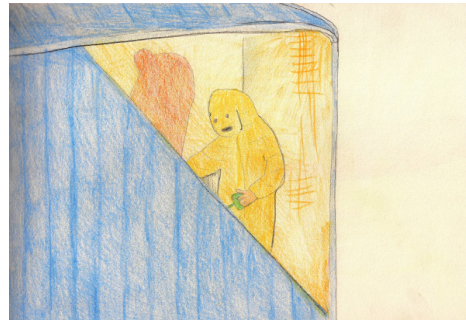
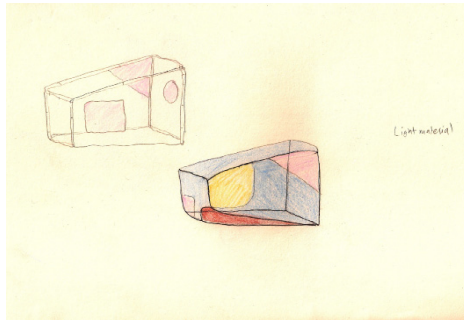
*ASS* 2010



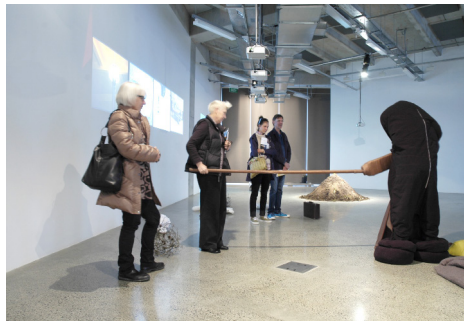
*Pink Rambo* 2010



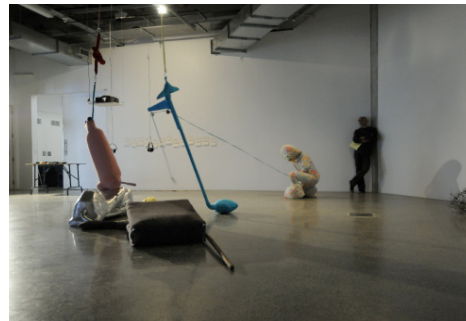
## Proposal drawings for *Live.Repeat.Playback* St Paul Street Gallery, August 2010



## Documentation of performances at *Live.Repeat.Playback* St Paul Street Gallery, August 2010



Tuesday 17th: *Shunta*



Wednesday 18th: *Great Expectations*



Thursday 19th: *Freestyler*



Friday 20th: *Given Time (Flaneur)*



Tuesday 24th: *El Fresco*



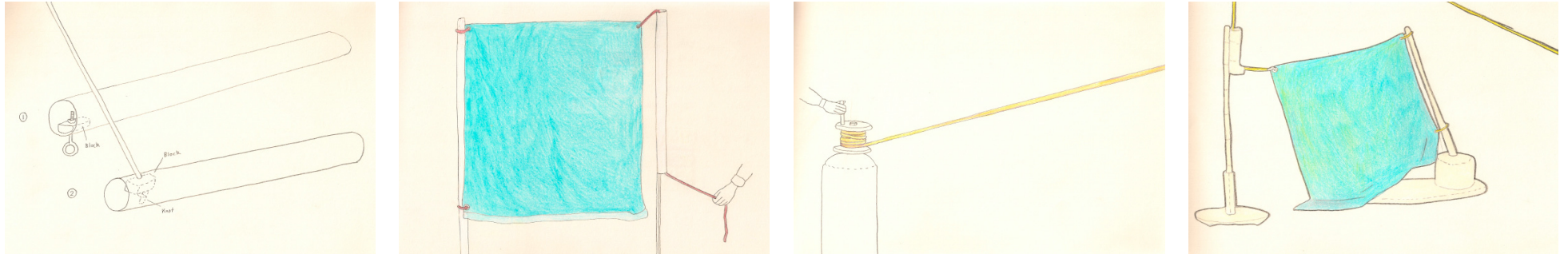
Wednesday 25th: *Birthday*



Thursday 26th: *Final Wrap*



A selection of proposal drawings for Grad Show at AUT University, November 2010



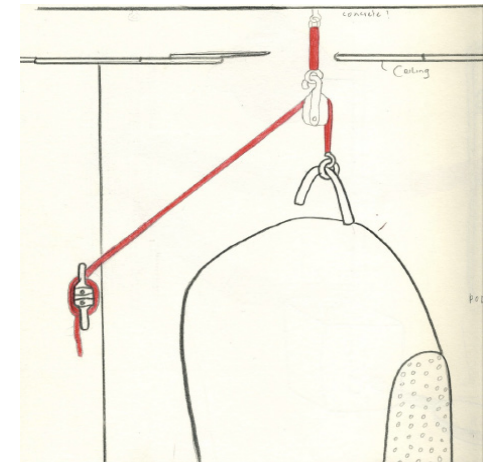
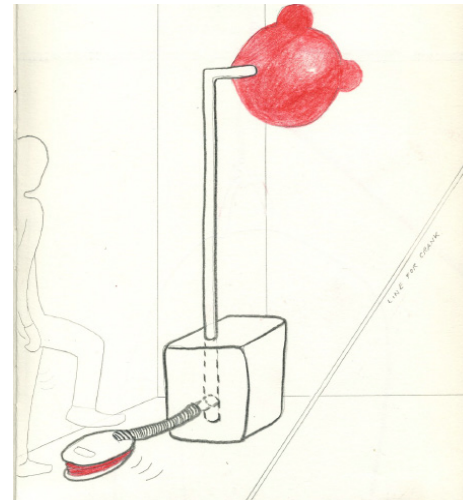
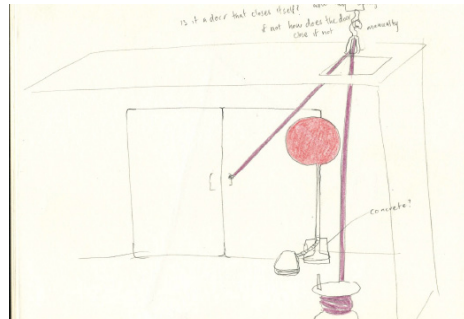
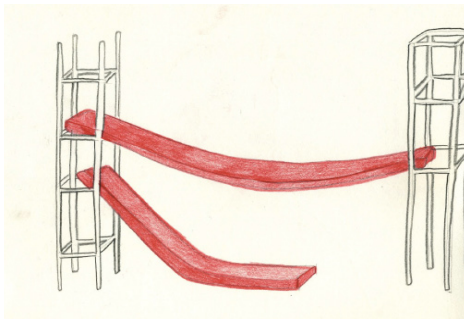
Installation for Grad Show at AUT University, November 2010



*Many Efforts* at St Paul Street Gallery, September 2010



Proposal drawings for *New Faces* at Creative New Zealand, December 2010



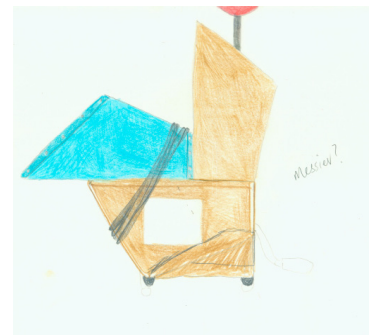
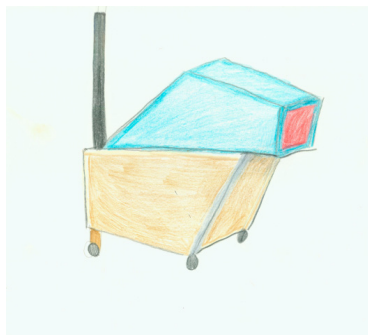
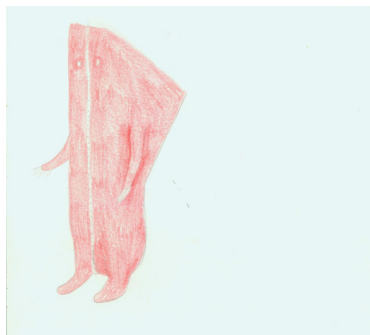


*Big White Soul, Karekare Beach, April 2011*





Proposal drawings for *The Object of Labour in Material Remains* at the Prague Quadrennial, February 2011



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Figures 31 & 32. Proposal drawing for *Extension Suits*, August 2011, coloured pencil on paper.

Figures 33. Laressa Kosloff, *Spirit and Muscle*, 2006, retrieved on 4/10/2011 from [www.laresakosloff.com/](http://www.laresakosloff.com/)

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## AFTERWORD

The performance of *Extension Suits* on the night of my graduating Masters exhibition began amongst a large crowd. Some of the crowd followed me up, and around five floors of the Art and Design building. Over the duration of half an hour, I moved between five suits, taking on the particular character of each as I entered a suit. The character I had created for each suit was an outward manifestation of some kind of futile struggle with relating to an object. The object of which was factored into the design of each suit as a seamless extension of my body. Having a series of suits gave me the ability to explore notions of struggle on several different levels, including physical, psychological and sensual. For example, the struggle associated with the blue glitter suit (titled *Little Blue Touch*) was almost imperceptible to a viewer because my task within the suit was mundane to the naked eye. What the audience would see was a strange blue character drawing a stick extended from one arm over tactile objects in its immediate environment. However there was an internal struggle going on. This was to focus my attention on the transference of touch between my hand, the stick and the object. In other words to feel the object through the stick.

It was clear when proposing for *Extension Suits*, that I would need a neutral suit for moving between the Extension Suits. This neutral suit composed of light grey tenting fabric resembled a forensic overall or a boiler suit, leaving the face, hands and feet uncovered. I wanted this basic garment to have an air of laborious intent, so that I could assist my audience to recognise that entering, exiting and movement between the suits was as important to the performance as being inside the suits. This created a whole new area of exploration for me, one that I would like to look into more carefully in the future. Each extension suit acted as a kind of chrysalis or skin, that during the climbing into or shedding harked back to the natural phenomenon of butterflies transforming, or a banana being peeled. This also had the effect of bringing the often, secretive act of theatrical transformation into the spotlight. I have observed this kind of public metamorphosis in the donning of masks in traditional Chinese and Japanese theatre.

It was quite surprising that upon exiting some of the suits, people clapped, as if I had finished a show. People also clapped when I was able to fulfill a particularly arduous task. This suggests that there must have been a measure



of frustration experienced during the viewing of my work.

I proposed within my exegesis that when viewing *Extension Suits*, the emphasis would be on chance encounter and that by moving from floor to floor, I could infiltrate the crowds of people instead of them coming to me. Although, this happened to some extent, there was also a crowd that followed me around, which changed the way I performed. This change occurred as a feeling of needing to play to the people. This is something I constantly battle with. The dramatic and theatrical elements of my work naturally reach out to a crowd, however it is also important that I refrain from trotting out crowd pleasing acts and follow a more investigative route, allowing myself to push the boundaries of my knowledge of the materials and tasks.

I feel that this came through well with the pink suit, (titled *Drop Dead Pink*). Being the most recently made, the suit was uncharted territory and had a certain anxiety attached to its performance. As a result, my tasks were performed without the censure of rehearsal and featured a genuine struggle for mastery. I also felt that the idea of getting inside the pink suit with an object and having to negotiate with that object for a space created for a human, conveyed the key notions of my research in a more concise way than with the other suits. Human negotiation with an object occurred, to an extent, within the grey stationery suit (titled *Sweatshop*) however human and object parameters were more abstract, meaning that one couldn't quite tell where object ended and human began. While my body in *Drop Dead Pink* attempted to wrestle, my body in *Sweatshop* morphed with the encased object, creating a kind of fabric cyborg.

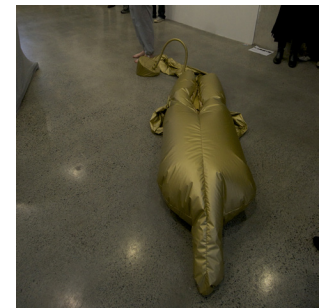
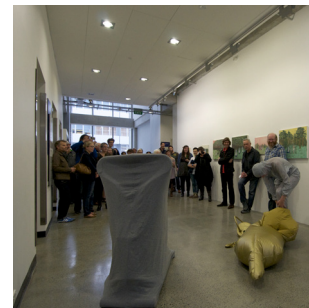
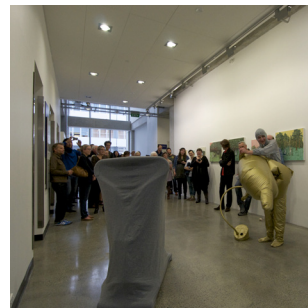
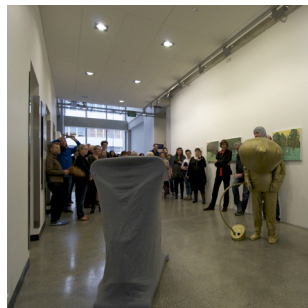
I found there was a problem with leaving the suits on the ground behind me. The gold suit titled *Gold U Schmuck*, was stolen by some idiot, who paraded all over the building before being forced to hand it back. He had torn the delicate stitching. This is something that I will have to give more thought. I like the idea of there being remnants after a performance, but this is not the first time people have taken the liberty to climb into my suits.

As a whole, the performance was thoroughly exhausting, but very rewarding in its making and presenting. The addition of my Blog and Book base on Level 4 of the Art and Design building provided an opportunity to show the working drawings and Blog site that supports and prolongs the life cycle of the performances and objects created over the tenure of this project.

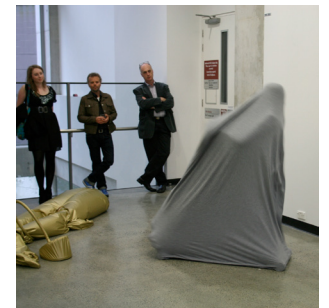
The following five pages include documentation of the performance *Extension Suits*.

















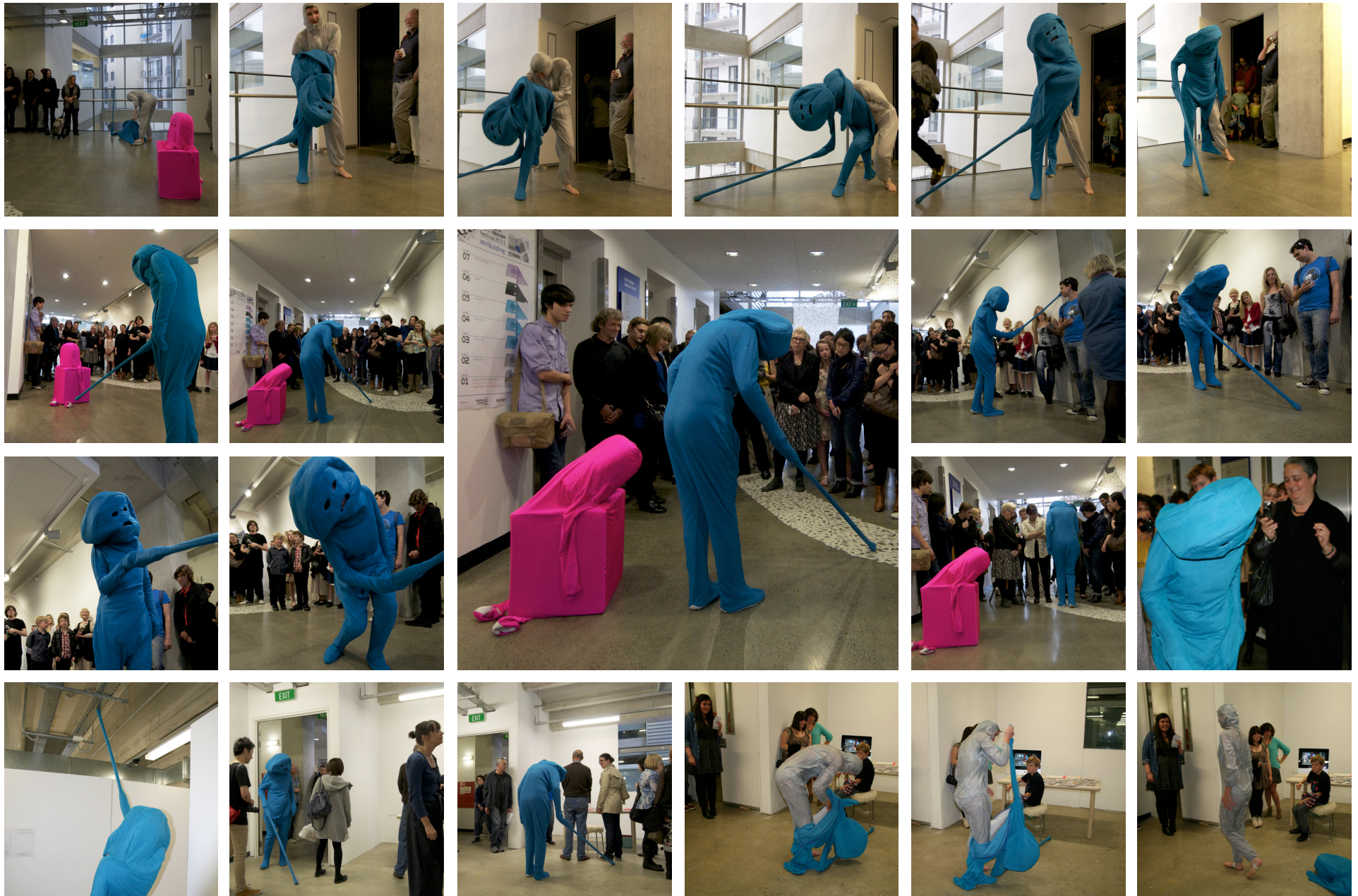


fig 38. Photographic Essay of *Extension Suits* November 2011, Raw Festival, Aut University.





fig 39



fig40

## APPENDIX I

### Transcript of Seminar delivered for Post-Graduate Art and Design Conference at AUT, August 2011.

Part of my practice-based research explores the autopoietic flow between human and object. It highlights a working method that seeks a way toward breaking down hierarchical tendencies over everyday objects. I am investigating the ever-decreasing duration that exists between the production of objects to landfill and questioning the methods in which these objects are created. The research attempts to manifest a desire for comfort and entertainment in all its subjects and yet this never seems to be reached, reflecting the shift from producing goods for survival to the pathos associated with a system that undermines the value of labour.

My research takes shape through a series of itinerant performance installations that employ methods of disguise and demeanour, to explore how humans could build a more rewarding and sustainable relationship with objects.

To start with it would help to tell you what this project is not. It is not a project that focus's on our self-indulgent state of being human. It doesn't examine the various attitudes of being ME, Its not even interested in ME. It may delve into pathos and shameless sentimentality, but this angle is purely designed to coax the human subject into taking a good hard look at itself for a moment.

*This project views the human body as an object along side all other objects. It asks the human being to watch the human doing as it goes about its tasks, utilising, nurturing, relying on and destroying objects in its immediate locale. It looks into the inventory of human activity and asks "What does it take to get a bit of respect for the things around us?"*

I would like to zero in on the autopoietic relationship humans have with objects, Normal everyday objects like a chair, a box, a TV.

I am also examining how this relationship has become a, more than often, fleeting one with mass production of consumer objects into the market place, the lack of accountability for their origin and the poor quality of these "things". The duration between production and the rubbish has become so minimal that respect for materiality has hit an all time low.

*In my abstract, I mentioned the notion of autopoietic flow. For those of you who are not familiar with the term autopoiesis, it doesn't have anything to do with poetry. It's originally a scientific term introduced by Humberto Maturana and F.J Varela to describe a closed and autonomous system that is self-producing. They state that all living systems are autopoietic and as Mat-*

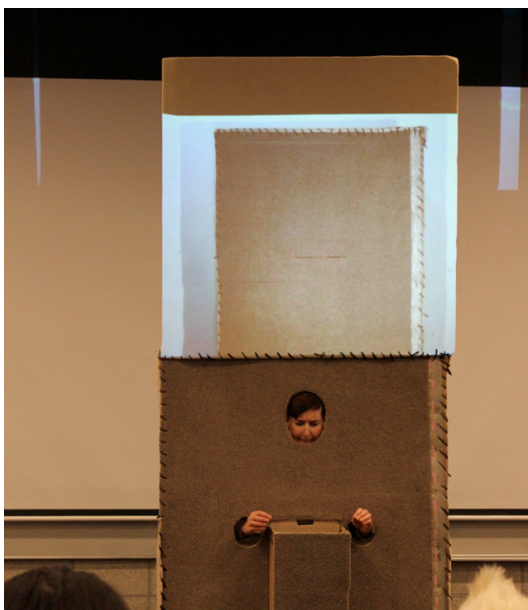


fig 41



fig 42

urana puts it...

*"The living organization is a circular organization which secures the production or maintenance of the components that specify it in such a manner that the product of their functioning is the very same organization that produces them." (Autopoiesis and Cognition page 48)*  
A perfect example of this is the living cell.

Applying this principle to an Art context that explores relationships between human and object could be seen as problematic. But I am appropriating this term hypothetically. In the first instance I am interested in the human body as an object, producing, connecting with and utilizing other objects in the world.

*But I am also interested in the subjective implications humans place on objects, in that humans produce objects for their own means and become reliant on them through habitual association. We even begin to identify ourselves through the objects we have around us, and become sentimental about certain things because they have shared our history with us.*

This interconnected relationship has been described by Jane Bennett In her essay "The Force of Things", as an autopoietic flow...

*Yes Bennett uses this idea of a flow in conjunction with "autopoiesis" to support her theories on what she calls 'thing materialism'. The idea is that the, quote, "...particular matter-energy formation that is a human is always engaged in a working relationship with other formations, some human and some not..." In a similar way Deleuze and Guattari locate humanity as being in a continuous cosmic flow between configurations of matter and that there are an extraordinary array of mobile equations. She summarises this theory by saying that, quote "This is not a world, in the first instance, of subjects and objects, but of various materiality's constantly engaged in a network of relations."*

So how does this idea of Autopoiesis manifest in my practice?

*Well it's happening right now.*

I guess so; I'm just not sure about how to perceive me. I am supposed to be looking at me as an object, but I feel very subjective right now.

*Well its hypothetical. The point is to step outside your self and try and see yourself as material along side all the other materiality's in the world...e.g. carpet, lectern, projector screen, paper...and become aware of how we are constantly in some kind of relationship with these things. Part of my practice is to concentrate my energy on the flow between these materiality's, to explore why and how humans abuse other materialities so mercilessly and what to do about it.*

Well, I've been very interested in James Lovelocks Gaia theory for this very reason. Lovelock developed his theory that the earths biota, coupled with its environment



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acts as a single living system. It is his philosophy that

*Humanity is peripheral and dangerous to the life systems of the planet; He states that "Our anthropocentric concern is to preserve earth as WE want it."*

You mean like it's a machine and we can manipulate it? This idea reduces everything into parts and assumes that life has come about by a chance of physics and chemistry. It makes evolution into a game of ruthless competition, where the natural world is there to be exploited.

*Well Lovelock suggests an alternative to this view that the world is a machine. David Abrahm discusses this in his paper "Gaia in Action", where the change to an organic metaphor, meaning the earth is alive, removes the assumption that humans can interact with nature as a machine and quote, "It allows recovery of our sense of being encompassed by and immersed in the world as Participants " unquote*  
So co-operation is the key?

*Yes, according to Lovelock*

This requires human compassion, compassion for things, the earth, other people. Compassion is subjective.

*Yes, this is true, but humans have to be subjective to get in touch with their inner object*

*Poetry is a fantastic way of being subjective.*

That's true

*Things men have made with wakened hands , and put soft life  
into  
are awake through years of transferred touch, and go on glowing  
for long years.  
And for this reason, some old things are lovely  
Warm still with the life of forgotten men that made them*

That's by DH Lawrence.

*Yeh*

The transference of touch, the glow of old things and the history behind the hand made object, imbues the object with value. Brings it alive for its possessor

*Hmmm the idea of Possession comes up in a text by Peter Schwenger called 'The Tears of Things' He discusses Possession of objects as ownership and ownership is, as Walter Benjamin*



states “ *The most intimate relationship that one can have with objects*”. He cautions that it is not the object that lives in us, but that we come alive in the object. The object absorbs the sentiment of its owner and become things that, quote, “ *...paradoxically possess something of their possessors*”.

In other words, DH Lawrence’s lovely old hand made stuff owns HIM rather than he owning IT. Objects can be that powerfully connected to us through personal, religious and historical associations that we will cart it round like a limb.

*Hmmm, I’m interested to know where this comes through in your performances and installations.*

Well it manifests aesthetically and conceptually through a series of roving performance installations, where I as a costumed character interact with a set of objects. Lately my characters have become more and more integrated into the status of object. I still maintain an emotional demeanor though. My characters are very emotional, almost depressed really. Very sentimental.

*Yes Sentimentality is a big part of the equation. I believe that through this transference of myself into various materialities I learn to value the things and the environment around me.*

The point is to shamelessly baby everything, to treat it as you would a small baby. With care, nurturing and attention.

*And kindness*

Yes Kindness.

Why are the characters so depressed, so emo?

*In my suits I am able to get in touch with my inner itinerant, my depressed drop out, the slow moving, irresponsible and free roamer of the world. This homeless shiftless individual is weighed down by his possessions, tied to the simplest of tasks. He... (And I’m not sure why he’s always a he)... puts the greatest and most frustrated effort into things, and its always with little point.*

So the presence of sentimentality is in the weight, in the tremendous responsibility that life is and the desire to drop out, become unthinking, become, an object almost.

Yes

You know Schwenger is good with this. He has some really interesting ideas in this direction. He leans toward Freud's death drive as a way to postulate that moment of longing for an anterior state of objects, the state of actually being an object. Away from the personality: away from the consciousness of humanity.

