

THE WEIGHT OF THINGS

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A thesis submitted to Auckland University of Technology
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Art and Design (MA&D)

2012

School of Art and 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 (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.



Ross Forbes

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank and acknowledge all my supervisors who have worked so hard on my behalf: Christopher Braddock, Paul Cullen and Monique Redmond. A special thanks, too, goes out to my partner, Audrey Boyle, for her encouragement and advice throughout the years spent studying.

Finally I would like to mention my late dear friend—the artist Megan Phillips—whose example I have tried to follow and who is sadly missed.

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Abstract

The *weight of things* is a sculptural project that utilizes materials such as stone, metal foil, paint, steel and mirror in relation to a specific site. In the process key binaries— substance/surface, weightlessness/ weight, transparency/reflection, geometric/organic, sight/embodiment, autonomy/site and finally referent/materiality—are activated in a manner that contests the significance traditionally attached to the primary term. Here Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction provides a framework for thinking through the ways in which the sign's relationship to the *thing* can be questioned by the material ecologies proposed.

Contextualizing my own practise and providing further insight into this question of signification are the practices of the artists Robert Smithson, Gego and Jessica Stockholder. The research does not seek a new meaning—a new grammar—embedded, *fixed* in the overarching paradigm of representation, but specifically sets out to avoid its grasp, even as it acknowledges signification's ultimate reach. In parallel with deconstructive theory the objective is to suspend judgement, to invoke a situation where 'sense' is immanent—in flux—a promise and not its committal.



Forbes, R. *citrus and disco*.
Details of entire
installation. (2011)

Introduction

As an analysis of practice this exegesis primarily focuses on the example of *citrus and disco* (2011)—the collective title for the variety of works I presented at the end of my Post Graduate Diploma year. I will also discuss a number of developing works from 2012 in relation to *citrus and disco*.

Occupying an entire room *citrus and disco* was characterised by its use of brightly coloured twine and physical attachment to site. In addition, there was the visible privileging of the horizontal as against the vertical axis of orientation evidenced in the number of works that strayed from the perpendicular.

The largest sculpture and the title piece, *citrus and disco* (2011) consisted of a chain of objects ranging from disco ball to potted citrus tree to rock. Connected by a tense hyphenation of yellow twine these objects—suspended in space or planted on the floor—sprawled some 10 metres across space in some aberrant illustration of praxis. Punctuating their articulation—hanging vertically — were two further weighted objects.

To the rear of the room the body of pine that was *drawing red* (2011) pivoted on its base, its uprightness skewed by the blue twine attaching it to the adjacent wall. A deep red, *drawing red* presents itself as the most statue-like of all works presented, albeit one whose composure is disrupted by its physical tie to the wall.

Further round there was *dead weight* (2011). Consisting of another body of wood—this one suspended in mid air and the colour of aluminium—it was anchored at one end by rock drenched in silver paint whilst its counterweight at the other was a tetrahedron sheathed in mirrors. Finally there was *trolley work* (2011), another piece whose verticality was compromised in its relationship to counterweight. Its movement arrested in mid flight, the trolley of this piece—hyphenated from the blue rock which is its anchor—leans back in stasis, apparently going nowhere.

The following analysis sees several modalities, or operations, at work (which form seven short chapters)—substance/surface, weight/weightlessness, transparency/reflection, geometric/organic, sight/embodiment autonomy/site and finally referent/materiality. Conceptualised as binaries, these ‘modes’ highlight problems within binary signification itself—the relationship of *thing* to *sign*—traditionally associated with the philosophy of deconstruction as articulated by Jacques Derrida. Hence this exegesis begins with an investigation of just this conceptual context, this philosophical enquiry evoked from the exigencies of practice. From here—in a broadening of context that takes into consideration the work of other artists such as Gego, Robert Smithson and Jessica Stockholder—I move on to an analysis of the ways in which these modalities unfold—substantiate—themselves within practice.

The idea of weight as integral characteristic, as intrinsic to *meaning*, is one often ignored by traditional plinth based sculpture¹ (Herkenhoff, 1999, p. 122). My project seeks to redress this lack of emphasis, positioning the one natural force common to every *thing* at the centre of its deliberations. I contrast this with its episodic absence or denial, thus raising questions about traditional scientific definition; about the scientific axiom that equates mass with weight, casts the meaning of mass in terms of weight. Similarly I set out to problematize the relationships within the other binaries where meaning has traditionally been seen to originate in just one of the terms, the other being classified in terms of the primary term's absence—as its lack, its shadow, its *other*.

Hence the superficial qualities of things are emphasized over their substance; the mirror, which is said to prevent or block the transparency of vision, is, in my practice, given conceptual—and actual—weight; the organic or formlessness seen as the absence of order is imbued with significance. Similarly the traditional status of the optical within art is unsettled by an analysis of the body's role in perception and site is investigated to establish its role in the production of artistic meaning. Finally, the potential of materiality itself to unsettle its referential aspect comes under consideration.

However what is of vital importance here is that the secondary *other* is not invoked simply to reorder the terms of signification's hierarchical structure—to reverse the polarity signified/signifier—to place the signifier before the signified—in an operation that leaves its premises unchallenged² (Howells, 1999, p. 83). After all, any investment in authority, whether it is of sign over thing or thing over sign is still an investment *in authority*—in the premises of binary signification. This project, rather, seeks to undermine any claim to certainty, any recourse to authority said to reside in the allocation of meaning to sign or thing, art or experience. Meaning is located precisely *within* the paradox that is the simultaneity of sign and thing. The terrain, “where the certainties of didactic discourse are hurled into the erosion of the poetic principle” is my objective here (Flam, 1996, p. 107).

¹ Cildo Meireles, a Brazilian artist of the Neo-Concretist movement, noted that “this question of weight...has been almost totally bypassed in accounts of sculpture's history whereas anyone who actually works in the world of sculpture...always comes up against the problem of moving all that mass. Despite its being systematically disregarded, I see this feature of sculpture as perhaps its most significant feature”.

² Howells notes that “Formalism ultimately confirms the logocentrism it contests by its support of the metaphysical opposition between form and content” and “Derrida warns against” this.



Forbes, R. *citrus and disco*.
Details (2) Title work. (2011).





Forbes, R. *drawing red*. (2011)



Forbes, R. *dead weight*. (2011)



Forbes, R. *dead weight*, (foreground),
(2011). *trolley work*, (rear), (2011).



Forbes, R. *trolley work*. (2011)

A theory of poison, the remedy of theory

The principle theoretical context in which my practice might be situated was best articulated by Jacques Derrida in the analysis of language undertaken in *Disseminations* (translated 1981, originally published 1972). Derrida's principle focus was the problem of representation, of translation, of signification. How it is that in any system of signs one thing can be said to refer to another, to signify something else; how do we gain direct access to that which is signified if all we ever appear to have are 'signs' of that thing? What Derrida is interested in here is what has obsessed thinkers in the west since antiquity and which had one of its earliest expositions in the 'forms' of Plato.

In Platonic philosophy an ideal form was said to pre-exist and transcend any signification of that form. The Ideal was a form's essential nature, its *meaning*, eternal and unchanging. Such thinking always emphasized—privileged—the signified, the term to which the sign was said to point. The signified was thus deemed the *essence* of its sign or signifier. In linguistics, specifically, such a hierarchical formulation implied:

a chain of representations which lead in uninterrupted fashion from experiences and ideas to their expression in speech, and later, perhaps, writing. In the other direction words can be traced back to their meaning in their object; the signifier is always the representation of the original signified. (Howells, 1998, p. 49)

Over time such thinking has given rise to the various binary oppositions—soul/body, mental/physical, form/content, meaning/text, speech/writing, etc—common to philosophic discourse. Derrida termed these oppositions, and the thinking that gave rise to them, the myth of the transcendental signified, or logocentrism. In art this Platonic conception is said to define and be the basis of what we call modernism—the quest for the essential within the various genre's of art.

Throughout his career Derrida was intent on mounting a sustained attack on such a philosophy—on the very conception of essence—and in *Disseminations* he did so specifically via an analysis of language, or text. Theoreticians have since coined the neologism 'deconstruction' to describe the school of thinking subsequently ushered in by his analysis. For Derrida, language was the system of signification *par excellence*. Any problems, he theorized, to be found in language as a system of signs could be applied to any other system of expression—and this naturally includes art. As he famously stated in 1967, "the problem of language has never been simply one problem among others" (1967, p. 15 as cited in Lawlor, 2003, p. 143).

Within *Disseminations* Derrida unearthed the lever which would destabilize any presumption to origin merited by the term essence, unsettle any claim to transcendent authority. In a manner analogous to the scientific discovery of quantum physics which relegated certainty to a minor role within scientific discourse, Derrida exposed certain paradoxes, anomalies, within language which problematized its status as a mere re-presentation of an original essence. That is, his analysis laid bare *undecidable* terms—terms which "mean both one thing and its opposite and neither one thing nor its opposite"—at the heart of sign (Howells, 1998, p. 78). Definitions so defined are not *definitions* at all and so are generative of no clear meaning.

One such example was uncovered by Derrida in his analysis of Plato's defence of the essence of speech. Intent on proving the primacy of speech over what he saw as its mere representation—its sign—in writing, Plato attributes mutually exclusive meanings to one and the same word, the *pharmakon*. Depending on his intent, Plato translates *pharmakon* first one way, as life affirming, as medicine, and then later as its opposite, as poison, as that which heralds death. That is to say he attributes two contrary essences to one and the same word, or sign, just as he is arguing for the primacy of an essence—speech—over its very sign, writing.

According to Derrida in *Positions* (1972), the *pharmakon* is a clear example of paradox, one which “can no longer be understood in terms of [binary] philosophic opposition, and which none the less inhabit it, resist it and disorganise it” without—and this is very important—“ever constituting a third term” (p. 58 as cited in Howells, 1998, p. 79). That is, without presenting any *resolution* to the problem of meaning. There could be no resolution to what any sign might refer to precisely because this “impasse between two seeming irreconcilables”—this substance that is at once both medicine and poison but cannot be both—opened up the sign to a multiplicity of meanings, to what could only remain *unresolved* (Gardner, 2009, p. 72). Thus the *pharmakon* was just one example of an undecidable term, one whose essence lay in its lack of essence; its substance in its absence of substance, its concept in its misconception.

Within *Disseminations* Derrida outlined a number of such terms but in each case their function was not negative—they did not close meaning down. Rather, according to Howells, their action was “positive: it was not a loss of meaning but rather the affirmation of an indefinite number of meanings” (1998, p. 79). For Derrida such terms were a syntactic practice which both forged and dissolved meaning—which clouded the hitherto important distinction between things and signs, content and form. That is, as in quantum physics, the paradox of essence “presents us with a world of meaning out of our control”, beyond the terrain of fixed, unchanging Ideas envisaged by Plato (Howells, 1998, p. 79).

In the absence of such a terrain, in the absence of such certainty, Derrida locates meaning in the nature of the *relationship* between signifier and signified. That is, he locates meaning in the notion of *différance* —a key Derridean concept. This word originates in the French verb *différer* which means to both ‘defer’ and ‘differ’. Thus *différance* has both a temporal and spatial sense. Derrida’s fundamental insight here is that meaning is constituted by the very difference between a sign and that of what it is said to be a sign of, that meaning is simply not possible without such demarcation or difference. This difference is both temporal—in the sense that essence is said to precede image—and diachronic—the sign *must differ* from what it is said to re-present, otherwise it would not be a sign. That is to say, a sign is always, necessarily, a sign of *something else*, of which it is *not*. Gayatri Spivak in her Translators Preface to Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* summarized it thus:

Word and thing or thought never in fact become one. We are reminded of, referred to, what the convention of words sets up as thing or thought, by a particular arrangement of words. The structure of reference works and can go on working not because of the identity between these two so-called component parts of the sign, but because of their relationship of difference. *The sign marks a place of difference.* (1976, p. 16)

Or, as Barbara Johnson put it in her Translators Preface to *Disseminations*: “As soon as there is meaning there is difference” and this difference is “something that is really nothing—a difference, a gap, an interval, a trace” (1981, p. 10).

This brings me to another Derridean idea of importance to my practice—the trace. If meaning is something that is at the same time nothing, then significance is located only in the *trace* of that which is always absent, in the track or imprint of that which it is not. The concept of ‘trace’ is a difficult one to grasp precisely because it does not, and cannot, *mean anything*, for to mean something is to place it always, already, within the transcendent thinking it seeks to undermine. As Howells puts it, “the trace ... is not a secondary mark of prior origin, it means rather that there was no origin before the trace” (1998, p. 51). Elsewhere she writes, “In simple terms, the trace expresses the absence of full present meaning in so far as meaning is differential, a matter of constant referral onwards from term to term” (1998, p. 50). It is, simply, “a past that has never been present”, a past that in its presence is both simultaneously, yet wholly neither (Howells, 1998, p. 51). Being wholly neither—“the trace or track of that which is forever absent”—determines the very structure of the sign, according to Spivak (1976, p. 17). She continues: “The structure of the sign [is] a trace structure” (1976, p. 17).

The idea that text is a structure of trace, that ‘meaning’ is constitutive of a network of traces, is a very important one in terms of my practice. Together with the concept of *différance*, and the paradox emblematic of *pharmakon*, it carves out a space that is at once ambiguous and ambivalent, that allows for the existence of mutually exclusive operations; that bears within itself its own opposite³ (Gardner, 2009, p. 72).

The question remains however: how exactly is such a conceptual terrain—one enacted by the axis of trace, *différance* and undecidable terms—evoked in a work such as *citrus and disco*? The answer is to be found in its *operation*. Following, as said, is a discussion of various modalities, various ways in which *citrus and disco* operates—*performs*—each having its origin in the paradoxical dynamics of deconstruction.

³ Writing of the work of artist Diana Thater, the critic Colin Gardner noted how ... “human space and animal space are always in an irresolvable dialogue with each other. Neither one really wins the argument”.

In disguise: a coat of many colours

Upon viewing *citrus and disco* many peoples' initial response was to ask "what exactly are those things?", or more precisely, "What are they made of?"

These queries were directed at those objects in the installation whose substance or material basis is brought into doubt, problematized, by the treatment of surface. Take the red suspended mass of the title work for example. Is it plastic, clay, rock or something else entirely? Are the blocks in *trolley work* the result of industrial practice—cast in some factory—or borne of primordial forces acting millennia ago? Does the white of the object suspended in *citrus and disco* signify styrene or bone?

In each case the difference in signification pivots on a conceptual knife edge. It depends on the exact nature of the substance applied to each surface. Meaning—that is to say—'essence', is contingent on the thin coat of enamel that is its disguise. It is simply a coat of paint, applied to an object's surface that confuses and misleads the eye. Such a coat renders meaning ambiguous, tenuous, treating substance as if it was surface and the superficial as if it were essential. Such ambiguity is the unbounded terrain of deconstruction, the certainties of depth lost in the confusion of mere appearance.

In this respect the way I use paint in my practice is analogous to the way the critic Georges Bataille casts words in his 'dictionary' of the 1920s⁴ (Bois, 1997, p. 16). Here, intent on "insulting the very opposition of form and content", he created a dictionary in which, according to Bois, there seemed to be no strict correlation between a word and its meaning (1997, p. 16). If the *pharmakon's* twin definitions defied logic then so too did Bataille in his allocation of different meanings to one and the same word. Other terms he trivialized with absurdities. Here words—the surface qualities of my objects—are confused with their meanings—the substance of objects. In a memorable phrase which evokes this confusion of substance with surface, this fusion of word and meaning, Bois (1997) notes that Bataille labels the definition of words their "mathematical frock coats" (p. 16). Hence what appears to be two are in fact one, the coat of paint disguising surface merging with the 'frock coat' of substance, destabilising essence at the same time as it raises the hitherto superficial status of surface. This interchange of value, which stops short of any ultimate privileging of signifier over signified, surface over essence, is nothing if not deconstructive in character.

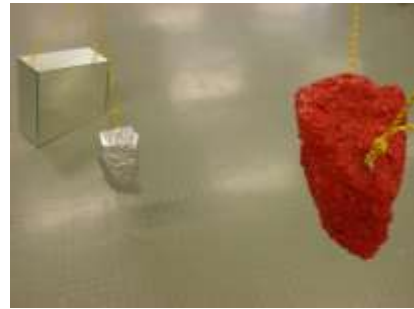
In many respects such an operation achieves what the artist Robert Smithson described, in his review of a Donald Judd show in the 1960s, as an *uncanny materiality*, one that was "inherent in the surface, engulfing the basic structure" (1996, p.6). As a result, he continues, "Both surface and structure exist simultaneously in a suspended condition" (p. 6). That is, the physical device of suspension in my practice is often matched by its conceptual counterpoint—a suspension of *definition*—the two echoing and enforcing what for Smithson was "always the basic lack of substance at the core of facts" (p.6).

⁴ Bois comments here that this "dictionary remains one of the most effective of Bataille's acts of sabotage against the academic world and the spirit of system"

Surface Treatments



1



2



7



3



6



5



4

(1). Detail: *citrus and disco*

(2). Detail: *citrus and disco*

(3). Detail: rock from *trolley work* in 2nd iteration.

(4) Detail: *pink thing* rock prior to tin foil

(5) Detail: rock from *dead weight*

(6) Detail: *pink thing* tin foiled

(7) Detail: log featured in *falling*

The weight of things

Characteristic of sculptural practices that foreground *suspension* is an insistence on the paramount importance of a thing's resistance to gravity, its weight. A distinguishing factor within my practice of suspension, however, is the idea that in one and the same work there is an attempt to foreground and diminish—undermine—the agency of gravity. Hence one has the seemingly light frothy object that is a disco ball weighted down with concrete—its mass confused, its relationship to the earth compromised. Or take the displacement of the mirror box in *dead weight*. What is more ephemeral, fleeting—weightless—one could argue, than reflections, yet the tetrahedron, the vehicle for those reflections, is decidedly grounded, its tilt a product of the implacable operation of gravitational forces. The suggestion—the implication that reflections might bear weight—is clearly evocative of the thinking of deconstruction in its destabilisation of opposing terms.

Elsewhere however the operation of gravity is not so confounded. Its operation is most apparent in the taut vibrantly coloured twine that characterises *citrus and disco*. Here string is stretched tight, its rigidity a clear expression of tension. It is this visible depiction of tension, of matter under duress that, more than anything else, is the *leit-motif* of *citrus and disco*. From the tense red twine of *drawing red* to the precariously balanced boxes of the title work, this fraught encounter between weight and counterweight is central to the entire installation. It could be said of the title work—*citrus and disco*—that it consists of nothing *but* weight to counterweight, a diagrammatic exercise in physics articulated in space, each object—be it disco ball, citrus tree or rock—part of a complex ecology of mass.

So it is that each *thing* in this work owes its literal position in space to the impersonal agency of gravity. Gravity provides the law—the frame—in which such ecology unfolds. The fact that, as an artist, I choose at times to deliberately complicate the relationship between such a law, such a *theory*, and its articulation—that I choose an explication of the principle of gravity that is in no way formulaic—indicates the inherent paradoxical nature of my artistic intent. It is here, in other words, that the antimony of an undecidable term—one that according to Derrida: “harbours within itself two significations whose co-habitation is as strange as it is necessary”—makes itself apparent (1974, p. 144 as cited in Rogoff, 2000, p.51).

Its impact is most readily seen in the way weight to counterweight oppositions are set up only to have the basis for their oppositions subverted. Mass is treated alternatively, and more importantly—arbitrarily—as if it were first a matter of great import, and then as if it were of no import at all.

A disco ball strains at its fetters—its guts of concrete—the taut twine indicative of the tension that is paradox, of weight denied yet implied. Rocks float like balloons, reflections hug the floor; it is as if these objects “appear not in a clear dialectic, in collision with each other, but through impasse or aporia, where thesis and antithesis spin their wheels yet go nowhere” (Gardner, 1998, p. 72).



Forbes, R. (detail). *citrus and disco*.
Title work, (2011)

Certainly the trolley of *trolley work* goes nowhere, its movement arrested by the mass of cerulean blue rock. Here the signification of natural forces, the 'weight' which is to gravity what the signified is to the signifier, is undermined. The favoured term—the privileged term—of scientific law is destabilized, undermined, *deconstructed*.

For "talk week" this year I produced a series of works, each notable for the manner in which mass was emphasized, literally held aloft by an armature of some sort. *Talk week work* (2012) is indicative of my preoccupation with weight and its alternate denial and embrace—the four works on display evincing both these alternatives—like so many birds of stone attempting flight.



Forbes, R. *Talk week work*.
(2012)

Pink thing too, a piece which grew out of *talk week work*, also invokes an ambivalent attitude to weight. Here the mass of scoria painted silver (depicted to the right in the photograph) certainly does appear to float—balloon-like—its escape from gravity's confines prevented by taut yellow twine.

In the uncertain impact of gravity, in the passage of movement arrested, the *pharmakon* of medicine and poison acting in works such as these may appear as the prescription for an art of impasse, but in fact this is not the case. In casting doubt on the essence of natural forces, in clouding their intent, (their signification), paradox here is generative. It is creative of an immanent arena, one which makes enigmatic certain terms whose meaning hitherto has been quite clear. In *Positions* Derrida speaks of how *différance*, as “a structure and a movement no longer conceivable on the basis of the opposition presence/absence” is “a becoming-space which makes possible... every passage from one to the other” (2002, p. 24).

In their indecisive depiction of natural physical law *citrus and disco* and *talk week work* are precisely such an art “where opposites can coexist as additive rather than as alternative”, an art that voids stasis, that is productive of new meanings (Gardner, 2009, p. 72). After all, if even that most fundamental of concepts, *the weight of things*, is shown to be elusive, what else need we reconsider?



Forbes, R. *pink thing too.* (2012)

The mirror without end, a window without beginning

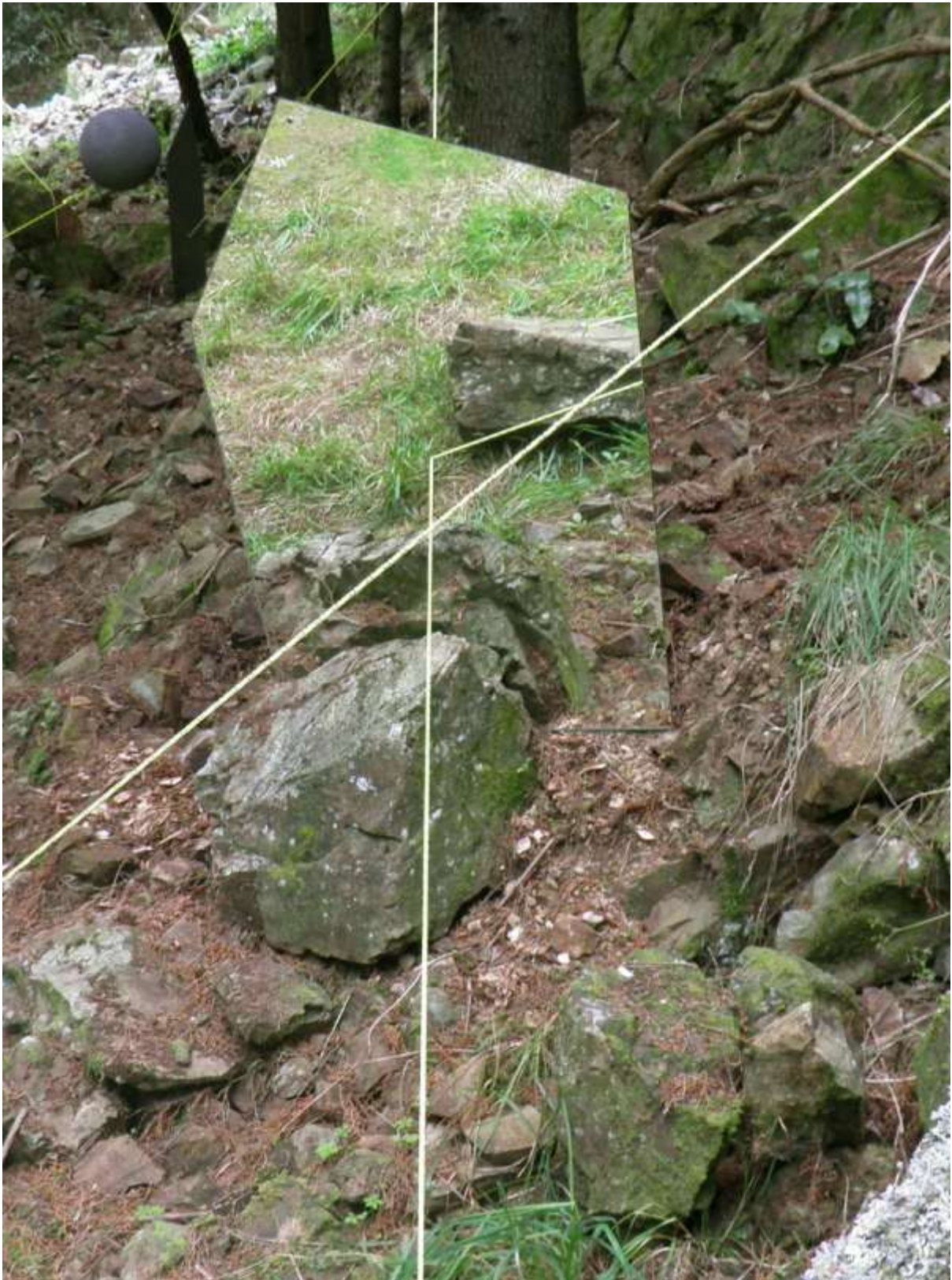
Robert Smithson—an artist whose art was in many respects a paradigmatic example of deconstructive theory—once said: “Reflections fall onto mirrors without logic, and in so doing invalidate every rational assertion” (1996, p. 124). The absence of just such “rational assertions” could be said characterise my work *clash, crash, bang*, installed earlier this year. This work, consisting of a disparate series of mirrors, rocks and cast objects connected via yellow twine, wound its way amongst the rocky bush site of a sculpture park. Here the mirrors—pierced and held in stasis by the twine—reflect whatever arbitrary arrangement confronts them; an arrangement, moreover, that appears to alter as the viewer moves. The resulting visual dislocation suggests that such a reflection could equally be an image—one seen as if through a window. The push and pull as it ricochets between transparency and reflection, between window and mirror, undermines any optical resolution. One is, to quote Smithson, “plunged into an indeterminate state, where solid and liquids (lose) themselves in each other.... No sense wondering about classifications and categories, there are none” (1996, p. 146).

Like myself, Smithson’s formal vocabulary ranged from rocks and mirrors to the earth itself. His practice has had a considerable influence on me and his insights regarding this modality of mirroring/reflection are worthwhile considering here.

Mirrors were Smithson’s weapon of choice in his struggle with the stultifying effects of representation, of “rational assertions”. In Smithson’s art, as the critic Gary Shapiro put it:

Mirrors juxtapose the two metaphors for art of representation: looking into a mirror and looking through a window. The two metaphors seem opposed, because one suggests that we look through a window into something else, into another space, while the other has to do with what we precisely do not look through but which reflects back what lies before us. (1997, p. 62)

In this way two mutually incompatible concepts, that of transparency and mirroring, lose their separate structures and are fused in a flash, or trace, of realisation—one that locates meaning in the flux of their opposition. For Smithson, the mirror is a decentring device, activating space so that centre—essence—is confused with periphery—its sign. We are forced to thought, to envision the world anew. For example, take one of his most allusive and poetic works, *yucatan mirror displacements*, from 1969. Smithson travelled the length of the Yucatan peninsula in Mexico, stopping every now and then to place 12 mirrors in the landscape. After photographing each “displacement”—as he termed all 9 occasions—he collected up the mirrors and continued on. There were no witnesses to these displacements other than Smithson and a few friends; no trace of their activities remained except photographs and that which inscribed itself within memory.



Forbes, R. (detail). *Clash, crash, bang*. (2012)



Forbes, R. (detail). *Clash, crash, bang.* (2012).



Smithson, R. (1969). *Yucatan mirror displacements*.

Here, as Shapiro points out: “Mirrors displace the objects that common sense, and Plato, say they reflect” (1997, p. 103). However mirrors are just the first in a series of ‘reflections’. These mirror images are then photographed. Then we read about them in a magazine article. This article is then transcribed into a book which I read and finally you have my words here. Where is the image, the art? In which reflection should we vouchsafe its authority? That is to say, in terms of Platonic discourse, which text is the original and which its image?

From this perspective one can see how representations, images of the real, can form an infinite series, with each referring to the next with no final resolution. As Derrida famously wrote: “There is no outside the text” (1967, p. 227). There is only an endless chain of signifiers, each pointing to another in a sequence without end, each one an image and none the ultimate ground or origin, of that image.

This, some say, is the ultimate fate of Derrida’s thinking, the inevitable consequence of logic based on *différance* and paradox. Such a position has been described as the *idealism of the text*, the complete embrace of subjectivity in the complete absence of its binary opposite—an objectivity grounded in some transcendent authority. But is this ‘idealism of the text’—the supposition that there is no ultimate ground from which all the subsequent images spring—really what Derrida meant? Yes and no.

It is the case that, as the scholar Howells notes, “There is no presence pre-existing the sign”, but that is not to say that Derrida “proposed a simple inversion of the priority of signified over signifier” (1998, p. 83 & p. 45). This division of reality into binary oppositions holds true only if one accepts the primacy of text; only if one accepts the idea that a sign is always a sign of *something else*, outside, exterior to it. As Derrida states in *Disseminations*, “if there is nothing outside the text, this means, with the transformation of the concept of the text in general, that the text is no longer the insulated inside of an interiority or a self-identity” (1972, p. 42 as cited in Howells, 1998, p.84). That is, the division between an inside and an outside collapses. The division of signified from signifier, source from image, is breached, if only for a moment. Derrida, according to Howells, felt that the play of signification might “eventually produce a chink through which a glimmer of *outré-cloture* (what lies beyond closure) may be glimpsed” (1998, p. 45). As Howells notes, “Derridean deconstruction attempts to overcome the art/world opposition, and set both on the same footing. If all is general text, then the text/*hors-texte* opposition loses its pertinence” (1998, p. 84).

The mirroring/reflective modality inherent in *citrus and disco*, and elsewhere, in my practice, is just such an attempt at breaking down these distinctions. Its operation is most evident within the oppositional formulation that dominates much of my sculptural grammar. Time and again I make physical connections between things; objects are linked as if in a mathematical or chemical formula. What connects both sides of this formulation, what acts as the equals sign as in $x=y$, is, more often than not, twine. Thus twine under tension is an analogue for the mathematical or scientific operation of translation as signified by the equals sign. Another way of interpreting line in my practice is to see it in terms of the ‘em dash’ utilised within the paradigm of writing—separating equivalent phrases or meanings. However, whether ‘em dash’, equals sign or mirror, the physical connection enacted by twine confronts the audience with the same dilemma—the essential question of translation, of the equivalency between a thing and its image—that so fascinated Derrida.

What has the red log of *drawing red* got to do with the white wall to which it is ineluctably tied? How is the citrus tree in the title work in anyway a reflection of the disco ball, how does the trolley relate to its blue anchor of rock in *trolley work*?

The answer is to be found in the operations of *différance*, in how the objects are distinguished one from another in a process of translation. Such a process, Derrida notes in *Positions*: “holds that an element functions and signifies, takes on or conveys meaning, only by referring to another past or future element in an economy of traces” (2002, p.25). It is this deferment and differing that annuls the equal sign of equivalence, that undoes the mirrors reflective capacity. Two things can be mirror images of each other in terms of mass, in terms of weight, but this mirror transforms itself into something else entirely when one is asked to confront the object’s everyday meaning. Here a disco ball is very definitely not a citrus tree. At such point mirror becomes window, a window whose transparency, in the clash of mundane signification, belies the equivalence of weight. What the window denies in transparency—every day meaning—the mirror affirms in the reflection of mass and weight. Equally what is taken in reflection is returned via transparency.

Here is the reply to the question raised with respect to Smithson’s *yucatan mirror displacements* and the fictional series of mirror images. The absence of a prior origin—the problem of ‘the idealism of the text’—has its answer within *différance*, within ‘an economy of trace’. It is trace structure which prevents my practice from disappearing—Alice in Wonderland-like—down this void created in the apparent absence of the signified. It is trace structure that saves *Yucatan Mirror Displacements* from being simply a pointless exercise in nihilism. It is trace structure that grounds meaning in the constant deferral of meaning, in the potentially endless chain of signification. As Howell remarks: “the sign implies that it is a sign of something which precedes it; the trace, on the contrary...is not a secondary mark of a prior origin” (1998, p. 51). It is trace that produces meaning; it is trace that in its very insubstantiality gives substance to art. Referring to the *Yucatan Mirror Displacements* Smithson said:

If you visit the sites you find nothing but memory traces, for the mirror displacements were dismantled right after they were photographed. The mirrors are somewhere in New York. The reflected light has been erased. Yucatan is elsewhere. (1996, p. 133)

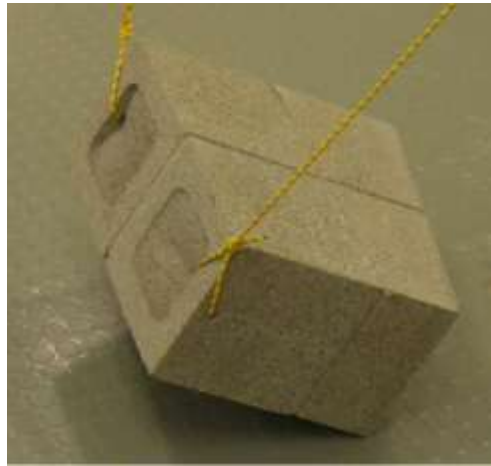
So meaning here is ‘elsewhere’, never fully present, its presence angelic, fleeting. Smithson records the flutter of butterfly wings, an instant of movement captured in the glacial presence of mirrors—meaning—a flash of cognizance prior to its encryption and death in matter (1996, p. 122).

Which is the image/which is the original? Such a refrain also activates the space between the two tetrahedrons of *citrus and disco*, one a mirrored construction, the other an aggregation of concrete block. Of which is the other its “cast”? Both are of exactly the same dimensions, the same size. Here can be seen a deliberate attempt to privilege neither thing nor sign, to indicate that such significance lies in the very question, the very refrain, the very space between the two, in the deferral and difference of *différance*.



Forbes, R. (details). *citrus and disco*.
(2011)

'Which is the image/which is the
original'



Smithson was content with just such a fragile rendition of meaning. As Shapiro indicates, Smithson's objective was not the elimination of the referential frame, not some doomed quest for the essence of that which such reflections are said to reflect, but rather an exploration of the limits of signification.⁵ (1997, p. 96). He knew that "every single perception is essentially determinate", that is, that perception is founded in frames of reference and cannot exist independently of it (1996, p. 191). Making 'sense' of reality always and necessarily involves a positioning—the cut of perception enacted by consciousness always involves direction, consciousness is always consciousness of *something else*. As Barbara Johnson put it: "every theory starts somewhere ..."—and presumably therefore, *goes* somewhere, has direction (1981, p. 15).

⁵ In this respect Shapiro makes an interesting comment which speaks to the horizontality of much of my work. He asks: "Does a sculpture require a pedestal [or frame] to set it off from its surroundings? Does the option of the jettisoning the pedestal lead to a horizontal sculpture that thematizes the fact of its not being 'set up' or erected?"

However rather than treating this as a crypt for signification and simply turning away, or trying to construct something else that would not entomb –just as it preserves—meaning, Smithson felt that artists could profitably explore its limits. This is exactly what Derrida sought in his deliberations: “Deconstruction must neither reframe nor dream of the pure and simple absence of the frame. These two apparently contradictory gestures are the very ones—and they are systematically indissociable—of *what* is here deconstructed” (1987, p. 73 as cited, Shapiro, 1997, p. 97). Hence what held true for Derrida the philosopher also held for Smithson the artist. Thus for Smithson the call of art lay ‘indissociably’ in just such an internment that is at once both the ailment and antidote of the *pharmakon*. It lay precisely in a slippage within signification and between significations—between mirroring and transparency—a slippage whose moment moreover is marked by transition, by movement.

Such moments are here best understood as precisely *not* static categories, *not* passive objects of conceptual analysis. Rather they are procedures—*operations*—activating and informing artistic practice.

Bois (1997), writing of the critic Bataille’s concept of the ‘formless’ commented on that which was “neither a theme, nor a substance, nor a concept” but an operation (p. 15). Such an operation, he continued, was neither form nor content but “displaced both those terms” (p. 15). The slippage, the play here, in signification is thus no such *thing*—rather it precedes the realisation of things. As Derrida states in his typically allusive manner in *Disseminations*: “it holds in reserve, in its undecided shadow and vigil, the opposites and the differends that the process of discrimination will come to carve out” (1981, p. 127).

The transformative moment, that point of diffraction where mirror ends and window begins, will thus always elude us ... but that *is* the point. After all, what remains of promise if enacted?

Geometries of dirt

“Geometry or biology, the mathematical or the organicist, the set or the fold. This is the recurrent alternative that seems to traverse the entire history of western thought” (Bosteels, 2006, p. 30).

So writes Bruno Bosteels, commenting on the art of the Venezuelan artist Gego—who I shall speak of later. What Bosteels is referring to here is the binary opposition, the dialectic, between geometry and organism, that is, between the organising principle of mathematics and that of nature. Such an opposition is the stuff of myth—the ancient Greeks attributed god-like figures to each side of this dialectic (Dutton, 2006, p. 1). Dionysus was said to rule over the unruly forces of nature whilst Apollo stood for the logic of form.

As Friedrich Nietzsche points out, the history of art can be read as a struggle between just these two forces or drives, between Apollonian form and Dionysian chaos, between, that is, the precision of structure and the formlessness of matter (Kreis, 2000, paragraph 2 & 3). Within my own work the intention is to privilege neither side. Rather a tension is created between the organic and the purely constructivist paradigms, a tension that activates the space in which the installation locates itself.

Certainly the sprawling, vine like nature of the title work *citrus and disco* is paradigmatic of the organicist principle—each object be it rock, plant or tetrahedron—a resting point prior to the next iteration or manifestation of cellular division. However in considering the implications of utilizing a living organism as a paradigm for structure, I then introduce the idea of its opposite in the guise of shapes derived from the number. The form of clean geometric shapes etched in mineral, mirror, and concrete punctuate the visual field just as they puncture any purely organicist formulation. If *citrus and disco* does resemble a plant, it is in many respects a crystalline one, one whose fruit more often than not appear to be the product of mathematics, rather than soil, water and sun. The sharp edge of mirror box has nothing of the organicist in its construction, the concrete tetrahedron equally a repudiation of natural growth.

Within this series of formal objects, however, the organic occasionally reasserts itself, in one case literally in the form of a living citrus tree, in another in the appearance of rock whose shape seems more suggestive of the molten than the geometric. It is as if “the repressed materiality of an idealised code”, as Bois put it in his discussion of the formless, cannot help itself, cannot help but signal its presence in eruptions of green matter, in the distortion of mineral (1997, p. 127). Again one can see here how this notion of that which contradicts itself, of a formal eloquence interrupted by the stutter and stammer of living matter, is yet another embodiment of the deferral of any ultimate signification. The simultaneity of both systemic and organic significations act as the ground for what is hopefully a fertile reinvention of discourse, a seed planted in the geometry of dirt.

In the footsteps of the eye

Arguably throughout art history it is the perceptual agency of vision that has been privileged over its other—the body as site of primary experience. The critic Juan Ledezma speaks of “the universalizing claims of late modernism’s optical paradigm”—a paradigm whose echo is found in the epithet of the *visual arts* (2006, p. 56). However, as the critic Kaira Marie Cabanas points out, such a program:

adheres to a mode of visual address that is neither neutral nor natural. It is based on a model of vision whose historical project has been to sublimate, to raise up to purify, securing for the spectator a visual control independent of the body and the contingencies of context. (2006, p. 67)

Put simply what one sees in a gallery has traditionally trumped any sensations experienced at the corporeal level. It is as if the eye’s physical location on top of and preceding the body has its conceptual analogue in a binary that conceives art primarily in terms of visual experience—the bodily apprehension of art being relegated a lower or nonexistent status, one that follows In the footsteps of the eye.

My practice is, in part, an attempt to undermine this ‘optical paradigm’ by implicating the corporeal in the very act of seeing. As such, it is characterised by a greater insistence on the idea of body *as experience*—as the primary site of experience. It is just this experience of the somatic and its concomitant projection into art that the critic Rosenberg alluded to when he spoke of visual art “being the action of the body suspended in material” (Westfall, 2006, p. 139).

An instance of this is to be found in the way tension, stress, is evoked. In *pink thing*, for example, the vertical central mass of the work is restrained, held back, by means of thin, taut, rope. As I mentioned earlier, one almost *feels* the tension—experiences the risk of rupture—engendered by the rope’s rigid extension. This experience is decidedly more corporeal than visual, it could be argued; the somatic experience being one of *danger*, fear that the twine will snap and endanger the viewer.

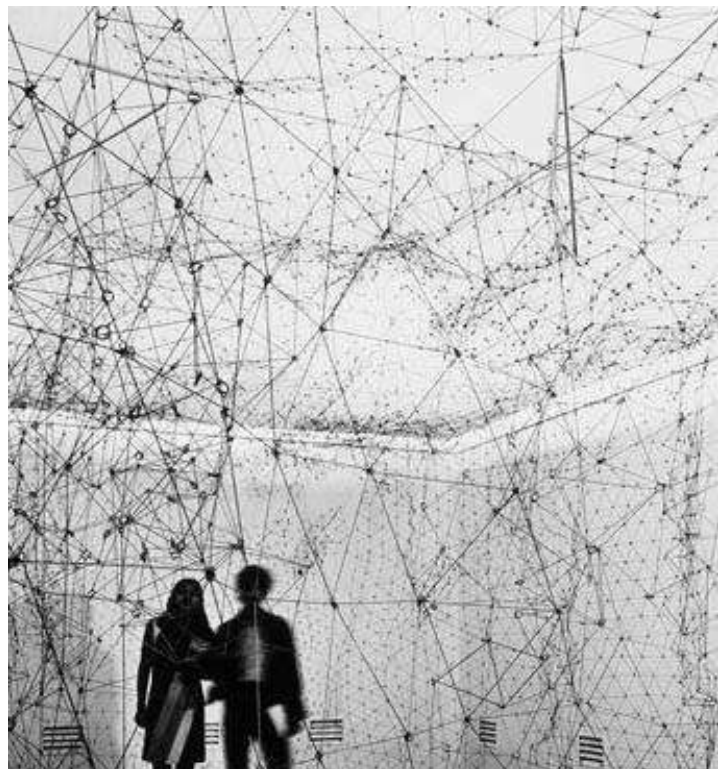
One need only look to the dictionary meanings of “taut” to see how completely the somatic is implied within practice—“tense, worried, anxious, nervous, wired” and “strung out”—all attributes either of body or *line* (Microsoft Office Word 2007. Thesaurus). One speaks of being “stressed”, of being stretched beyond ones limits, of being at “breaking point”—all characteristics both of line and body. Thus line here in *pink thing* is treated, or rather experienced, as an extension of body, as part of felt somatic experience. Take a further meaning—“on edge”. The tetrahedron of *citrus and disco*, its angled edge grating the floor, is nothing if not the tense encounter of concrete with linoleum.



Forbes, R. (detail). *citrus and disco*. (2011)

This extraction of a particular bodily sensation—tension—and its materialisation in string, in line, is central to the generation of meaning within much of my practice. However the entanglement of body in vision is a product of another characteristic of my practice too, one located in *scale*. Before I refer directly to this it is perhaps best to examine it within the context of another artist's work whose practice remains of singular importance to me—the Venezuelan sculptor Gego.

Gego, *Reticularia*. (1968)



Gego, *Reticularia*.(1968)



The critic Bosteels feels that the best of Gego's oeuvre, in particular her seminal piece *reticularia* from 1968, was unique in its ability to place us, if only for a moment, outside the polarities of dualistic opposition (2006, p. 25).

A seemingly weightless structure of tenuous hooks, joints and loops of wire and rod *reticularia* was in effect a huge maze encompassing more than one room. Its most significant aspect to this exegesis lay in the fact that this maze had to be entered to be wholly perceived, that these webs, as the commentator Ledezma explains, "rather than being objects *within* a given space...are objects that come to be understood *as* space" (2006, p. 39). The eye is afforded no single, privileged viewpoint. Rather it is the case that the authoritative, static, single vision traditionally associated with art is fractured into as many points of view as there are footsteps necessary to traverse the work.

Hence it is the work's scale in combination with restricted access that implicates the viewer's body in its reading. It is the viewer's body that—lost in the multiplicities of the optical that its scale allows—activates the "art" of *reticularia*, opening it up to a constant process of transformation. This places it outside the paradigm of its referent in post-war constructivism, as Ledezma explains:

The virtual entanglement of viewer and work was in itself a glaring signal of the intention to spin the premises of post-war constructivism... in reverse. It upset from within the principles of geometric abstraction, principles located in the bodiless primacy of the optical. (2006, p. 39)

Reticularia achieved this by negating the critical distance between subject and object, between the viewer as centred and self-reflecting subject and the work of art as autonomous object, one whose meaning was determined by independently existing criteria—criteria based upon the centrality of vision to meaning. In *reticularia* meaning becomes a matter of negotiation between viewer and work, it becomes, as Ledezma explains:

A mode in accord with which the body's perceptual agency comes forward as vision's recedes, and vice versa, so that the redefinition of the subject—its alternative displacement and recentering—is constantly exercised in that place which the *reticularea's* so effectively circumscribe, the place of a productive ambiguity. (2006, p. 50)

Such 'productive ambiguity' is precisely the poison and antidote of the *pharmakon*, precisely the Derridean concept of the undecidable term at work.

In *citrus and disco* the same productive ambiguity between eye and body is to be found—located again within the specifics of scale and access. The title work zigzags its way across the floor. There is no privileged point-of-view; once more it is the footsteps of the viewer that undermine the certitude of the eye, producing a multivalent perspective that denies conceptual closure.

Clash, crash, bang, too, is a work steeped in this tension between ones footsteps—the body—and the eye. Look again at the two photographs of the work on display. Both are of the same object—a mirror—yet the image seen in its surface varies; the result of a point of view whose location is not fixed but rather is entirely dependent on the viewers position.



Forbes, R. (Details). *clash, crash, bang*. (2012)

It is precisely in such a multivalent perspective, one governed as much by the corporeal as the optical, that—as Derrida writes in *L'Écriture et la différence*—one finds “the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, without origin, offered to an active interpretation...” (1967, p. 427, as cited Spivak, 1976, p. 13).

This denial of closure, this collapse of subject into object, itself traces the trajectory of postmodernism since its inception, a trajectory whose allegory could be found in the journey of the viewer’s body through the complex, bewildering maze of steel rod and wire that is *reticularea*. However the works postmodern nature is not only a condition of scale combined with restricted access; its very structure (or rather lack thereof) situates it amongst those works that evince the *informe* of Bois and Krauss, amongst, that is, those modernist artworks whose particularities undermined their modernist categorisation.

The tangled ganglia of line punctuated by the occasional outbreak of geometric order that is *reticularea* is the promise of form implied yet denied; it is that same promise of the *informe* I alluded to earlier enacted by the fragmented grammar of *citrus and disco*. In Gego’s work, as in my own, the passage of the body through the installation thus only confounds—as it emphasizes—what is already apparent within our mutual disregard for the formalities of ‘sense’ or geometric logic as perceived by the eye. The arbitrary line of *reticularea* has its parallel in the random articulation of *citrus and disco*’s stretched bungee cord; both seem to go nowhere in particular. Thus for *reticularea* as for *citrus and disco*, meaning is always a step ahead of the viewer; the *différance*—the deferral and difference of its structure of trace—both a product of viewer embodiment and the specific characteristics of form in its denotative sense.

Of *reticularea*’s search for meaning in the pure exigencies of pattern and its absence—enacted in the logic of constructivism to order to undermine it—Luis Perez Oramas wrote:

within its webs, nothing moves except the webs themselves, hanging precariously in their state of weightlessness. Time does not pass; it stops in those links, knots and vectors, in that woven suspension of the world’s cardinal experience, devoid both of center and meaning. (2004, p. 255 as cited in Godfrey, 2006, p. 49)

Such a ‘cardinal experience’ it would seem, might be available to those willing to trust their footsteps as readily as they do the eye which reveals the way.

Out of site

Deinstallation—the extraction of my work from its physical context—presents difficulties for me as the site of the work is always in some way bound up *in* the work. In *citrus and disco* the title work is literally tied into site, into its physical location in the gallery—it is in many respects inseparable from its physical context. Any extraction from its specific architectural setting necessarily entails a loss of meaning. *Citrus and disco*—as an art work—now no longer “exists”. Its twin components—the art materials of which it was comprised and its gallery location—severed of such status by their physical separation.



Stockholder, J. *sweet for
three oranges* (1995)

Another artist whose practice faces similar difficulties is Jessica Stockholder, an artist whose oeuvre is typically described as bridging the divide between painting and sculpture. Typically she installs her art *into*, *onto*, and *through* the immediate architectural context, weaving a dazzling array of found and constructed material into the very fabric of the institutional space. As she states, “in all of the work I place something I make in relationship to what’s already there. With installations it’s the building, the architecture, or you might say, it’s the place I work on top of” (Westfall, 2006, p. 118). What she often ‘adds on top of’ is colour, colour in the form of swathes of paint—painting landscape in a literal updating of the traditional genre.

Take one of her signature works from 1995—*sweet for three oranges*—for example. A sprawling colossus of a work, it comprises a multifarious collection of disparate bits and pieces ranging from the droll litany of “40 Christmas trees, 50 kilos of oranges” and “4 bird cages”, to “roofing tar, light bulbs and yellow electric cord”, amongst other things (Cooke, 1995, p. 82).

Site is an integral aspect of this work—so much so that in many respects it resembles nothing if not a building site. A brick wall rears up, separating stripped back framing from a surreal combination of suspended fir trees and bird cages packed with fruit. A steel cable attaches one wall to another. There are gas bottles tied umbilically to the ceiling via wire. There is no room here for the autonomous art work, no pedestal announcing its independent presence, no pristine white walls offering the security of anonymity. Paint—where used—is applied as if by a tradesman, the frame demarcating artwork from context missing in the flux of art and architecture. Here site imposes itself without respite—the site *is* the work, the work *is* the site.

Much of my practice eschews a similar bias towards the built environment—its form a product of this dialogue between artist and physical context. It is there in *drawing red’s* attachment to the wall, in *citrus and disco’s* insistent connections to floor and ceiling. It is there, too, in the way *slacker*, one of my talk week works from this year, hangs indecorously from the ceiling by means of yellow bungee. *Pink thing*, too, from the same show, exhibits a similar tendency, but in this instance it is the actual fabric of site—framing timber—extracted from its context and fetishized.

What is under consideration throughout this approach to site is precisely the disregard for such as evidenced by much traditional art. By emphasizing the signification of physical context I am undermining such a traditional approach to art which eschews immediate context in favour of the transcendent qualities said to repose within the art object itself—qualities and meaning thought to transcend *mere* context.

In contrast both my and Stockholders oeuvre’s embrace site as intrinsic—not extrinsic—to meaning. Hence the modality operating here is one of autonomy/site, with the authority of the stand alone art work eroding in the obduracy of physical context. Here site is integrated into *text* as another layer of meaning to be explicated—not relegated to the margins by the supposed autonomy of the all powerful work of art.



Forbes, R. *slacker*. (2012)

Thus within my practice site is treated the same way surface qualities are, as a repository of hitherto ignored signification whose emphasis destabilizes any essentialist reading. Hence this description of Stockholder's art—that "it skips across the surface by the most improbable syntagmatic routes, dragging a nebulous cargo of dissembled meaning in its wake" could equally apply to *citrus and disco* (Bankowsky, 1990, p. 142, as cited in Cooke, 1995, p. 82). Both our practices, in their respective sensitivity to the immediate architecture, unleash multivalent readings that require one to account for the site as much as for the 'art'. Such an approach, "far from requiring the suppression of one alternative in favour of another, conjures (up) meanings amid the disintegration of readings" (Cooke, 1995, p. 85). This tension between art and context is thus seen as productive in a Derridean sense—the flux of autonomy and site the occasion for not the absence of meaning, but rather its manifestation in an infinity of signs.

Material excess

If treatment of site as material is characteristic of both my and Stockholder's work then another we share is outlined in the following comment she makes:

I am interested in the quality of material, whether it is a chair or a piece of concrete: that you experience it over time, that it changes with the light, that you have a particular experience of it that is separate from talking about it, taking pictures of it, or writing about it. (Westfall, 2006 p. 136)

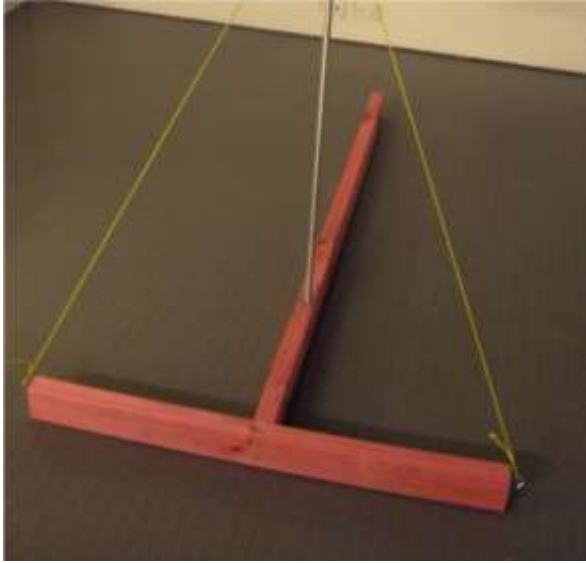
This experience of *things* that is 'separate from talking about it, taking pictures of it, or writing about it', that is, separate from—in *excess* of—representation is also key to my practice. Here again the comfortable binary of signification is undone in favour of a modality which privileges neither side, neither thing nor sign. Instead an immanent materiality is presaged—one whose meaning is not yet clear.

Sweet for three oranges is a prime example of this. At first glance it seems to defy analysis. However upon closer inspection it is apparent that the arrangement and choice of material has been carefully orchestrated with the explicit intention of juxtaposing the "concrete and the abstract, the material and the immaterial, the literal and the fictive"—to layer text upon text—in an effort to locate meaning amidst its dissolution (Cooke, 1995, p. 82). To give just one instance: the literal, quotidian meaning of the yellow lights in the piece—as lighting equipment—in no way corresponds to their position directly confronting a wall. Rather one is forced to consider them afresh, perhaps as over scaled felt-tipped pens painting the gallery wall, as Cooke suggests (1995, p.87). Here, as in much of her work, "a signature tension was set up between the referential capacity of the object and its more purely abstract potential" (Cooke, 1995, p. 85).

Such a tension animates *pink thing too*. Here the framing timber, that utilitarian object from the world of carpentry, is given a coat of varnish and highlighted. It is thus freighted with a fine art connotation—one at odds with its prosaic origin but perfectly in keeping with its status as a splash of pink in a abstract combination of silver, green and yellow. Its raw pinkness and the glittering silver of the tin foiled bulk looming above both expressions of a materiality that, if only for a moment, evade signification.

Interestingly, such an emphasis on the very incommensurability of that "which exists in the material world and it's unfixable (and not necessarily language based) meaning" is seen by the critic Lynne Cooke as evidence that Stockholder's real target here is the structure of consciousness itself (1995, p. 85). A comment given weight by Stockholders oft repeated injunction:

My work often arrives in the world like an idea arrives in your mind. You don't quite know where it came from or when it got put together, nevertheless it is possible to take it apart and see that it has an internal logic. I'm trying to get closer to thinking processes as they exist before the idea is fully formed. (Cooke, 1995, p. 89)



Forbes, R. (detail). *pink thing*. (2012)

The structure of thought itself is thus seen here both as the objective of Derridean deconstruction and certain installation practices that attempt to take ideas and their material referents apart.

Certainly “thinking processes as they exist before the idea is fully formed”—that is to say prior to their formation—is nothing if not emblematic of “the trace (as a) notion of an inscription of meaning, present in, but prior to, incision, engraving, drawing or letters” (Howells, 1998, p. 50). It is just this trace structure, this chain of constantly deferred significations, each one disclosing—as it conceals—some trace of the other that exemplifies both *sweet for three oranges* and my own investigations.

What I am suggesting here is that I too, like Stockholder, am attempting to activate space by means of that which gives rise to both thought *and* art. It is a search for that which “is at once matter and meaning, or matter and sense, prior to the distinction of the so-called ‘formed substances’ in terms of expression and content or signifier and signified” (Bosteels, 2006, p. 25). Working within an installation mode I colonise space with objects whose primary orientation—in their combinations with others or in their singularity—is such that meaning is immanent, but never explicit. It is designed to tantalize there at the edge of thought, just as disco balls dazzle before they signify or just as one registers the tension in the builder’s string before one notes it as an item from a building site.

Conclusion

All the modalities mentioned here—substance/surface, weight/weightlessness, transparency/reflection, geometric/organic, sight/embodiment autonomy/site, referent/materiality—operate as an *abysmal* questioning of the traditional artistic process. That is, their intention is to open meaning up to the regenerative possibilities inherent in the void or abyss of signification that is intrinsically one with its substantiation. It is precisely this void—one located in ‘the erosion of the poetic principle’—that grants my practice its artistic status.

So those aspects traditionally overlooked or devalued within art become the focus of investigation. In *citrus and disco* and in my more recent work, it is the surface of things, their weight, their capacity to elude form and to mirror—rather than manifest form and reveal—that becomes the subject of analysis. The body behind the eye, the site of the artwork and the materiality previously subsumed by referent are similarly given expressive space. However their expression is never at the expense of their hitherto dominant partner—Derridean deconstruction, as mentioned, is not just a simple reversal of the binary. The poetic principle, after all, *only exists* in the erosion of didactic certainties; weight is only meaningful in its absence, superficiality only significant when contrasted with substance.

As noted earlier, it is precisely ‘the trace or track of that which is forever absent’ that defines the sign. It is the *forever absent*—this “strange being of the sign: half of it always ‘*not there*’, and the other half always ‘*not that*’”—that provides the impetus for practice (Spivak, 1976, p. 17). Evading measure in its fleeting presence—one that nevertheless instantiates and animates practice—such a being is only glimpsed in passing, its trace the flutter of wings, its residue the stuff of art.

Final exhibition

Entitled *the weight of things* my final Masters show in November 2012 comprised one large installation consisting of seven individual works. Overall the modality given most emphasis was surface/substance with the red rock, the four rocks planted on the floor and the white rock all being given surface treatments that belied their actual substance. Audience expectations were in particular confounded by the appearance of the large red rock which many believed to be not rock but polystyrene; its spongy surface highlighted by several coats of paint. Similarly the quartet of rocks on the floor led some audience members to ask where I had had them cast—such was their resemblance to aluminium. Uncertainty also surrounded the actual nature of the white rock whose weight, however, was never in doubt—the bend of the steel reinforcing bar which skewered it to the floor testimony to this.

In this show the steel rod replaced the twine of previous works but to the same end—as a graphic illustration of weight and tension. Nowhere was this more pronounced than in the single work that pierced the wall and culminated in an object which appeared to be made of tin but was in fact a rock covered in tin foil. Flag-like, it hung above the audience, posing not just a physical risk but a conceptual one too. Here the arc of the rod testified exactly to the weight of the work.

Other works in the installation took as their leading modality the binary of transparency/reflection. The yellow trolley bearing the mirrored box was emblematic of the capacity of art to both reflect and elide an image whilst the mirror leaning casually against the reinforcing rod testified in a literal way to the weight or gravitas usually denied the mere image. Other modalities, too, were present in the nature of the overall installation—site/embodiment and autonomy/site both evident in the works connections to the fabric of the gallery and the necessity to walk through the installation to engage with its nature. In summary the exhibition *the weight of things* reinforced much of what has been here theorised, providing, I hope, a fitting farewell to both this exegesis and to my years as a student artist.



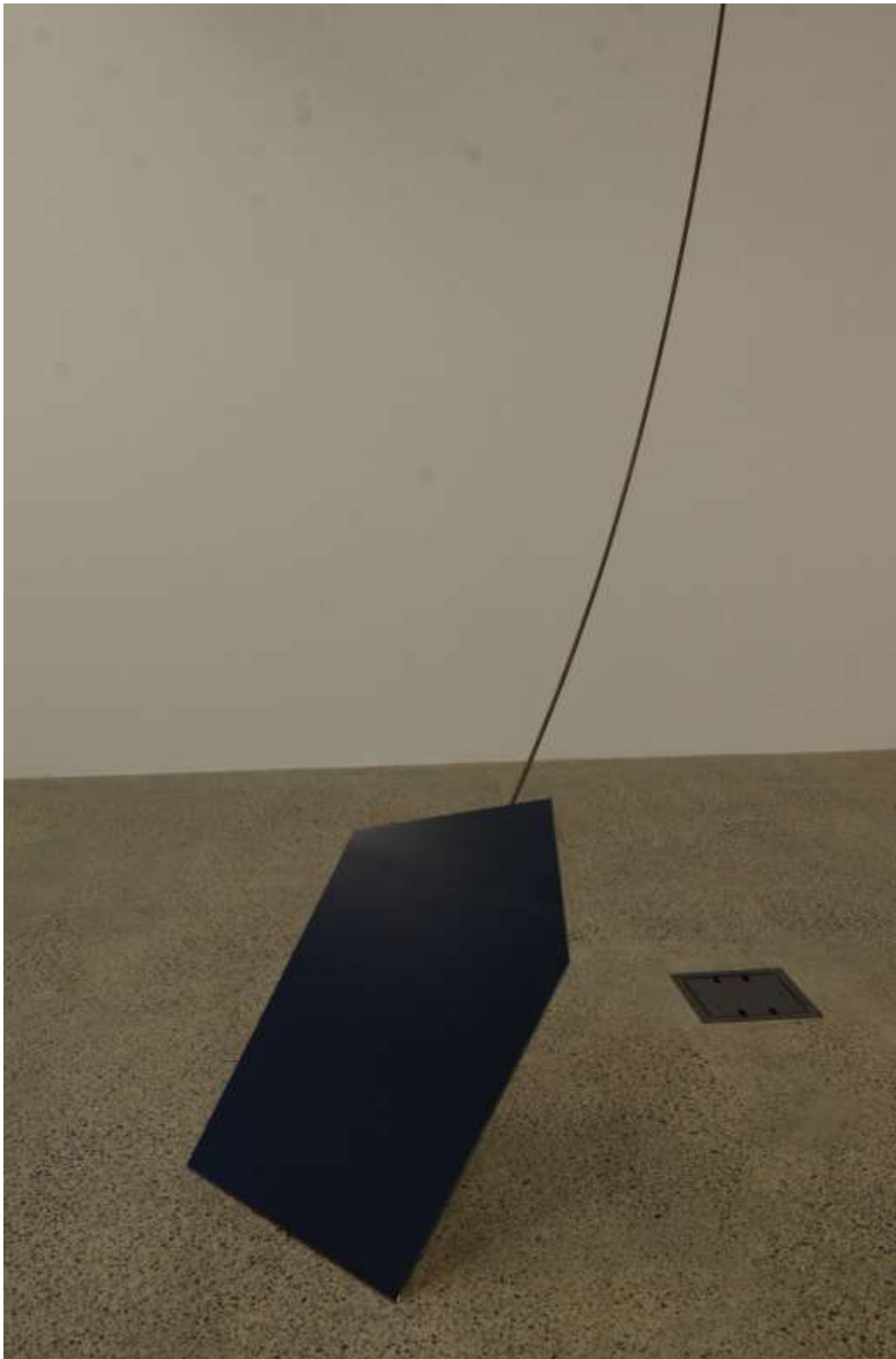
Forbes, R. *the weight of things*.
Overview of installation. (2012)



Forbes, R. *the weight of things*.
Overview of installation. (2012)



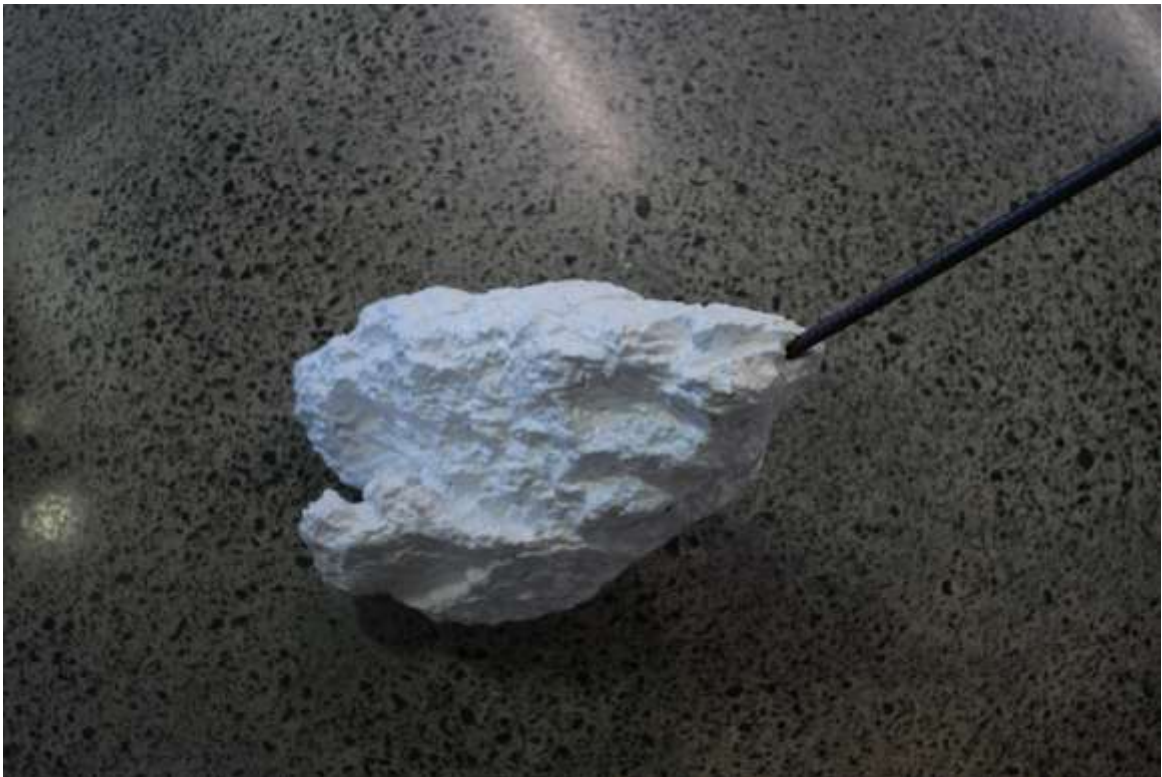
Forbes, R. *the weight of things*.
Detail. (2012)

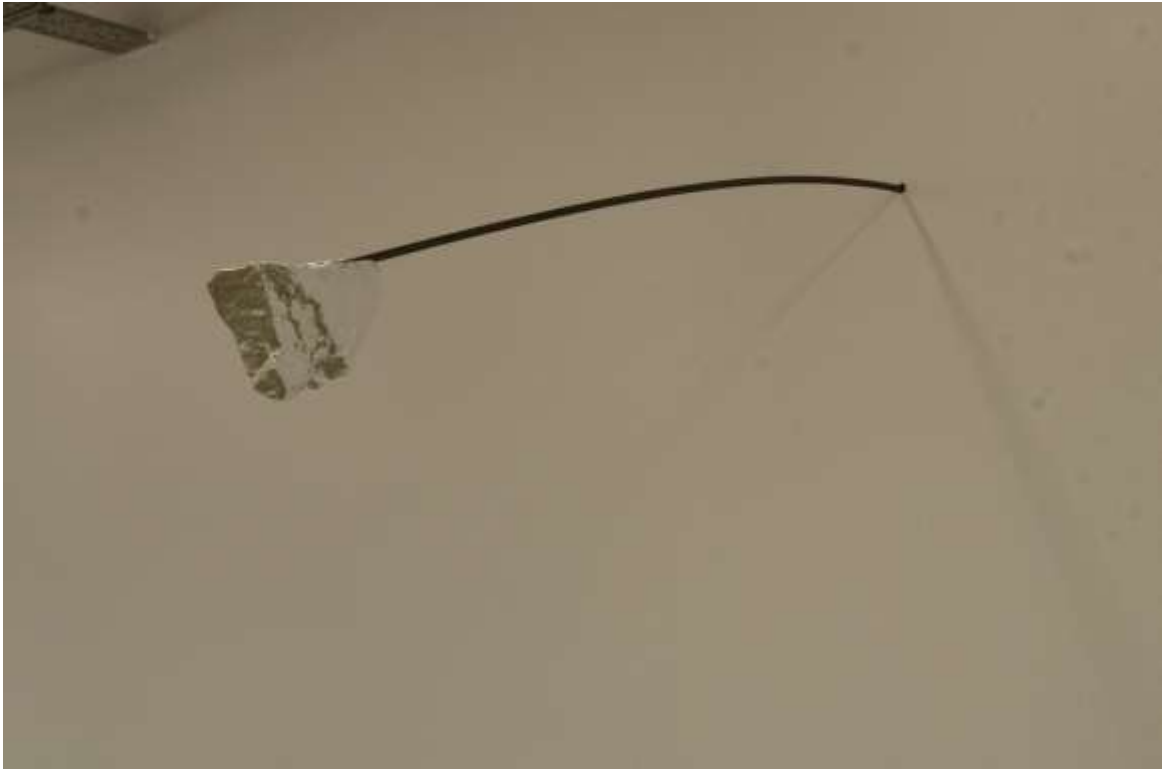


Forbes, R. *the weight of things*.
Detail. (2012)



Forbes, R. *the weight of things*.
Details. (2012)





Forbes, R. *the weight of things*.
Details. (2012)





Forbes, R. *the weight of things*.
Detail. (2012)



Forbes, R. *the weight of things*.
Detail. (2012)

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