

Frenzy Episode, 2010



contact

socio-spatial entanglements

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As I anticipate the proximity of the keyboard to my body, I'm reminded of the multiple forms of contact in everyday life. Forms of contact encompass encounters between bodies, objects and narratives. Some occur through institutional forms involving education sectors, art galleries and scholarly enquiries in disciplines such as visual art, anthropology, cultural studies, philosophy and human geography. In collaborative projects between Martin Johnson and myself, these contacts are entangled and shape our explorations into the relations between bodily capacities and socio-spatial intercultural contexts. Our work is informed by aspects of Polish folklore, modes of *immersive* installation practice,¹ feminist enquiries, popular genre of anime (Japanese animation) and Australian urban building practices. Each is reconsidered in the present through the process of constructing objects and spaces.

Another more discrete form of contact with *sensography*² occurs here as bodies engage with writing about our installations. However, rather than just *reading* bodies and spaces through vision, our approaches to making also involve *feeling* and *sensing* the emotional and multi-sensorial dimensions of spaces as we are concerned with the affective, emotional and sensory dimensions of bodily capacities encompassed in everyday intercultural encounters between Australian and Polish cultures.

Cultural theorist Sara Ahmed³ positions feeling; bringing together affectivity, emotionality and sensation as

powerful social machinations involving political and economic productions that circulate towards and press against bodily spaces. Through the deployment of narratives or political rhetoric into private and public spheres, this pressure or contact is felt by the body and gives rise to a multiplicity of bodily movements - physical, emotional and psychical - which then shape bodies and the spaces in which the bodies reside. When it comes to the sociality of bodily capacities, the research of Howes⁴ and Classen⁵ into the senses is also useful. Both position the complex configurations of bodily encounters in spaces as renegotiable cultural communicative systems that vary from place to place and between different bodies. To explore the productions of these bodily capacities in everyday intercultural encounters and installation sculptural spaces, we knot affect, emotion and the senses together with the sociality of the place. This concern with the dimensions of feeling is the main focus of my doctoral research titled *Sensography*, that Howes describes as "...predicated on the recognition that the senses are constructed and lived differently in different societies..."⁶

Howes' model of the interwoven three-dimensional form of the knot⁷ becomes useful when thinking about the complexities of bodily encounters in spaces. Knots bring to mind culturally varying uses, social meanings and histories⁸ ranging from Chinese knotting, Japanese braiding, Celtic knots, Polish crochet and Sudanese or Haitian fish netting. The process of knotting utilises multi-

sensory acts across various social spheres, numerous industries and local economies. Knots are used by sailors, arborists, rescue professionals, surgeons, mathematicians and artists.⁹ Knotting skills are also crucial to numerous industries and local economies whilst being essential in many leisure and domestic activities. In the popular film genre of westerns, the precision of tightening the lasso shaped an iconic image of the US. Expressions such as *tying the knot*, mark social values and intimate feelings and a *knot in the stomach* points to an emotional state of anxiety. The hangman's noose may be considered as one of the most political and feared knots. We engage with Howes' model of the knot to think about how bodily capacities, objects and spaces are knotted with and steeped in sociality and issues of power.

In other words, through a *creative action* we attempt to negotiate what Raymond Williams calls *structures of feeling*.¹⁰ In referencing Williams' ideas, art critic and curator Jim Drobnick explains *structures of feeling* as "that unrepresentable, inarticulable sense of lived experience".¹¹ More specifically, *structures of feeling* are intangible forces of the present that arise out of the knotting between political and economic tensions and the felt bodily experience. Such entanglements promise that *structures of feeling* are far from innocent. These dynamic and relational forces are products governed by social formations; the political and economic practices of a particular place. Our encounters in places such as

Australia, Poland and Japan knotted such *structures of feeling* into our modes of expression.

As I attempt to feel my way out of this paragraph, I'm yet again drawn to the view outside my office window. There, in close proximity, stands a lush velvety green mountain called Mt Keira, at the bottom of which Martin and I live, make things and share our lives with my 90-year-old Polish grandmother. This is an intimate world, where feelings, sensations and affects circulate in swirling cycles. It is also a space where Australian and Polish cultures intermingle and collide. As human geographers Liz Bondi and Joyce Davison and philosopher Mick Smith put it, "Clearly our emotions matter. They affect the way we sense the substance of our past, present and future...".¹² Entanglements between narratives, emotion and the senses convert into affect: an ability to affect and a susceptibility to be affected.¹³ The affective, emotional and sensory movements between the past, present and future in both Polish and Australian cultures are heavy with social significance, saturated with politics and economics of both places, which in turn move our bodies and form worlds through which our bodies manoeuvre.

These felt forces are reflected in the process of making these exhibitions. For example, whilst Martin is assembling a sculpture in the studio, aromas of timber and sounds of tapping are released by his repetitive actions and contact with the materials, tools and processes. He takes a deep care as each piece of wood



is cut into wafer-thin slivers and drilled with a single hole to enable it to be hung from a toothpick. Each piece feels like raw silk, the soft furry pattern grazed by the blade still detectable. Hung by the hundreds onto a large triangular roof structure, the paper-thin slices take the shape of a roof shingle. From the warmth of pine we move to the cool, slippery surface of aluminium printing plates. Through a painstaking process, tiny impressions of dots are driven into the surface of printing plates with a nail. Each tap brings to mind an experience of frenzied labour involved in producing short-lived printed material for transforming bodies into consuming products in Adelaide. As the subtlety of the pattern emerges, a much slower world is also invoked. In this world, bodies are affected and emotionally moved by paintings of icons adorned with a glimmering silvery surface at the Pauline monastery of Jasna Gora in Czestochowa. In the studio, aluminium plates are also cut in narrow strips, edges of which are then nicked and rolled into rosettes. This process was shown to us by a folk artist in Zalipie, who twists colourful papers into flowers for the ephemeral Spring greeting ritual. These influences and their connections to the politics and economics become knotted together with the potential for future action.

The philosopher Brian Massumi explains this potential for futurity by pointing out that the transition between affective and affected involves uncertainty - the moment of *what to do next?*, which is felt or registered by the body.¹⁴ Affect intensifies due to the multiplicity of recurring

movements, which unlock the reservoirs of past histories and the contingency of future in the reality of the present - the *margin of manoeuvrability*, the feeling of an opportunity for future experimentation. Through this intensification, bodies connect and attachments are made between bodies, objects, spaces or situations. Ahmed goes on to suggest that over time repeated circulations of ideologies invested into emotion and sensation, which are bound to the protean nature of politics and economics, accumulate in memory as a kind of capricious affective value.¹⁵ The fluctuation in the intensification of affect makes *structures of feeling* unstable. We utilise this instability as an access point for constructing spaces, which attempt to negotiate the real and imagined dimensions of our intercultural worlds.

At the other end of our house, sounds of Polish words circulate, gravitating towards the studio space and Martin's body, in the process entangling with noises, aromas and emotions. My grandmother, Maria Zawada is teaching me how to crochet complex traditional Polish lace patterns for a hood that will clothe a sculpture that Martin is carving. Like preparing Polish ritual foods with my grandmother, the multi-sensory dimensions of making crochet stir up stories about the past. Tales of Polish history and personal experiences are resurrected and interwoven with current encounters in Australia and political agendas of both places. We invest much emotion into these narratives and our utterings reverberate through the house. As I wait in anticipation for how to proceed with



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the next crochet loop, our binding migrant experiences of journeying to Australia in 1981 resurface. Together, in a rush, with few possessions, we – my grandmother and I – escaped from Poland during the 1981 Martial Law period, manoeuvring our way to asylum in Austria. Later we reunited with our family in Australia. These were extraordinary emotional passages of anticipation and tension.

Although the process of crocheting is central in recalling my past experiences in the reality of the present, Martin and I attempt to link the traditional practice of Polish crochet with the place of our current residence in Wollongong by collecting plant material from the grounds of the University of Wollongong and by drawing on the plant dyeing practices developed by Australian artists including Elsje King,¹⁶ Kay Lawrence¹⁷ and India Flint.¹⁸ Potent aromas are released and permeate the studio when Merino wool yarns and *Eucalyptus tereticornis* leaves come together in the dye pot, sometimes interrupted by the sizzling sounds of brew escaping from the dye pot. The almost black fluffy strands are formed by crochet into a hood and rib-like garment, designed to shape the absent body of the creature that is being assembled. Through the cross-cultural intermingling of the textiles processes the boundaries between past, present and future seem to become blurred.

Likewise, the worlds of the folk legends of Baba Jaga¹⁹ and Yu-Baaba also become entangled in the sculptural

works. In Slavic folklore and contemporary animations, Baba Jaga is portrayed as a witch that is both an antagonist and a source of wisdom. Yu-Baaba on the other hand, is one of the protagonists of the Japanese anime film *Spirited Away* (2001) directed by Hayao Miyazaki of Studio Ghibli.²⁰ For me, Slavic folklore and anime from Japan became intertwined in Poland, during the 1970s when anime was a consistent element in Polish television and film. Since the 1980s both of our interests into anime deepened with the rapid growth and popularisation of the Japanese animation genre in Australia. In these stories both characters are powerful witches, Baba Jaga is a keeper of the forest and Yu-Baaba manages a Bathhouse for the spirits that populate Japanese folklore traditions and Shinto beliefs. Both are anthropomorphic creatures that move between the spiritual and contemporary worlds of popular culture, invoking multi-sensory and emotional places. Baba Jaga's and Yu-Baaba's shape-shifting abilities enable them to construct spaces where movements between the past, present and contingency of future can occur. Although ambiguity surrounds the precise location of Baba Jaga's and Yu-Baaba's territory, this world can be accessed through oral and moving-image narratives from the reality of the present. When entered, the boundaries between past, present and future seem to erode and a space for critiquing or resisting aspects of contemporary life emerges.

The cross-cultural knotting between these stories provides more than fantasy-scapes or escapes. In

terms of our installation, the exploration of the narrative structures and identities in Polish folklore and anime has enabled us to construct objects and spaces that negotiate some of the uneasiness felt by us in everyday encounters of intercultural living. In this context, our installations are not simply about the proximity of contact with affects, emotions or sensations but also with the *objects of feeling*.²¹ For example, through the emotionality invested in narratives about Baba Jaga, her feared identity moves across bodies and spaces from Poland to Australia. These circulations or productions are saturated with the affective value and feelings, which have stuck to her for over thousands of years.²²

When it comes to *feeling* and *sensing* the ways in which we as both migrant and non-migrant bodies negotiate living, work and gallery spaces, movement and attachment are equally important. Attachments are formed through the multiplicities of movements alluded to above, which occur between past, present and future and between affect, emotion, the senses and the social formations of the place. The productions of affectivity, emotionality and multi-sensory dimensions in spaces, move bodies towards certain bodies whether real or imagined. Through our collaborative projects we respond to such attachments by forming and constructing protean territories or worlds where setting of boundaries and loosing of ties with other bodies, spaces and worlds also occurs. The interconnections between Massumi's, Ahmed's and Howes' insights into affect, emotion and the

senses suggest that much can escape the notice of the artist's and viewer's body yet somehow it registers and accumulates. When felt repeatedly over time through the deployment of narratives or creative actions into spaces it has the potential to resurface somewhere in the future.

Crack! Snap! Another blade breaks as it comes into contact with a knot in the wood. Our bodies move towards the studio to make a hood fitting. Lots of questions circulate in both languages. Is it death, a witch or an anime character? It's scary but soft. Why does it wobble? Are these human teeth? Ahh it's a good demon... Is there such a thing?...Well in anime there is.



- 1 De Oliveira, N, Oxley, N & Petry, M 2003, *Installation art in the New Millennium: the empire of the senses*, Thames & Hudson, New York, p49.
- 2 Howes, D 2007, 'Sensory basket Weaving 101' in *NeoCraft: Modernity and the Crafts*, The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, Nova Scotia. pp216-224. Anthropologist David Howes explains "The notion of sensography – or 'sense description' – is an offspring of the sensorial revolution which is currently sweeping humanities and social sciences", p217.
- 3 Ahmed, S 2004, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Edinburgh University Press, New York.
- 4 Howes, D (ed.) 2005, *Empire of the Senses: the sensual culture reader*, Berg Publishers, Oxford & New York.
- 5 Classen, C (ed.) 2005, *The Book of Touch*, Berg Publishers, Oxford, New York.
- 6 Howes, D 2007, 'Sensory basket Weaving 101' in *NeoCraft: Modernity and the Crafts*, The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, Nova Scotia, p218.
- 7 Howes, D (ed.) 2005, *Empire of the Senses: the sensual culture reader*, Berg Publishers, Oxford & New York, p9.
- 8 This text is useful for a historical overview of knots in mythology, magic and ritual practices; Frazer, J 1911-1951, *The Golden Bough: a study in magic and religion*, Macmillan, London.
- 9 For a good example of knots and knotting in contemporary art works see: M. Abakanowicz, *White* (1967), H. Bjarnadottir, *Skulls* (1999), J. Antoni, *Moor* (2001), S. Pepe, *Under the F&G* (2003).
- 10 Williams, R 1977, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- 11 Drobnick, J 2005, 'Volatile effects: olfactory dimensions of art and architecture', in *Empire of the Senses: the sensual culture reader*, Berg Publishers, Oxford & New York, p276.
- 12 Bondi, L, Davidson, J & Smith, M 2005, *Emotional Geographies*, Ashgate Pub Co, England, p1.
- 13 Massumi, B 2002, *Parables for the Virtual: movement, affect, sensation*, Duke University Press, Durham, p15.
- 14 Massumi, B & Zournazi, M 2003, , 15/4/2010. <http://www.21cmagazine.com/issue2/massumi.html>
- 15 Ahmed, S 2004, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Edinburgh University Press, New York, p12.
- 16 For a good example of Elsje King's (also know as Elsje van Keppel) use of plant dyes see: Koumis, M (ed.) 1999, *Art Textiles of the World: Australia*, Telos, Winchester.
- 17 Kay Lawrence's artworks utilising plant dyes include the Lake Mungo project: *Plant dye grid* (1997) and *Translation* (1999-2000).
- 18 For India Flint's use of plant dyes see Flint, I 2008, *Eco Colour: botanical dyes for beautiful textiles*, Murdoch Books, Millers Point, NSW.
- 19 In Slavic languages variant forms include; Baba Yaga, Baba Yaha or Baba Jaha, in the Polish language names that relate to Baba Jaga include; *wiedźma*, *jedza* and *czarownica*.
- 20 Miyazaki, H 2002, *The Art of Miyazaki's Spirited Away*, VIZ Media LLC, San Francisco, CA.
- 21 Ahmed, S 2004, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Edinburgh University Press, New York, p13.
- 22 For etymology of Baba Jaga's identity see: Johns, A 2004, *Baba Yaga the Ambiguous Mother and Witch of the Russian Folktale*, Peter Lang Publishing, New York.

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