

Contact, 2009



other worlds

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Agnieszka Golda and Martin Johnson make things. Through more than twenty years of independent and collaborative practice, involving painting, photography, video, wooden sculpture and textiles, what is unmistakable in their object-making is their love for an often eclectic mix of materials, colours, textures and surface patterns, combined with a pleasure in narrative and allusion. Often playful and sometimes startling, they manipulate figurative imagery and symbolism drawn from traditional European folk and contemporary, globalised popular culture to fashion a space for imaginative and emotional associations to stir.

In a parallel trajectory, their collaborative exhibition work both inside and out of the gallery demonstrates a literal concern with the fashioning of space. The strategies of installation practice – the consideration of objects, not in isolation, but as an integral component of a complete environment in which the spectator also plays a part – offers the artists a means of paying attention to the complex multi-sensorial nature of experience and of creating new possibilities for viewer interaction. In this way, Golda and Johnson seek to instigate movements between physical bodies, materials, artefacts, spaces, and events – in the process evoking memories and sensations, thereby telling stories.

In Golda and Johnson's collaborative installation 'Contact' at the Faculty of Creative Arts Gallery (University of Wollongong), the visitor is invited to make contact with

another world, one situated somewhere between art gallery, folk tale writ large, or the set of a fantasy film or Japanese anime scene; a space formerly familiar as a container for artworks now enlivened with possibilities for exploration, association and experience.

Dominating the gallery is a huge timber-shingled roof smelling of newly cut pine, a life-size sketch of an imagined dwelling, now somehow displaced and without its proper 'home'. Open at one end, the structure draws visitors around the walls of the gallery and invites them to peer within or even enter, despite the seeming precariousness of the internal timber props – a protective shelter, a place from which to look out and not be seen, to whisper with friends, to plot and play.

Covering the floor, pale green carpet underlay modifies the transmission of sound within the space and even the experience of placing foot to floor. Visually unifying the gallery, distinguishing inside from out, indisputably synthetic in appearance, smell and feel, the green surface nevertheless speaks 'ground' with all the lingering associations of grass, lawn, or forest floor.

Three-dimensional aluminium flowers attached to one wall likewise continue the reflections upon an encounter with storybook, synthetic nature. At the far end of the gallery a nightmarish, ribbed and horned figure seems to extrude from the wall, long arms stretching to meet the floor, perhaps emerging from some other realm (caught



at the interface between worlds) to greet the viewer face-to-face. Two walls are covered in large aluminium sheets. Embossed with a regular dot pattern, the metal provides a surface that gently bounces light around the gallery (including the diffuse bodily reflections of gallery visitors), creating movement and another impetus for visitors to reassess their own spatial perceptions.

Here, installation is conceived as a form of ephemeral, contingent practice that pivots on the role of the encounter between viewers and their surrounds. Since at least the 1960s, visual artists have explored installation as a mode of practice that has sought to undermine the autonomy of both viewer and art object by focusing on subjective perception and 'environmental' relations. New York academic and artist, Allen Kaprow's simple definition of environment was of 'an art form that fills an entire room (or outdoor space) surrounding the visitor and consisting of any materials whatsoever, including lights, sounds and colour'.¹ Environmental artworks produced by artists such as Kaprow throughout the 60s and 70s claimed to create an immersive experience, an environment in which the spectator was literally absorbed to become 'a real part of the whole'.² Artistic experience therefore involved the whole body of the visitor, their full range of



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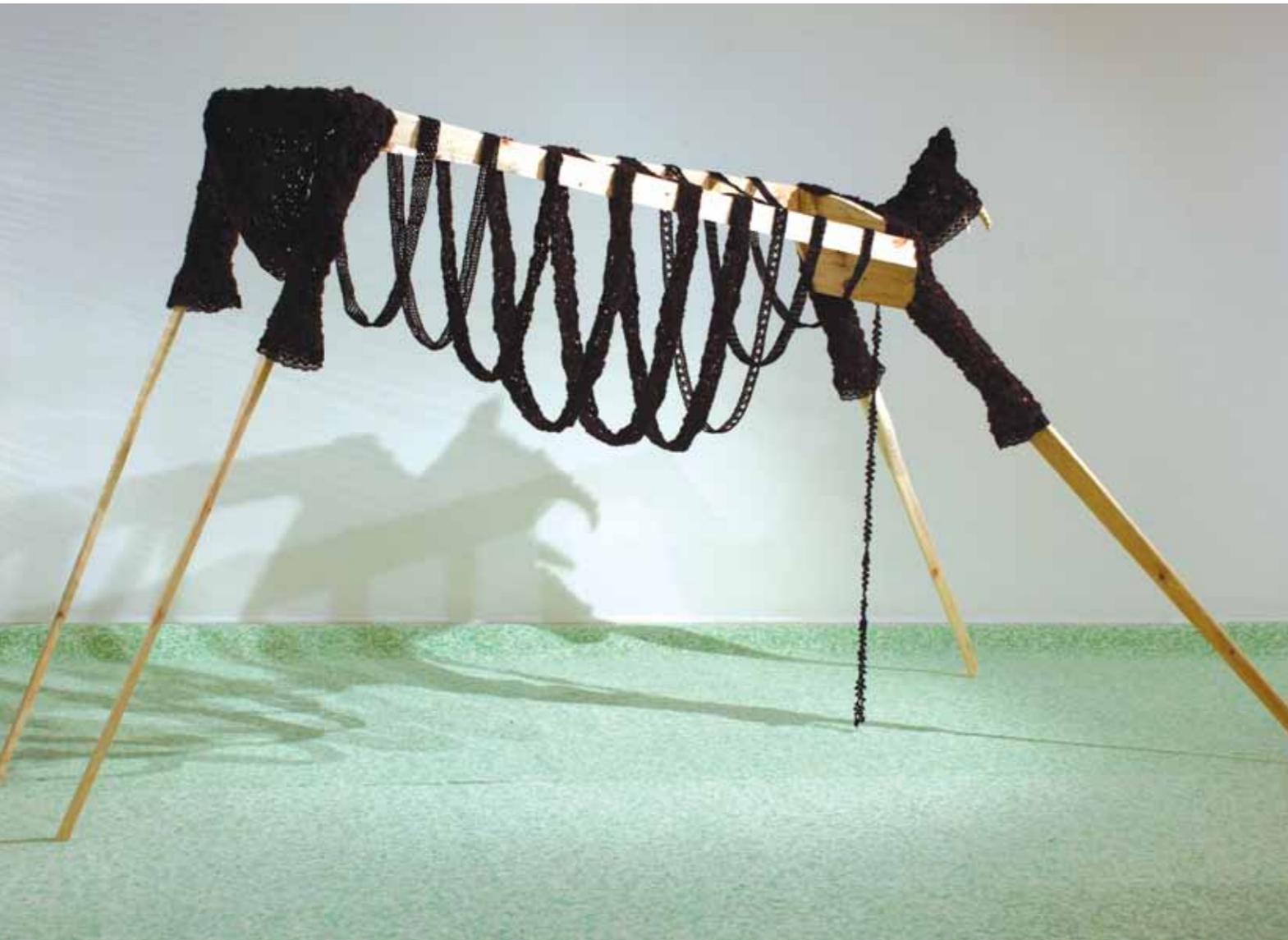
sense perceptrors as well as the mind and imagination – a proposition, as Martin Jay notes, in direct contrast to the Kantian notion that aesthetic experience was inherently contemplative, with the observer supposedly distanced and separate from the object of knowledge.³

Proliferating 'new art' and 'new sculpture' in this period (such as earthworks, land art, assemblages, happenings, environmental, installation, conceptual, ephemeral and performance art) sought new approaches to art that would break down established boundaries between art forms, between art and everyday life, and create a drastically new relationship with the audience.⁴ In emphasising active experience and the consciousness of the viewer, rather than the particular qualities inherent in any given object, such practices brought to the fore the role of the beholder of artwork as an active participant in both the production and reception of art, reflecting a trend towards what Jay calls a performative impulse: 'the anti-optical theatricalization of the aesthetic experience, that addressing of the body of the beholder in real time that formalist critics like Michael Fried were vigorously, if unsuccessfully, condemning in the Minimalist art of the 1960s'.⁵

For Nicolas Bourriaud, however, while the participants of Kaprow's Happenings and Environments might have been active and engaged, they were restricted to reacting to those initial impulses engineered by the artist as 'transmitter'.⁶ Claire Bishop notes that the emphasis on

first-hand experience in environmental and installation art of the 1960s and 70s, despite claims to reconfigure relations between the artist-producer and viewer-consumer, frequently played on an ambiguity between a fully present, autonomous subject (the viewer) and the abstract, philosophical model of that spectator postulated by the way in which the work itself attempted to structure the artful encounter.⁷ Bourriaud describes this situation as a 'soft' version of interactivity, in contrast to the possibilities of contemporary DIY cultures and internet practices, for example, and he argues instead for the possibility of a 'relational art' that might somehow ignore the separation between transmission and reception.⁸ No longer 'a space to walk through', contemporary art, for Bourriaud, is a state of encounter and 'interstice': 'a space in social relations which [...] suggests possibilities for exchanges other than those that prevail within the system' – not through representation per se, but by modelling possible universes, providing alternative models of action.⁹

In the installation 'Contact', Golda and Johnson don't simply represent an alternative space for contemplation, one of intermingled worlds comprised of fantasy and reality, the artificial and the natural, traditional and contemporary. Instead, the encounter is central, not only through the inevitable contingency of each meeting of viewer-material-object-space (and so on) within the gallery, but in the emphasis on praxis, that is, in the actual performance and practice of spaces and relationships



through which alternative worlds are both encountered and modelled, remembered, transformed or rejected.

It is with the performative in mind that Golda has so often drawn upon the traditional, regional folk tales and ephemeral, ritual practices of her birthplace in Zalipie, Poland. These folk practices are significant not only for their rich symbolic language but as socio-experiential forms that connect places and identities. Take the ambiguous figure of the Baba Jaga, for example, a woman both wise and threatening whose home is in a willow tree, deep in the forest that borders Zalipie village. In this forest time exists differently from outside and for those who enter past and present can seem to merge. From within, Baba Jaga keeps careful watch. By means of powerful spells and charms (and special abilities that enable her to transform into a bird or forest animal) she can pass unnoticed when she chooses to, moving between worlds, space and time.¹⁰ The telling of the Baba Jaga story, like the act of walking through the forest, embodies specific knowledge about appropriate ways of behaviour, about real places and local constructions of identity, in the process making links between the village and villagers, the forest and its groves, its plant and animal life, and what lies outside. At the same time, the tale expresses a broader conceptualisation of the relationships between humans and nature, between dreams and reality, the visible and invisible, past and future.

It may be pertinent to introduce the concept of animism

here as a potentially useful abstraction for thinking about European folk traditions and systems of knowledge. Sociologist John Clammer describes animism as an approach that regards reality as non-material, or nature as spiritualised.¹¹ Taking account of everyday phenomena such as dreams, which might be taken as evidence of the uncertain boundary between fantasy and the waking world, animist beliefs and practices envision the existence of a world beyond ordinary materialism. Animism, Clammer suggests, embodies 'an experiential, active and everyday relationship to creatures and things in nature', effectively dissolving fixed boundaries between the animate and inanimate, and 'spiritualising the mundane'.¹²

An example of animist beliefs and practices can also be found in Japanese traditional folk Shinto, and its articulation of human, natural and spiritual relationships. In a world where almost anything has the potential to be deified, including natural forces and phenomena, mountains, rocks and trees, animals and humans, living or dead, Shinto constructs a rich network of spiritual influences that results in a very permeable sense of human-nature-divine boundaries.¹³

Although, in common parlance, the term animism may be associated with traditional (or even 'primitive') systems of knowledge, the concept is clearly alive and well in contemporary Japan. This is a world-view, for example, that might be seen to underpin aspects of contemporary



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Japanese story telling, such as Hayao Miyazaki's animated films 'Spirited Away' (Studio Ghibli, 2001) or 'My Neighbour Totoro' (Studio Ghibli, 1988), both popular internationally. Ostensibly stories for children, these tales articulate the complex, porous and overlapping boundaries that exist between realms of past, present and future, between humans and the natural and spirit worlds. Science fiction films, such as the well-known anime 'Ghost in the Shell' (Mamoru Oshii/Studio IG, 1995), in a similar way, take as a given the intermingling of the synthetic and the natural, the virtual and the real.

While animism is clearly manifest as a trace in the products of the internationally successful manga and anime industries, Clammer argues that animism is also used within Japanese intellectual discourse as a way of explaining the distinctiveness of Japanese culture, and as a means of explicitly locating nature as part of the constitution of Japanese society.¹⁴

From the perspective of attempts to reveal or redefine relationships between society and nature, humans and technology, or the material and the immaterial, the concept of animism suggests particular possibilities as one lens for reflecting upon the history of recent installation practice, as well as for organising the various threads emerging in the installation 'Contact'. In this exhibition, Johnson and Golda bring European and Japanese animism into dialogue, drawing on their knowledge of traditional Polish folk practices and

contemporary Japanese anime (linked as well to childhood memories of popular Japanese cartoon series, shown on both Australian and Polish TV). It might also be worth reflecting (following Clammer) that animist systems have a subversive potential – in their undermining of rigorous scientific categories and resistance to assimilation or codification within rationalist schemas they throw a spotlight on the political dimensions and effects of everyday practices and beliefs (including contemporary art).

Cognisant of the historical foundations of installation practice in the visual arts, the installation 'Contact' invites the gallery visitor into an environment and 'sets it in motion', allowing for new meanings or counter-meanings to be created through the 'radical juxtaposition' of bodies, objects and spaces.¹⁵ Although a world where (almost) anything might happen, Golda and Johnson's installation draws on shared histories (of story-telling, popular culture, the feel and smell of materials) to set the scene for an encounter with overlapping and porous borders between fantasy and reality, and between the gallery and the everyday world of the University outside, and beyond.



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- 5 Jay, M 2002, p59.
- 6 Bourriaud, N 2002, *Postproduction. Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*, Lukas & Sternberg, New York, pp81-82.
- 7 Bishop, C 2005, *Installation Art: a Critical History*, Tate, London, pp102-127.
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- 9 Bourriaud, N 2006, p161.
- 10 Golda, A 2005, *Bewitched Between Borders, Boundaries and Bridges*, unpublished MA thesis, University of South Australia, Adelaide, p54.
- 11 Clammer, J, 2001, *Japan and its Others: Globalization, difference and the critique of Modernity*, Trans Pacific Press, Melbourne, pp217-243.
- 12 Clammer, J 2001, pp221-222.
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- 14 Clammer, J 2001, p217.
- 15 As Susan Sontag observed in 1962 of Kaprow's staged events or 'Happenings' in New York. Sontag, S 1978, 'Happenings: an art of radical juxtaposition'; in S Sontag, *Against Interpretation and other essays*, Octagon Books, New York, pp263-274.