



Images clockwise, from top left : Fiona Connor, *Notes on half the page*, 2009, installation view, courtesy of the artist and Gambia Castle, Auckland, photo: Alex North. Eve Armstrong, *Run Off*, 2000, installation view, "Dressed and Shaken", Michael Lett, Auckland. Gaelen Macdonald, *Pomps*, 2007 installation view, "Moment Making", Artspace. Eve Armstrong, *Run Off*, 2000, installation view, "Dressed and Shaken", Michael Lett, Auckland. Gaelen Macdonald, *122's x 122's*, 2007, installation view "Moment Making", Artspace. Kate Newby, *My poetry, for example*, 2007, installation view, Elam School of Fine Arts, Auckland.

KNOW HOW CAN DO: E, F, G, K – BUSY WITH THE ELEPHANT; OR, CALCULATE, EVALUATE, IMPROVISE: EVE ARMSTRONG; FIONA CONNOR; GAELLEN MACDONALD; KATE NEWBY.

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*'In cooking, one always has to calculate, both time and money, not go beyond the budget, not overestimate one's own work speed, not make the schoolboy late. One has to evaluate in the twinkling of an eye what will be the most cost-effective in terms of price, preparation, and flavour. One has to know how to improvise with panache, know what to do when fresh milk "turns" on the stove, when meat, taken out of the package and trimmed of fat, reveals itself to be not enough to feed four guests, or when Mathieu brings a little friend to dinner unannounced and one has to make the leftover stew "go a little farther".'*¹

This evening, I've been reading W.G. Sebald comparing his writing process to a dog moving through a field, and the structural designer Cecil Balmond noting that the way we enter and move through static architectural spaces is always non-linear, that is unpredictable and non-repeated (and this includes "how you read those spaces as you travel through the building"²). Sebald's analogy put me in mind of Ian Wedde's discussion on walking his dog, as the animal sets the pace and initiates the swerves, doublings-back and delays, which turns the shared time outdoors into a complex diagram of movement, responsive to odours and wind shifts across a varied Wellington terrain. Balmond says that whether we think of architecture or the engineering of cells, "the fundamental shift that is irreversibly upon us is that organisation is no longer seen as linear, classically ordained, with a formal set of references. Organisation forms out of itself, which is very hard to get your head around; it's self-referential, it doesn't have any global axis to plot against."³ Sebald says, "If you look at a dog following the advice of his nose, he traverses a patch of land in a completely unplotable manner. And he invariably finds what he's looking for... as I've always had dogs, I've learned from them how to do this. And so you then have a small amount of material, and you accumulate things, and it grows; one thing takes you to another, and you make something out of these haphazardly assembled materials."⁴ Ian Wedde observes how years of noting and absorbing his dog's ways each morning has rubbed off on his own thinking: "after running for years with this alert, courteous dog, I learned to think outside the claustrophobic confines of strategizing my day: my thought resembled running, sniffing, and looking, more than it did planning."⁵ These tropes, this sort of language, takes me right into the conceptual drawing-rooms of Eve Armstrong, Fiona Connor, Gaelen Macdonald and Kate Newby – henceforth E, F, G, K.

The improvisational materiality of both Eve Armstrong and Gaelen Macdonald has to do with the world as variegated, or differentiated plenum; with busy and intensely patterned configurations that constantly branch off, subdivide, effects things up close and at a distance. The time scales and organisational styles in their work do differ; but the implications of the joint projects they worked on soon after leaving art school, are still "running wild and adapting" (as John Lyall would say) in their on-going projects. Macdonald is a site-responsive map-maker; she sets herself exercises in the connections and syntactical rhymes between things and spaces, between gaps and edges, proximities and distal points. It does look plotted, but in an idiosyncratic, unpredictable, private and obsessive way – rather than worked out according to what Le Corbusier used to call the plan as 'generator'. The organisational intimacies of the table top, shelf or file box pervade all of Macdonald's work. Even when she activates a whole room as she once did in Canary

Gallery, or a sequence of walls and a floor, as she did in Laura Preston's "After the situation: *MOMENT MAKING* exhibition at Artspace in 2007. There is not enough space here to pursue the implicit links between the office or studio desk, the private bureau, the sorting table, as Macdonald has engaged them, and the ubiquitous grids of bureaucratic administration; I think, however, that her work does imply both an affection for the trappings of bureaucracy and a subversion, at a distance, of its big schemes. Macdonald deploys things and materials on her working surfaces as if scoring a private syntax of organisational intrigue; as might a composer mark up a sheet of empty bars, using the ruled lines as a scaffold on which to string the graphic signs of an emergent, design-as-you-go system of notation. Macdonald's organisational scoring all looks like a type of rehearsed improvisation, inflected by chance, feeling and site. She sets up surfaces for setting things out, for skewing things on the orthogonal, for pushing some things into a group, for accenting the plane with incidents, small events of cardboard, pencils, paperclips, a pile of photographs, or folded envelopes. She implies different time scales within the different locales of her morphogenetic fields, as if modulating the type and intensity of attention required.

I thought of Macdonald's floor of cardboard tiles when I saw Bertolucci's *The Dreamers* on TV a couple of weeks ago. One of the many movies within the movie was a clip from Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers's *Top Hat* (1935). Astaire was dancing on a gridded parquet floor, which in turn sounded on the ceiling of Ginger Rogers' bedroom on the floor directly below; and Astaire's tapping further doubled and rhymed off itself as he kicked and rapped on individual objects and architectural details around the room with the soles and edges of his hard, shiny shoes. In my mind, Astaire's accenting of the room chimed with the playful syncopation of Macdonald's work in the Artspace group show; with the iterations of her floor of cardboard tiles, tied in to various surrounding points of focus; deliriously in and out of step with its own logic of assembly. The alliterative echoes between *The Dreamers* and Macdonald's work also bounced around the scene in the movie when the character Matthew moved the cigarette lighter about the table showing proportional matches between its dimensions and those of the patterns of the table cloth. He speculates on being able to show similar dimensional links with any objects on the table, the refrigerator, the whole of the room, the father's nose and the rest of the world. This little monologue is like an arpeggio or choral progression which ends up in a brief transport of improvisational excess. Macdonald uses a similar rehearsal of organisational parallels, alignments, rhymes and repetitions as a base-line on which she may double-back, break-off or introduce a new motif altogether.

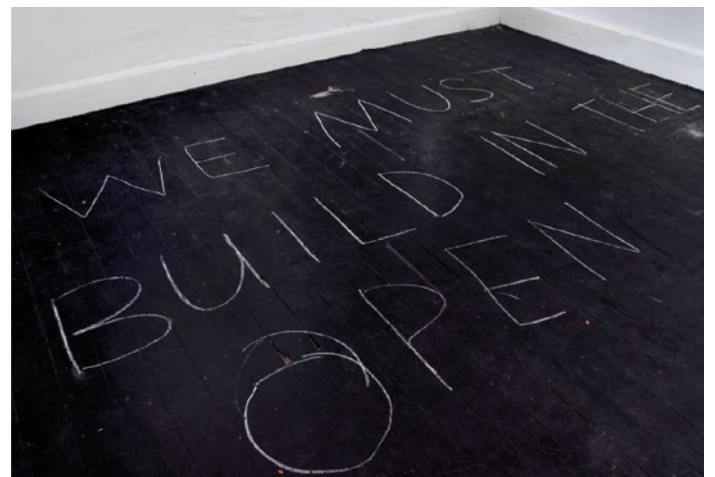
In Sanford Kwinter's wonderfully precise and busy book, *Architectures of Time: Toward a theory of the event in modernist culture*, the way he discusses the particulars of Franz Kafka's writing style can be applied word for word to the practice of all four of E, F, G, K. If I replace writing with art, Kwinter says: "[Art] becomes less a question of representing a world than of explicating or unfolding the many potential worlds complicated within every point or instant and of tracing the routes and connective pathways between. Not the horizontal line of development, superhighway of the grand Event, but the diagonal line of connection and changes of state, webwork of microscopic fissures and openings. Reality here develops as a multiplicity of hypotheses continually etching themselves into the concrete, a reality founded not in Truth or given a priori, but re-created at each point anew through minute, specific gestures, actions, or speculations."⁶

In Michael Parekowhai's *Roebuck Jones and the Cuniculus Kid* (2001), two rabbit gunfighter's facing off in tiny cowboy costumes enact a humorous parable of a type of tensed relationship between sculptural object and viewer; the between-bunny space is fraught and static, in permanent



Images clockwise, from top left : Fiona Connor, *Free Literature: 1 de Junio*, 2007. Eve Armstrong, *Roam*, 2006, installation view, Artspace, Auckland. Kate Newby, *My poetry, for example*, 2007, installation view Elam School of Fine Arts, Auckland. Kate Newby, *Falling Over with Surprise*, 2009, installation detail Adam Art Gallery, Wellington. Fiona Connor, *They had an idea to take out all the doors* 2008, Gertrude Contemporary Artspace, Melbourne, Australia. Gaelen Macdonald, *Painting Mansions Occupation*, 2002, installation view.





Images clockwise, from top left: Fiona Connor, *Something Transparent (please go around the back)*, 2009, installation view, courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett, Auckland, photo: Alex North. Gaelen Macdonald, *Painting Mansions Occupation*, 2002, installation view. Fiona Connor, *Notes on half the page*, 2009, installation view, courtesy of the artist and Gambia Castle, Auckland, photo: Alex North. Kate Newby, *On the Benefits of Building*, 2007, installation view Gambia Castle, Auckland. Gaelen Macdonald, *122's x 122's*, installation view "Moment Making", Artspace, 2007.

anticipation of a violent termination of the conflict – there's nowhere else to go, no way to slip around the figure as blocking device. The gun-toting varmints are acting out an Event; the uppercase "E" denoting the occurrence as that which is "gathering reality around itself like a center and commanding a certain measure of space."⁷ Macdonald's de-centering diagrams of emergence improvise a very different type of organisational freedom. I find the term 'sculptor' inapt for what each of these people do. E, F, G, K arrange things, set them out, install, group, fabricate and organise materials, things, spaces, objects, language. The term sculptor harks back to the labour of realising the isolated form; the unique figure around which all attention turns.

Eve Armstrong's practice is about collecting, gathering, folding, compressing, spreading, leaning and arranging accrued material, as might a student of limited means practising a boisterous street-side Ikebana. Armstrong's other line of production being trading tables and social sculpture at local and modest scale, serves, by implication, to put the dense materiality of her physical assemblages into a conceptual circulation. The relational works oriented to social events imply the transience of the materials and forms of her closely structured installations. The composite heaps, or collations of inorganic refuse works, often seem to have all sorts of traditional arrangements of things in mind – whether flowers, pot plants, heraldic devices, consumer merchandise, clothes or domestic furniture – which they mimic in their convivial formality; in their humorously managed profusion. In some of Armstrong's large, installed, climbing piles of flattened cardboard, the rambling aggregation of the overall work presents the graspable world as something confusing and precarious, and although constantly requiring our prehensile attention, its stability is only relative. The layers of cardboard, their bent and splayed edges accenting accumulation, stack up temporal shells or slices of a bloc of space-time (to use Deleuze's term) as did the crystalline encrustations of forms in J.G. Ballard's *The Crystal World*; each shell like a sloughed cicada carcass, transparent to an earlier moment of time, or to one of innumerable virtual time exposures. A series of collages made with brown plastic tape and cut out pictures of houses and miscellaneous objects, suggest a world in flux, borne along slowly, but inexorably on a turgid river of base materiality. In the year Armstrong made these works, there had been several photos in the papers and on TV of floods and landslides that took households, cars and civic structures away in a turbulence of mud and water.

There is a theological term I have discovered recently which seems an unlikely place to begin talking about Kate Newby's work. The term *apocatastasis* refers to the final restoration, or resolution of all things at the end of time; it means nothing is lost. Newby's work is built on the premise that every little thing, every turn of the head, every inflection of a distracted attention, every small intention, counts in some way. As much as the theological notion of a future resolution of all contradictions, of all hierarchies of value and competing power structures implies a critique of the way significance generally gets apportioned, so Newby's precise and infinitely subtle aesthetics of indirection carry a similar implication. There is a similarity between Newby's fidelity to the falling away and Alban Berg's compositional manner as Adorno talks about it. Adorno contrasts the "self-glorification" and the "insistence" of Wagner to the "passive, acquiescent, elusive quality" of Berg. In Berg, Adorno suggests, there is perhaps "the unacknowledged hope that only that which does not keep a grip on itself will not be lost."⁸ One of Newby's publications is called *Holding on to it only makes you sick* (2008); reflecting on this idea of relinquishing one's assertive grip on the work, on life, seems intrinsic to the task Newby has set herself. Newby assumes a weakness, a hesitancy at the heart of making both conceptual and material architectures. To apply another theological term, as have writers like Gianni

Vattimo, we can call this the kenotic aspect in the project. Kenosis entails a relinquishing of power, an abnegation of the protected position. Kenosis is movement, it is event oriented, it is temporal. Vattimo has recently talked about the kenotic unsettling of the strong structures of Being and the controls on interpretation that have built the history of Western metaphysics from the ground up. Newby's walls of crumbling bricks or unmortared concrete blocks, in combination with her flags, stained curtains, throw away personal texts, and coloured pieces of clothing tied to bushes, combine fragility, casualness, weakness, and informality with an incredibly precise sense of placement and the fine tuning of "miniscule motives". Again, as Adorno speculates on Berg: "In immersing oneself in Berg's music one feels at times as though Berg's voice were speaking in a tone combining gentleness, nihilism, and intimate trust to the point of utter enervation: 'Oh well, in the end, it's all really nothing'. Under an analytic gaze this music completely dissolves, as if it contained no solid components. It vanishes even while still in its apparently fixed, objectified aggregate state. Had one drawn Berg's attention to this he would, in his own bashful way, have been as pleased as someone caught in a secret kindness."⁹

At first glance, Fiona Connor's carefully fabricated objects appear closer to the isolate, frozen fetish ideal than the works of the other three I'm speaking to here. It could be argued, however, that Fiona's uncanny doubles, her invasive but dissembled architectural alterations, actually unmake the static object from inside. The assumed and asserted givens of a cast of objects taking over a space, inviolate in their hold on a reliable setting, is 'unmanned' from within. Defensive boundaries of identity are no longer so easy to find; that is they can no longer be confidently located, and therefore are drained of the tensions they once kept in place, becoming overgrown like neglected border crossings. There is, however, a new form of tension or manic energy that often replaces that force field of tense stand-off between individual objects, as though reality, like a faulty old film projector kept flashing up a jerky staccato of images only slightly different from each other. Connor's perspectival tunnel of glass and aluminium framing that she constructed to repeat the windows and glass door of the Michael Lett gallery fourteen times – *Something Transparent (please go round the back)*, 2009) – traps the viewer in a vertigo of reproduction. That particular work was like a hole drilled into the ordinary world that showed us, as a metaphysical core sample, that it was "turtles all the way down". Quiet and steady though Fiona's practice may appear, I think it actually unleashes a real instability and restlessness into the world of relations between people and things.

Some artists have taken up highly illusionistic modelling of objects in order to proclaim a *tour de force* virtuosity through sporting with a technique; Connor's mimeticism seems much more pragmatic than that; she does not do the beguiling demonstration of technical skill as an end in itself. Her objects are always transitive; they are always about stages in a process, rather than being independent things in themselves. This is clear in Connor's choice of what she represents. Her disjunctive, self-elaborating, collaged newspaper page is typical (*Free Literature: 1 de Junio 2007*, 2007); the newspaper as a vehicle for dissemination gets folded back on itself, so that the very site of daily change and the circulation of information gets thickened and prolonged through repetition; through a strange stutter of time. The same applies for her magazine racks and newspaper stands; they are sites of distribution. Connor's stands and racks do involve an uncanny play between original and seamless copy (some were found, some were exact copies) – but what they are, and therefore what type of processes they facilitate, parallel and exceed their primary status as monadic objects. Both semantic and syntactical in nature, they are points in a system of circulation; units in a larger language. The doubling and reduction of the Gambia gallery space (*Old Buildings*,

2007) was also about granting a renewed reality to a context of knowledge exchange; to a place in which people and ideas come and go over time. Connor's manipulations of the gallery space restored to an ambiguous presence what disappears as a rule, when the real art appears. Similarly, the collapsed Artspace stairs (*Props*, 2008) replicated and displaced the space and means of access to that gallery, so that the audience saw again that which is always forgotten on arrival upstairs, where the real art begins.

It is, perhaps, that Connor's practice starts with a sense of the dynamic ambiguity at the heart of any individuating process, rather than the physical actors themselves; trying to find a relational equation, an emergent space of possibilities; dealing with what Brian Massumi calls "interaction-in-the-making"¹⁰. Connor dismantles, in advance, the idea of a politicised confrontational space intensified for narrative ends. The uncertain status of her objects and the instability of her created locales, caught up in semantic and metaphysical ambiguities, leaves us with a sense of Borgesian conundrums rather than any Mexican standoff between static things.

In dealing with the relational complexities of the spaces around and between objects and within object ensembles, by relativising the fetishised thing within an infrastructural matrix E, F, G, K are dealing with the elephant in the room of contemporary New Zealand sculpture. By that I mean what gets most coverage in the generalising arts media – which we have plenty of – and that is the notion of sculpture as image, as corporate ornament; well-behaved eye-candy; privileged aesthetic commodity in a culture of monument production. E, F, G, K are not alone in their attentions to material improvisation, the temporally elaborated, the relationally inflected, the morphological field; to the events and emergence of organisation at different, and sometimes competing levels. With no room to elaborate differences or discuss off-shore exemplars here, a brief list of some important local names will have to do: Ant Sumich, Simon Ingram, Jason Lindsay, Ruth Thomas-Edmonds, John Lyall, Paul Cullen, Isobel Thom.

9. Ibid, p.2.
10. Brian Massumi, *Parables For The Virtual: Movement, affect, sensation*, Duke University Press, Durham & London 2002, p.7– 8.

Notes

1. Luce Giard, "Gesture Sequences" in de Certeau, Giard, Mayol, *The Practice of Everyday Life, volume 2: living and cooking*, The University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London 1998, p.200.
2. Cecil Balmond, in *Cross-Catalytic Architectures: in conversation*, Emily Abruzzo, Eric Ellingsen, Jonathan D. Solomon, eds., Models, 36090 Books, Volume 11, p.127.
3. Ibid, p.127.
4. Joseph Cuomo, "A Conversation with W.G. Sebald", in Lynne Sharon Schwartz (ed), *The Emergence of Memory: conversations with W.G. Sebald*, Seven Stories Press, New York 2007, p94, 95.
5. Ian Wedde, "Walking the dog", in Laurence Simmons, Philip Armstrong (eds), *Knowing Animals*, Brill, Leiden and Boston 2007, p.283.
6. Sanford Kwinter, *Architectures of Time: Toward a theory of the event in modernist culture*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2002, p.117.
7. Ibid, p.111.
8. Theodor W. Adorno, trans. Juliane Brand, Christopher Hailey, Alban Berg: *Master of the smallest link*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991, p.5.