



SASA
GALLERY

Quirk

March 7 - March 31 2007

IS AN EXHIBITION OF WEIRD AND INTRIGUING ARTWORK BY SOUTH AUSTRALIAN AND

Quirk

TASMANIAN ARTISTS WHICH EXPLORES THE POIGNANT, DISCARDED, ABJECT AND BIZARRE.

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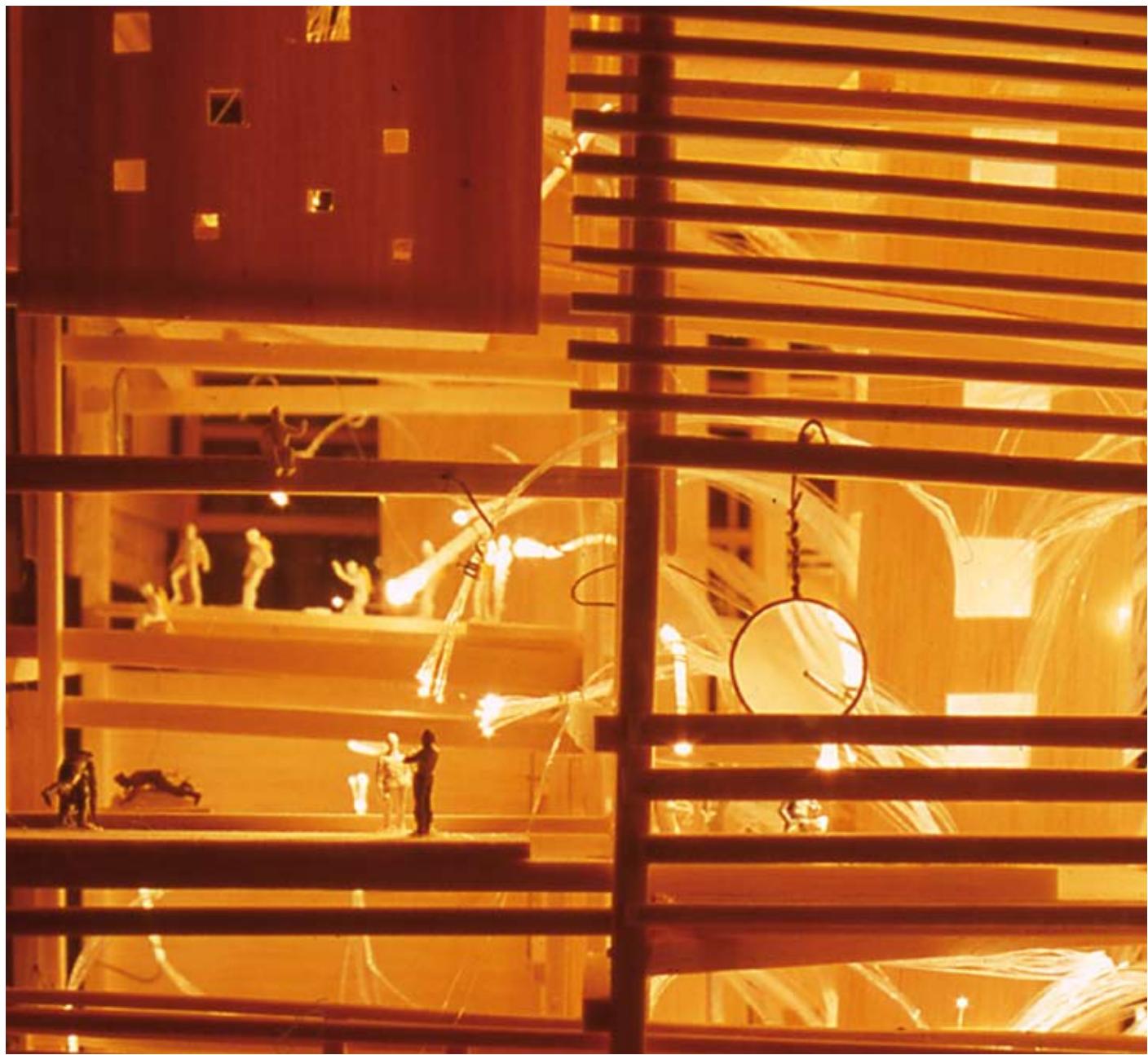
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Front cover: Rebecca Knapp, *Band-aid Series (detail)*, 2006, band-aids & thread

Back cover: Sonia Donnellan, *Going Under (detail)* 2006, clingwrap, sticky tape, marbles, wire

Mish Meijers & Tricky Wash, *The Bathhouse (detail)*, 2006, mixed media, approx 1200 x 500 x 500mm



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Anna Phillips, *Fat Jelly* (detail), 2006, used bathwater & beauty products, dimensions variable

Introduction

Quirk brings together contemporary artists from Tasmania and South Australia who explore the abject and perverse through their work. Developed for the 2007 Adelaide Fringe Festival, this exhibition is intended to expose artwork that is quirky, playful, weird and a little obsessive. The artists Sonia Donnellan, Amanda Robins, Rebecca Knapp, Anna Phillips, Mish Meijers, Tricky Walsh and Pamela Zeplin address the curatorial premise from a diverse range of perspectives and use media and techniques that range from band-aids and embroidery to film and installation.

Quirk is the first in a series of exhibitions that will bring external scholars as well as interstate and international artists and designers to Adelaide. They will participate in the SASA Gallery's exhibition and publication programs to enhance the already dynamic research culture of the South Australian School of Art. The first external scholar in the series is Seán Kelly, writer, curator and Honorary Research Associate, Tasmanian School of Art, University of Tasmania. Kelly recently returned from Ireland where he worked at the Cork Sculpture Factory and was involved in a number of projects in the 2005 European City of Culture. As well as writing one of the catalogue essays, while in Adelaide, Kelly will contribute to critical debate on the arts through lectures, discussions and talks organised by the SASA Gallery.

The SASA Gallery supports a program of exhibitions focusing on innovation, experimentation and performance. With the support of the Divisional Research Performance Fund the SASA Gallery is being developed as a leading contemporary art space publishing and exhibiting high-quality research based work, and as an active site of teaching and learning. The SASA Gallery showcases South Australian artists, designers, writers and curators associated with South Australian School of Art and Louis Laybourne Smith School of Architecture in a national and international context.

Mary Knights
Director, SASA Gallery



Mish Meijers & Tricky Walsh, *The Collector (detail)*, 2006, sugar and mixed media, dimensions variable

Quirk

by Seán Kelly

A Quirk is decidedly human. We may apply it to usages outside the human, such as in the phrase - 'a quirk of nature', but even then it is anthropomorphised nature that we refer to. The quirk is the odd thing, the thing which may be as minute as a tic, almost imperceptible, containable, subsumed or masked almost to invisibility. It is the deviation from the norm, from rule, which defines individuality and it is the thing which is so often just outside the edge of the social. It is that which is not agreed upon, not arrived at through agreement or consensus, it resists and persists, often serving no other purpose than to stress the resistance of the individual to complete subsumation into the societal being. It defines that which possesses a curiosity and even, a charm. It is rarely threatening, the cuteness of the word itself implies a quaint and amusing oddity. It is an act or event which sits unpredicted and often unforeseen amidst a series of predictable acts and events. It is the moment when something behaves oddly or erratically, a momentary deviation from the rule, illuminating briefly the contingent nature of any agreement or construction. It is a characteristic which identifies a personality and persists as a mark of the most human and most subjective. In behavior a quirk runs counter to logic unless it is recognised as an intuitive and unbidden thing, no more able to be avoided or resisted than any phenomenon which is not born in logic.

The space of art validates and valorises the Quirk. Ivan Durant's definition of art described it as "a safe holding ground for eccentricity". It is the openness of the field of art to expression and exploration of difference which provides the seed bed for exploration of the peculiar, the most deeply personal and subjective drives and fascinations.

The artists selected for this exhibition by curator, Mary Knights reveal a commitment to engagement with deeply personal issues, narratives and obsessions. Defined by Knights as "work concerned with the poignant, discarded, abject and bizarre"¹, they traverse internal spaces with acuity and in doing so return deeply personal engagements to a more universal space, in which the encounter becomes strangely reminiscent of the way that, as children, we first encounter things, and the depth of our capacity to sink deeply into the particular without seeking connections and attributions of significance or meaning to those phenomena.

Habituation describes the process by which we become familiar with phenomena. Up to a certain age children do not see connections between things, every 'thing' is encountered completely and only with reference to itself and perhaps its immediate context. In this sense every 'thing' is potentially an 'other', something not inculcated into self but outside of it

and disconnected from every other 'thing'. At a certain point habituation takes over and each phenomenon is related back to a growing stored database and then typed. It is only through the gradual development of habituation that we are able to effectively function in the world. Our gain is the ability to move forward and make decisions quickly based on the ability to classify and 'manage' each specific phenomenon into a type or sets of 'known' types. What we must lose in order to gain this skill is the ability to engage deeply with the phenomenon as a unique particular. In fact we generally regard a thing, 'object', only long enough to categorise it. This is well exemplified in the drawing class where a teacher may ask a student to go outside and draw a tree and the student may sit before a eucalypt and yet return with a drawing of a conifer. The student has looked at the tree long enough only to identify it as belonging to the category 'tree', - an abstraction. Abstractions are how we see in the mind when we cease to remain looking at the object as unique phenomenon. Our progress through the world is therefore hastened but impoverished. The practice of art making may be partly defined by the development of an engagement with phenomena which is inclined to reduce or subvert the affect of habituation and to engage with the specific qualities of the phenomenon more immediately and more fully. Deep engagement or fixation on the character of an object or/as phenomenon could be construed as dysfunctional or aberrant, yet it is an entirely natural condition. Such behavior may serve as proof of disassociation, of obsession, or of sociopathy, all of which are proffered as evidence of the inability of an individual to operate effectively at the level of abstraction and within the codified behavioural norms which define maturation and even an 'agreed' definition of sanity within society.

In support of the contention that conventional theoretical tropes for the interpretation of art have been restricted by their reliance on reference to the aesthetic as the primary base of interpretation, or even nominating something as art, and that this must be augmented or even replaced by a reification of the significance of narrative as essential to the reading of work, Nöel Carroll believes that we must reach beyond aesthetic theories of art and their various prohibitions. He states "...when confronted with an utterance, our standard cognitive goal is to figure out what the speaker intends to say", and continues, "When we read a literary text or contemplate a painting, we enter a relationship with its creator that is roughly analogous to a conversation."²

The "conversations" which arise in this exhibition are further encouraged by such things as the familiarity of many of the components within the installations and the invitations to connect through a 'known' - albeit the

known functions at the level of the unfamiliar through its re-workings, re-contextualisation or isolation. Elements such as the overcoat and dresses which are the subject/object of Amanda Robins' exquisite drawings, or the marbles which Sonia Donnellan employs and Rebecca Knapp's augmented band-aids for instance. Here is the unfamiliar situation or usage, inhabited by the familiar, which through specific processes and juxtapositions becomes inevitably, unfamiliar, a singular phenomenon whose new state subverts past connections. There is no suggestion of nostalgia in these works, they are objects whose prior meanings are employed to carry the potential for the subversion of that known relationship. These are not souvenirs, or precious artifacts, they are 'un-familiars', and deny past meanings while they hint of them.

All objects and installations accrue metaphorical connections. These may be loaded in consciously by the artist, they may occur unconsciously also from the artist and/or it may be loaded in later by the viewer. All of these potentials are in evidence in 'Quirk'. Mish Meijers and Tricky Walsh construct elaborate and detailed installations which are so loaded with phenomena that the potential connections into meaning are effectively subverted by the sheer weight of evidence. They have consciously invented a fictional character whose unfolding over multiple installations allows for him to accrue a 'character' through the evidence of his obsessive collecting. It is as if the character of Papin becomes a repository for an investigation into the act of collection, an ultimately futile devotion which reveals only psychosis, as if the character is known only by his (ultimately futile), attempts to actually form a psyche. Is Papin an 'Everyman', is he the repository for the artists' own obsessions, an unwitting vessel, or is he a representation of type? He can be all these things, as like any fictional invention, he threatens to grow into coherence and unity but in fact never does. All we have of him is the collection which simply traces and reinforces his disconnection to the point of hysteria since the weight of accumulation is only evidence of the activity of accumulating. Susan Stewart describes the collection thus, "...the collection offers example rather than sample, metaphor rather than metonymy"... "The collection seeks a form of self-enclosure which is possible because of its ahistoricism..." "...order beyond the realm of temporality." "...the collection presents a hermetic world".³

Although Stewart's reference is derived from a museological model it has relevance for this work and since the central issue is the "self-inclosure" it describes is also central to the construction of art objects and installations which 'appear' to converse with us according to common principles they in fact remain to an extent enclosed within the contingent meanings of their own allusive worlds. In this sense they are a form of deceit since their 'meanings' are never definitive and always referential to their own logic systems. They will always exclude definitive reading as much as they appear to invite it.

Amanda Robins' "Second Skin" overcoat drawings also offer evidence. Their inside linings reveal traces of usage, traces of lives, but again, the

desire is to simply record those traces, not to investigate them in a forensic sense. There is no desire to re-construct past lives for the coat and its wearer(s). They are sourced from discards therefore those things can never be known. The drawing re-presents the artifact and the process re-casts it within an aesthetic frame, tying it into the fabric of art history, not back into the fabric of a world and lives it has been redeemed from. The abject is somewhat elevated into an object of significance, even of authority, through an 'aestheticisation' which affords it significance and presence. It approaches the space of costume, of something venerable. Robins' drawings of dresses, (not present in this exhibition), carry this process further in arranging the objects into formal structures, oddly reminiscent of the way in which robes are displayed but also of ethereal sculptures. The overcoats remain hanging, inside-out presented as limp evidence, but the dignified force of their presence is compelling through this lack of artifice and a fascination with simply recording detail in a rigorous (yet never laboured) manner. The erotic is engaged through both a sensuousness of surface but more significantly through the allusive connection with skin that the rich silk lining implies and also through the essentially 'secret' aspect it suggests, a view of the rich interior, normally visible partially, and teasingly, as the wearer walks or removes the coat. Like most of the artists represented in this exhibition, Robins' process is rigorous and engaged to the point of meditative, one senses a slowing down to the time and space of seeing, of engagement with mark and moment which subverts habituation and is about the minuteness and particularity of engagement with small things accreting to something larger, a greater whole.

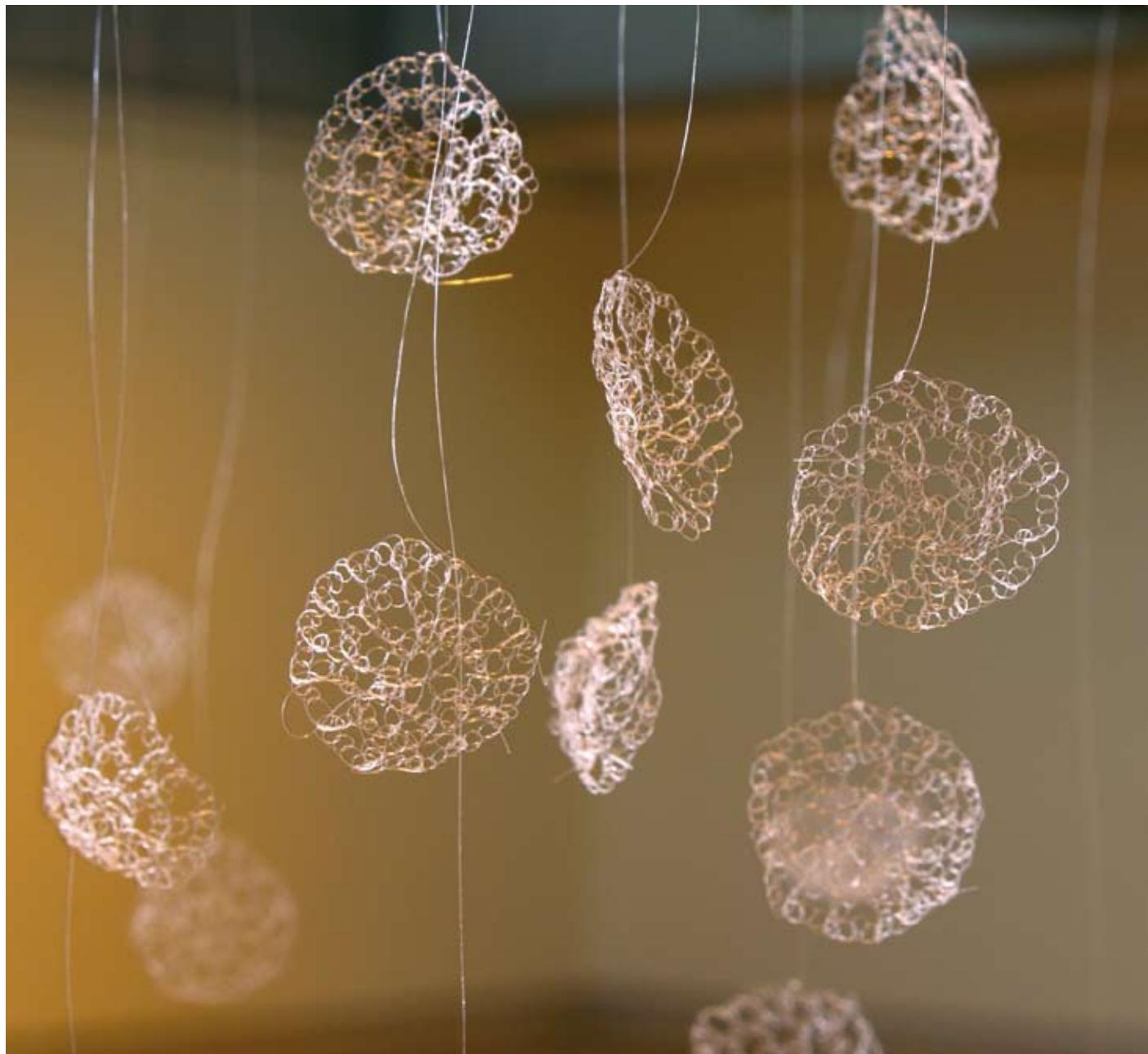
Anna Phillips has for many years pursued a practice which is predicated on 'skin' and like Robins, and others, the oppositional aspects of the reviled and the beautified. The ambivalence at the heart of her investigations is that the beauty of works such as the "Korean Bride" series is distilled from her own alchemical inventions of compounds based on a mixture of bodily residues and beauty products. The process is both time-consuming and odorous, entirely unpleasant at every level until the material becomes transformed and its murky creation history is effectively eradicated by the aesthetic resolution of its presentation. But its oddness is enshrined in its material nature, the bridal veil is conceived in murk and sludge and remains a gooey, glistening presence which speaks of elemental, physical and even alien things. The inability to resolve this dichotomy is where the tension resides, the discomfort will not abate and the loving of this strange hybrid implicates the viewer in an engagement with perversity. Around it hover simultaneously the fascinations of its materiality and the horror of its constituent elements. It is a thing born out of all that is hidden, discarded and reviled and its presence mocks the beauty it so closely clings to, and highlights the processes we engage in to achieve beauty.

The abject runs through this exhibition like a leitmotif. Rebecca Knapp crochets tiny forms on to the surface of band-aids. The abject is here

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Amanda Robins, *Tudor Rose (Open Coat II)*, 2004, graphite & pencil on Arches watercolour paper



Sonia Domellain, *Breath in, Breath out (detail)*, 2006, nylon thread, 800 x 800mm

overlain with an apparent futility yet the object asserts a presence which denies futility through the mere fact of its presence. Once again a painstakingly repetitive process becomes central to the creative act. It is only through a closing down on to particularity at this level of intensity that such a thing can come into being. The minute size of these works is the key to our initial fascination with them, and the very smallness draws our focus down to the focal point of the artist. Their intimacy invites exclusion and demands a totality of engagement often not possible in response to larger works. This is beyond the level of curiosity, for that falls away as we are pulled into an engagement with another 'un-familiar'. The 'second skin' of the band-aid infers a connection with the wound, of vulnerability of the horror of the opening of the sealed body. The dichotomous balance of all that the wound implies with the delicate beauty of the lace-made ornament heightens the oppositional aspects of both, and like Phillips' hybrids, will never quite resolve in one direction or the other.

Pam Zeplin is also engaged with obsession, in this case her own in the presentation of a series of photographs of bathrooms, a practice she has maintained over time. The mere banality and familiarity of the subject would imply that this exercise has no purpose but to resolve some obsessional tenancy. (This is reinforced by the fact that they lack any sense of being made as or for art. They are 'grabbed' in an amateurish rush that suggests that the qualities of the room are of no significance other than to be another photograph-as-evidence encounter). That it is evidence of just that is its rationale, not that it carries a greater metaphorical significance. The iconographic impulse is thwarted, the signifiers are too dispersed or lost too far back beyond consciousness for metaphorical connection. This is personal and defies any connection other than to the private psyche. It must remain un-analysed if it is to live and function, this practice of unquestioned adherence to a small ritual. Why this is the situation of the record or the place of the ritual of recording is of little import, the act is the interest. Obsessional behaviour at this magnitude is not uncommon and speaks of the resistance, or at least, persistence of the intuitive and the location of something inexplicable and perhaps potentially sociopathic into a harmless but necessary act, a small act, a tiny ritual but a 'balancing' process nonetheless and a quirk in the context of the 'normal'.

Sonia Donnellan's delicate and considered installation reveals again the desire to connect to the body and its processes, ones as elemental as breathing. The very immateriality of this work stresses the materiality of air, revealing its substance and dynamics, reminding us of the fragility of our connection to life, and the breath – the 'unthought' act as being the very point at which life is being sustained, like the rhythm of the unbidden heart.

The threads which run back and forth through this exhibition suggest logically the presence of the feminine aspects of the psyche more than they suggest the presence of an overtly feminine or women's discourse.

The unifying aspects of process and specificity, even domesticity and humility in scale bespeak the feminine through praxis, and focus, which is the natural outcome of a valorisation of the feminine in art, (voice and practice), and reveals it through the concentration of these elements in an altogether non-didactic or discursive form – the making of an art of the personal, itself at the core of the feminine psyche. Inevitably, an art of the personal becomes universal, for who is not constantly engaged with issues of the body, its materiality and its vulnerability, or the small traces of small lives, treasured and protected by the feminine, often invisible to the male view, concentrated as it often is on the social, the public, the abstract?

Most importantly 'Quirk' gives validation to the small strange act which, often intuitively driven, defines individuality, persisting in the face of the normative, and all the creations of ego which that implies. There are quirks in all of us, they are the indicator of difference, they are the small persistent signs that the psyche will demand resolution in manners of its own devising.

1. Excerpt from Curator's Statement

2. Noël Carroll

Beyond Aesthetics – Philosophical Essays

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001

3. Susan Stewart

On Longing – Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic,

the Souvenir, the Collection

Durham & London: Duke University Press: 1993



Pam Zeplin, *Tale of the Tub*, 2006, digital photograph, size variable

Hunting the Quirk

or; DISCOVERING THE DRAINPIPE By Pamela Zeplin

A subject seldom discussed, the quirk nevertheless forms a vital part of the social and cultural fabric enmeshing our lives. So much so, its meaning is taken for granted and, only intuitively understood, its role and status become difficult to determine. An ill-defined word in limited use, quirk rarely stands alone; grammatically, it is commonly flanked by 'a' and 'of' to create 'a quirk of fate', 'a quirk of physics' or 'a quirk of nature', etc. As inexplicable but not inconsiderable agents of change, these kinds of quirk can turn events around and propel anyone or anything along previously unimagined trajectories. However, the linguistic by-product, 'quirky' is suggestive of something less treacherous, more tolerable and often inflected with humour, whether intentional or not. We don't take the adjectival off-shoot too seriously and, as a result, we are yet to see within Australian visual arts institutions either form of the word enter the illustrious annals of art history as significant research or provide an acceptable methodology in Academy studios, despite a recent penchant for action research. Quirky is not synonymous with cool and, moreover, is fast becoming the province of idiots on the internet.

But who can say what constitutes a quirk? How is it defined, except against an arbitrary norm? And who's measuring, anyway? After all, what appears as a quirk to one person may seem perfectly ordinary to another. This curious word encompasses a spectrum of meaning, from life-changing latency to 'a way of justifying something stupid'¹. For some, quirk(ish) behaviour creates a refuge from everyday tedium and/or stress and it was only recently brought to my attention that obsessively wrapping toilet rolls in newspaper, compulsively photographing bathrooms or raising the hand washing of clothes to the status of art is not what other families necessarily do. In this way, what some may consider eccentric behaviour can be rendered quirky; that is, innocuous, diversionary and even therapeutic - as idiosyncrasy or whim.

For others, the quirk experience exceeds the bounds of light-hearted whimsy or foible. A quirk of taste, fate or nature can unsettle and dislocate, even while nuzzling the unconventional in a deliciously odd way; it may even generate a disconcerting aftertaste. Ironically, this un-easy reaction tends to increase in disproportionate ratio to the traces of detectable familiarity; if slightly 'bent' but not too distorted, the habit or object puzzles and demands closer inspection. This allows a subtly skewed perspective that intrigues, draws us in, hinting that something's not quite right, out of the ordinary - perhaps even out of control. The more sinister kind of quirk (of fate) occurs accidentally via a fluke or sudden hiccup; it can twist the future and shift forever our expectations. It is not surprising, therefore, that this word shares dictionary space with

those other out-of-the-ordinary 'q' words like quiff, quaint, quat, quim, queen and queer². Quirk is, it should be noted, in close lexicographic proximity to question and quiz.

Ever ubiquitous, some quirks lurk darkly, ready to ambush cosy notions of propriety and rationality. Such deliberate destabilisation has occurred notably in the work of a number of writers, prominent among them, Laurence Sterne. In Chapter XII of Sterne's celebrated eighteenth century novel, *The life and opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1760), for example, there is a single page occupied only by a large and vertical black rectangle³. In fact, it is not quite rectangular as the top corners are ever so slightly curved. For Sterne's contemporary readership, this shape was no less baffling than for today's audience, notwithstanding the novel's seriously unconventional structure in other regards. Brimming with 'unforseen stoppages'⁴ (digressions) and a relentlessly interruptive narrator, it evinces a multiple sense of time complicated by competing narratives while frolicking in extra textual irregularities⁵. Among these is a large and random freehand flourish⁶ (or scribble) within the text, a gesture that was contemporaneously synonymous with at least one meaning of 'quirk'⁷ and curiously echoed a century later in Lewis Carroll (aka Charles Dodgson)'s *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). This squiggle, in turn, presaged Guillaume Apollinaire's quirky text *calligrammes* of 1913-1916⁸.

Not surprisingly, Sterne's fictional aberration was recently re-discovered, raised from the level of virtually forgotten quirk to 'a serious proto-Post-modern novel'⁹ and adapted for film¹⁰. For art audiences his strange black 'rectangle' may now be considered as foreshadowing that icon of twentieth century modernism, Malevich's *Black square*, also considered 'off the wall' by the artist's contemporaries in 1913. Notwithstanding Sterne's dark shape's apparent prescience, the reader with a penchant for plumbing might elicit an alternative reading, given the ambiguity and drainage metaphors (a birth canal and a suppurating wound) that abound in *Tristram Shandy*. Would it be too far-fetched to imagine this image as an eighteenth century bathtub?

Despite its wayward and singular precocity, *The life and opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* is no isolated quirk of creative endeavour; it participates in a significant genre of literature celebrating the eccentric, 'the odd, the petty, the queer [sic], above all, over what the French untranslatable call the saugrenu'¹¹. This broader historical context of literary quirk distinguishes itself from conventional comedy while sharing elements of the satirical, the silly and the ridiculous. The additional dimension that nudges such work into the realm of quirk involves either

'deliberate fantasticality'¹² for its own sake or what Shakespeare termed 'very gracious fooling'¹³. Alternatively, unintentional spillage into the absurd may be identified but whether calculated or not, the result may or may not amuse and might even engender disgust.

In *A tale of a tub* (1704) Jonathan Swift's 'wanton imagination'¹⁴ had already conjured up such perverse digressions on moral 'filthiness'¹⁵ but, disappointingly, despite its title and subject matter, the author barely mentions bathtubs. Similarly, his satire, *Gulliver's travels* (1726) embraces the darker regions of irrationality by radically inverting scale in the lands of Lilliput, Laputa, Brobdingnag and sundry flying islands; these are impossible places populated by despicable beings such as scatalogically fixated yahoos and Houyhnhnms which represent abominable academics in equine form.

Far from being trivialised, the literature of quirk has often provoked sensation and outcry - from Swift and Sterne to Lewis Carroll's so-called nonsensical children's stories, *Alice's adventures in wonderland* (1865), *Through the looking glass* (1871) and *Hunting of the snark* (1876), followed by the different but highly idiosyncratic work of James Joyce and Samuel Becket, as well as a host of other 'left column' authors. Conternation and/or delight have accompanied writings of this ilk because of their transgressive form as much as their biting social commentary and (often humorous) twisting of taste. As Margaret Plant observes: 'Wit is a weapon, but wit is for pleasure too'¹⁶.

Meanings of quirk have proved slippery over time and, whereas sixteenth century definitions included 'verbal tricks', 'quibbles' and 'evasions'¹⁷, by 1806 the word had also acquired a subversive quality as '...capable of making law no law...' ¹⁸. Anarchic quirk in the form of animated noses and overcoats, not to mention flying coffins, flourished in the writings of Nikolai Gogol, 'the strangest prose-poet Russia ever produced' (he died after a cold bath, purged by leeches attached to his nose)¹⁹ while in France, Alfred Jarry's outrageously quirky writings - and even more repellent conduct - profoundly influenced Dada and Surrealism, as well as Artaud and the course of *avant-garde* theatre²⁰. As with the virulence of Swift and Sterne, Jarry's absurd Ubu plays grotesquely satirised the *status quo* of rational, sanitised mediocrity. This partially took the form of Père Ubu wielding a lavatory brush and was rendered more offensive by further scatalogical references. *Ubu Roi*'s first night audience rioted on December 9 1886 when '*merdre*' [sic] (shite) was the first word, not only uttered but deliberately mispronounced on stage. Jarry's even more remarkable treatise, *Exploits and opinions of Dr Faustroll, Pataphysician: A neo-scientific novel* (1898)²¹ attained new heights of quirkdom by proposing a detailed scientific and philosophical 'theory of the particular', an examination of the laws governing exceptions²²; in other words, this was a grand meta-theory of quirk that inverted scientific method. Eventually, Jarry's bent literary propensities overtook his life and he became a pistol-toting cyclist, alcoholic and absinthe addict, speaking in monosyllables. With a be-floured face, and occasionally a tiara for effect, he fished for food in the Seine, virtually lived in a black hole and died at

thirty four, requesting a toothpick.

Whatever its cultural context, the quirk is never at rest, skulking just below the surface of well-regulated social systems, from where it regularly but unpredictably erupts with all the force of a ripe pustule whose time has arrived. Even the excruciatingly polite and reasonable Anglo Saxon culture cherishes eccentric behaviour, giving rise to a strong lineage of quirky satire from Swift to *The Goon Show*, *The Goodies*, *Monty Python's Flying Circus* and more recently, *The league of gentlemen* and *Little Britain*. This rich heritage of absurd, self-deprecating humour has permeated Australian culture which, with robust local inflection, has become recognisable well beyond these shores. This is particularly noticeable in vernacular slang and comedy where, sadly, colourful turns of phrase like 'bonzer', 'cack' and 'as ugly as a hat full of arseholes' are fast disappearing down the global drainpipe under the onslaught of dumbed down cartoon and sit-com humour from the US. Pragmatic and plain Anglo-Australian culture may be, but Australians positively excel at quirk, if not in literature and art, then in films like *Mad Max*, *The adventures of Priscilla, queen of the desert*, *Bad boy Bubby* and *Kenny*, the last of which examines the minutiae of a portaloo sanitary engineer's life. Similarly, comedies and comedians such as *The Norman Gunston show*, Graham Kennedy's *In Melbourne tonight*, Barry Humphries (aka Dame Edna and cronies) and *The chaser's war on everything*, to name but a few, reveal an impudent intimacy with the quirk. Such affection for the bizarre and off-key may not explain a national fascination for crimes involving dingos and bodies in barrels but it goes a long way to explaining how Aunty Jack, a fat bloke in drag with a big hairy moustache and gold boxing glove was selected to usher in the era of colour television in 1975.

And what of Australian visual art in relation to the quirk? In seeking a genealogy of peculiarity, we would be hard put to find this lineage in conventional art history as opposed to literature, comedy, film or other forms of popular culture. At this point a crucial distinction should be made between artists and the art institution *per se*. While it is true that many, perhaps most, artists are fascinated and impelled by all manner of quirks, and it is acknowledged that Surrealism and Dada were monumentally liberating in radically celebrating the irrational, art officialdom has not seriously interrogated these subjects and strategies, unless to deconstruct or disembowel their humour. Pop art almost bypassed local interpretation in 1960s Australia and, in examining this situation in 1985, Margaret Plant critiqued the Australian art world's curious reticence about humour in her landmark exhibition *Irreverent Sculpture* which 'attempted to side-[step] ... art navel-gazing'²³. Plant lamented:

Despite the unavoidable, (if not central) tradition in twentieth century art of Dada and Surrealism, wit, irony and humour have not been accorded much theoretical explanation. Although chronicles of Dada and Surrealism abound, there has been but little scrutiny of the combined pleasure, pains and provocation. Despite the current fashion for theorizing metaphor, interest in its pertinence for the visual arts has been slight²⁴.

Twenty years on, institutional anality rules OK, as astute artists like Aleks



Pamela Zaplin, *Burn for Lenny*, (on loan from RMIT circa 1970), 2006

Twenty years on, institutional anality rules OK, as astute artists like Aleks Danko, Fiona MacDonald²⁵, Juan Davila, innumerable Art Army recruits²⁶ and countless others, including those exhibiting in, writing for or curating Quirk; Rebecca Knapp, Mish Meijers & Tricky Walsh, Anna Phillips, Amanda Robins, Sonia Donnellan, Séan Kelly, Mary Knights and myself, have reminded us - wittily, scathingly or in other ways. In 1996 the late Indonesian artist, Semsar Sianah confessed his astonishment at the contradiction between 'uptight' Australian art organisations and 'laid back' Australian lifestyles 'inured to pleasure'²⁷ - even at a festive occasion like *The Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art* in balmy Brisbane. These observations seem to indicate the vulnerable status of the arts enterprise itself within Australian society which is generally considered a benign, if somewhat irrelevant and irritating, quirk. In this situation, exacerbated by an increasingly corporatised university sector, ideologies of accountability, litigation anxiety and the apotheosis of 'the market' have dominated what has become known as the arts 'industry'. In desperately attempting to be taken seriously, arts 'sector' administration all too often reveals a defensive and deeply-seated inferiority complex – not unlike a blind pimple²⁸ - with little tolerance of levity, (non)sense or other uncontrollable twitches.

Certainly, it may be claimed that Duchamp's legacy of irony – manifested, of course, in that most banal of plumbing fixtures, the urinal - remains canonical in Academy pedagogy while psychoanalytic theory has also attracted fetishistic devotion in recent years. However, repeated as orthodoxies of belief, these landmark moments of subversion have become diluted and restricted to endless (and safe) re-runs of irony. With little serious interpretation of Freud's research on jokes or more irreverent interrogations of Jarry or the Dada and Surrealist canon, for example, few are prepared, in true Duchampian spirit, to take the piss. As well as the knowing Mona Lisa smile, might not the visual arts 'sector' also celebrate the guffaw, the snigger, the snort and the smirk?

Enter the quirk. Notoriously unstable and ever threatening to unravel apparent reality, is it condemned to inhabit the fringes of the art world, despite enjoying literary and broader social regard? Must it forever whisper around the edges and skirt responsibility? In a word, yes. Finally, whether the quirk is embraced or denied by organised art structures doesn't really matter: it won't go away and will continue to discombobulate and frustrate, delight and disgust, regardless of imaginary borders between art and life. A bit like plumbing, really, in a literal sense and metaphorically. As with Sterne's birth canal, Jarry's private and Parisian sewers or Alice's rabbit hole, it's always there, hidden beneath the surface but imbued with the threat of nightmare, should things go wrong. And as my son recently reminded me, when discussing the meaning of life: 'In the end, it's all about drainage.'²⁹

P.S. The day after I completed this essay, a roofer, quoting on new gutters for my house, asked me whether I preferred flat wood fascia boards or 'quirk mould' (which is distinguished by a horizontal groove). The latter was considerably more expensive, but what could I say?

1. Broker, D., Telephone conversation with the author, 21 January 2007.
2. As a result of gay pride movements and the new genre of queer theory, the meanings and usage of 'queen' and 'queer' have altered over the past few decades. Once a common expression signifying oddness and/or homosexuality in negative terms, 'queer' is now in general use to denote the latter – without its previous negative connotations.
3. Sterne, L, *The life and opinions of Tristram Shandy, gentleman*, with an introduction by George Saintsbury, J M Dent & Sons, London, (1760) reprinted 1961, p. 25.
4. Sterne, p. 29.
5. ibid. Among other eccentricities found in this novel are two blank pages in Book IX under the headings 'Chapter XVIII' and 'Chapter XIX' (pp. 458-459) (these are later referred to on p. 468), a curious image, suggestive of an oil and water print on p. 165 and an excess of assorted 'hobby-horses', asterisks and long punctuation dashes.
6. Ibid. p. 445.
7. Onions, C., (ed), *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, on Historical Principles*, Volume II, Oxford University Press Oxford, 1973, p. 1733. 'Quirk ... 6. A sudden twist, turn or curve; esp. in drawing or writing: a flourish...'
8. Carroll, L, *Alice's adventures in Wonderland*, with illustrations by John Tenniel, Avenel Books, New York, n.d., p. 37. The 'squiggle' is in the form of text, pre-dating Guillaume Apollinaire's *calligrammes* (or lyrical ideogrammes) of 1913-1916. See Schmacher, C, *Alfred Jarry and Guillaume Apollinaire*, Macmillan, Hounslow, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London, 1984, pp.127-195. See p. 133 for illustrations of these works.
9. See also entry in Dave Langford's 'FLAPzine' claiming this as 'the first New Wave sf', 'Bernadette', Cloud chamber 20: April 1983, Online: <http://www.wansible.co.uk/cc20.html> , p. 2, viewed 19/01/2007.
10. See *A cock and bull story*, directed by Michael Winterbottom, released 2005.
11. Saintsbury, G., 'Introduction', in Sterne, p. xix.
12. ibid, p. ix.
13. Firth, C., 'The political significance of Gulliver's travels (1919)', 'Part three: modern studies', in Gravil, R (ed), *Swift: Gulliver's travels: A casebook*, Macmillan, London and Basingstoke, 1974, p. 72.
14. Hawkesworth, J (1755) in 'Part 1: Swift and his contemporaries 1721-1784', in Gravil, p. 38.
15. See a defence of *Gulliver's travels* by Deane Swift (Jonathan's cousin), in face of literary outcry: 'And shall we condemn a preacher of righteousness, for exposing under the character of a nasty unteachable YAHOO the deformity, the blackness, the filthiness and corruption of those hellish, abominable vices, which inflame the wrath of GOD against the children of disobedience... [O]ught a watchman of the Christian faith, (who is accountable for his talents, and obliged to warn the innocent, as well as terrify the wicked and the prothane) to hold his peace, like a dumb dog that cannot bark, when avarice, fraud, cheating, violence, rapine, distortion, cruelty, oppression, tyranny, rancour, envy, malice, detraction, hatred, revenge, murder, whoredom, adultery, lasciviousness, bribery, corruption, pimping, lying, perjury, subordination, treachery, ingratitude, gaming, flattery, drunkenness, gluttony, luxury, vanity,
16. Plant, M., *Irreverent sculpture* (Exhibition Catalogue), Monash University Gallery, Department of Visual Arts, Clayton, 1-30 August 1985, p. 6.
17. Onions, p. 1733.
18. ibid, p. 1733 'A quirkie bodie, capable of making law no law at a' GAIT 'sic!']
19. Among other works, including *Diary of a madman* (1853) and *The inspector general*, Gogol published *The Nose* (1835), *The Overcoat* (1841) and *Dead Souls* (1842). Nabokov, V., *Nikolai Gogol*, New Directions Publishing, New York, (1959) 5th Edn., 1961, pp. 2-3.
20. André Breton includes a number of antecedents in his *Anthologie de l'Humour noir* [including] Alfred Jarry, whose invigorating independence of spirit inspired a whole generation of imitators and continuators ... Richter, H. *Dada: art and anti-art*, Harry N Abrams, Inc, New York, p.168.
21. The book was not published until 1911 when Apollinaire 'immediately acknowledged its importance by calling it the most significant publication of the year, while in the 1920s the surrealists recognised it as one of the most influential books written in the nineteenth century'. Schumacher, op. cit., p. 34.
22. 'One vacillates between amusement, puzzlement, irritation, and astonishment, at Jarry-Faustroll's cavalier treatment of the world and the words'. Shattuck, R., cited in Schumacher, p. 34, n. 3.
23. Plant, M., p. 37. The artists involved were; Barry Humphries, Ti Parks, Colin Lancelly, Mike Brown, Ross Crothall, Clive Murray-White, Less Kosssatz and Aleks Danko.
24. ibid, p. 6.
25. See Parr, D., 'Fiona MacDonald's Museum emotions'; *Eyeline*, No 54, Winter 2004, pp. 17-19. Parr's review discusses MacDonald's 2003 video satirising Melbourne's contemporary art scene, *Museum emotions*.
26. The Art Army is a non-existent (or conceptual) army, initiated in the early 1980s by Commander-in-Chief, Bronte Edwards and whose actual recruits include Robert Hughes, Barbara Kruger and many Australian, New Zealand and other international artists with whom you are probably acquainted. Influenced by theories of Francois Lyotard and other French theorists, as well as the eighteenth century military philosopher, Karl von Clausewitz, rank is determined by each member and the only regulation stipulates that, upon joining, everything henceforth done by members constitutes art.
27. Kirker, A., 'Serious stuff: Documenta 11', *Eyeline*, No 49, Spring 2002, p. 18. Sianah, S., Conversation with the author, Brisbane, September 1996.
28. Lee, M., Telephone conversation with author, 26 January 2007
29. Waite, S., Conversation with author, 12 January

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