

Chapter Six

Going Public

[W]hat makes us who we are within a particular social complex?

How are we to understand ourselves, our politics, our desires and our passions as produced within this historical present? ... more than ever one needs to question how identities continue to be produced, embodied and performed effectively, passionately and with social and political consequence (Bell, 1999b, 1-2).

With the emphasis on how you do relations, do self and community, the questions in this chapter ask what difference does this kind of work make? Where, when, to whom, and *how* it signifies?

Performance 1

The idea of a performance was present at the beginning and evolved during the process of the workshops, emerging out of them as a material reality in negotiations with the local library. I first offered a draft of a scripted piece to the project group as a starting point. This was drawn from our collective records, was to be performed as a conversation (and was something I could also present to my academic women's research group). As we sat around a large table in my workshop it was radically critiqued for form and content; pulled apart, added to, reformed - with such immediacy and invention I was taken aback. Here I offer the developed script that we produced and performed to the public in the local library. It takes about twenty/twenty five minutes to perform. It includes words and contributions from everyone in the group, though not every one wants, or is able to perform on the night. Rather than necessarily speak their own words, the women have chosen to randomly allocate speaking parts, and where they feel a particularly strong investment in their own words, to coach and direct their 'players'. In addition they combine voices to develop some songlike pieces with rounds, echoes and rejoinders.

The Library night

It was a charged atmosphere in more ways than one. Thunderstorms had been approaching in the late afternoon and the crackling lightning was almost upon us as we took up our positions.

Bright unsubtle fluorescent lights behind the huge plate glass front of the library, exposed us to the dark main street and to a group of people gathered to be the audience to an unusual event.

We have resisted setting the scene with anything that looks like a finished artwork. Our main prop is a large masonite toolboard of the kind usually found in the garage workshop or home toolshed. It is placed on an easel just inside the library entrance, and each of the group has contributed a stuffed, sculpted (soft toy) version of one of our tools (a foot long pen, a drill complete with cord, a giant needle and thread, someone's thinking hat, hammer with egg, a spikey polystyrene iron). The hanging wall (one of the long walls of this simple rectangular space) supports enlarged fragments from our collective journal. Used butchers' paper worksheets from our workshops drape from the ends of the bookshelf banks. Here and there, on the floor, in a corner, individuals from the group have made little collections of their materials, notebooks, samples. Our unfinished group scrapbook has a stand to itself, and lies open. Down the other side, beyond the administrative counter, we have created a space for 50 or so chairs, and beyond, facing them, a semi circle of chairs for the performers. The chairs are soon filled, people having to find spots to stand, or lean against walls.

After greeting everyone and thanking them for coming, I start our piece nervously just as the rain starts to thunder down.

Laura: Hello. My name's Laura Hartley and I'm the coordinator of the *Expressions of Place project*. Many of you may recall the advertisements that appeared at the beginning of the year under the heading of What's Your Forte? –addressed to women in the community who had an interest in any kind of making, and an interest in saying something about the place in which they lived. The proposal was to set up a group developing artworks about the place we live in, and documenting and making public, in a group exhibition, the experience of the process and its outcomes. You didn't have to consider yourself to be an artist to participate, whatever your forte was, we would explore, over eight months, how best rural women can “put themselves in the picture”.

The demands of a long term project such as this are quite considerable. It has been fantastic that fourteen women have been able to continue through to this point. I'd like to introduce you to those women. They are Wendy Abberton, Sue Davies, Catherine Drysdale, Rita England, Yvonne Galvin, Sue Graham, Margo Haley, Jennie Hunt, Robin King, Sylvia Martin, Carolyn O'Donnell, Barbara Poole, Lynda Row and Dell Stewart.

The first part of our exploration has involved a number of workshops, critical to our journey, and it's largely an account of those workshops we want to focus on this evening. There were three related themes for these workshops which we called '*Voice*', '*Materials of Place*', '*The Body in the Landscape*'.

These workshops have been led by facilitators from different creative fields. Mary Hutchison, community writer and publisher has been a very important collaborator in the project, and although she can't be here at present, she will be exhibiting with us in October. Sylvia Martin, actor and writer, has also been a facilitator in the project and has continued her collaboration as a participant. Tasmanian artist Ruth Hadlow, who took us through our last and longest workshop, is currently completing an artist's residency in New Zealand.

But let me take you back to the beginning - to the first Workshop, *Voice*. The plan is to explore the relationship between conversation, text and image; how conversation can become text, and text become artform in itself or contribute to other artforms. We're all going to introduce ourselves by bringing an object from 'our place' and talking it round the circle. Later in pairs, with Mary leading us, we learn some of her simple scribing techniques. We take turns to listen to each other's story, and write, paying attention to those specificities of rhythm, of colour, a turn of phrase, a certain style that marks an individual voice. Mary's scrapbook practice is going to be essential to the project, creating a shared collective resource and document to our journey. We've got a huge blank book, ready to go and we paste in some of our productions immediately.

Still it's scary. It's the CWA Hall and here are eighteen women full of anticipation, and another prospective facilitator and participant, Sylvia, who needs to know what it's all about. We range in age from early twenties to seventies and come from all over the district.

Part 1

Sylvia: I brought...

Robin: Mine is a pillow

Sue D: I brought my dictionary

Wendy: I brought my poor weather loved bear

Lynda: *This I find fascinating*

Catherine: I brought a little painting

Jennie: This belonged to my great grandmother

Carolyn: I really love the design of my wallet

Sue G: I brought some flowers from my garden

Sylvia: I brought a dull boring old mug

Lynda: *This I find fascinating*

Robin: One is an old scrapbook my mother made...

Sue D: I just brought along a picture of my new abode

Wendy: ...the other is a rock

Catherine: I've chosen a rock

Jennie: I brought a piece of quartz

Carolyn: I bought a book lately about crystals

Lynda: *This I find fascinating*

Sue G: I brought this little man

Robin: I brought a piece of sandstone, particularly pretty coloured gum leaves and a piece of bark

Sue D: I brought along a piece of my bark

Lynda: *This I find fascinating*

Sylvia: I brought -

Lynda: - *fascinating*

Sylvia: I brought -

Lynda: -*fascinating*

- Jennie:* It's amazing how demanding this is when first asked of us, and harder still when we are asked to develop either our own tellings or someone else's, with their permission, of course, into another piece again.
- Sue G:* We can cut up and rearrange, re order without cutting. Think about the style of writing, the size, thickness of pen that may be used to bring out the meaning.
- Wendy:* Think about the sound and shape of words, can we do anything with these? Does the text go in a straight line, can we make or break rhythms, and change the voice of the text? Try repetition, try the shape of a map, look for contrasts and similarities.
- Catherine:* It's a process of undoing and redoing.
- Sylvia:* Something that seemed like such a challenge at first suddenly became our first work of art. And Mary's quiet confidence made us feel we could all do it. The sense of play was really surprising and liberating.
- Robin:* I was shocked at how our interpretation, our spoken words turned into something poetic and artistic, where I've never thought I was capable of writing in that regard. But, yeh, to actually get something solid off those words is just, such a connection, it was such a connection to what we take for granted maybe?
- Sue D:* And how all that came from objects. That was the other interesting thing. Getting to know something about somebody by using that method, just by bringing an object.
- Wendy:* Well I went away reflecting on how much better I knew everybody. It was at the first meeting. I really wanted to go back and do some more.
- Lynda:* Looking at the different people when we were each talking about things and trying to put them in little boxes. I decided I'd put everyone in a little box and one person I found most amazing because I had had her in this little box as long

as I'd known her. And she was nothing like that when she actually came to talk about how she really felt.

(piece for four voices, as in a 'round', with echoes)

Sylvia leads, with Catherine doing the 'I turn', Laura follows with Robyn:

Making a spilling out experimenting mess *I turn* sidetracking learning attacking
 putting myself on the finding the boundaries myself *I turn* taking risks
 expanding flowing *I turn* a blank page into a making a binding line block
 cursing unblocking picture pushing the edges *I turn* a flat space into a 3D one
 tidying up reducing selecting sorting drawing measuring the line colours *I turn*
 letting go making a pile of daggy wool into a layering texturising blending
 jumper *I turn* a holding out refining out constantly analysing out condensing
 out extracting out saleable item *I turn* found objects nailing constructing gluing
 playing a part *I turn* into sculpture

Sue D: And Mary makes words sound like poems

Wendy: How inspiring it was that a group of women had come together and got through
 that in the day

Carolyn: I kept thinking of the quartz and the moonlight

Robin: I expanded on what I'd written with Rita

Jennie: I woke up at two o'clock in the morning
 The whole story, I nuted it all out
 Word for word

Sue G: I didn't have much idea what to bring
 Until I saw what everyone else had

Catherine: The process unfolding

Part 2

Laura: The main move of the next workshop, a week later, was to have a more direct conversation with materials of place. We started with a brief walk in a nearby park to observe and gather materials that appealed to us, thinking about as broad a range of shapes textures and colours as possible. It's as much about seeing as gathering. Once you start gathering, you start seeing differently.

Sylvia: So you're with this art group?

Robin: Well...yes

Sue D: It was a dear little bridge

Wendy: A little wooden bridge

Sue G: Walking, gathering

Catherine: You would not believe what I've found here

Jennie: It's a good shop here

Sue G: Walking, gathering

Carolyn: It was like going snorkelling!

Sylvia: I just loved the geese walking

Robin: The one with the funny wing

Sue D: People know about the geese and what happened to them

Wendy: Liz brought them in from Ulamambri

Lynda: We were enjoying ourselves like children

Sue G: Walking, gathering

Jennie: That circle of trees is just beautiful

Carolyn: They do Tai Chi in the middle of those trees – Sunday mornings at eleven

Sylvia: Meditation through movement

Wendy: Karate on valium

Laura: On our return our gatherings were heaped up in little piles – bark, leaves, flowers, seeds and pods, brown earth, fine feathers, sand and stone. Working in pairs, absolutely silently, people chose a handful of one material, took up a space on the floor, and took turns to make a gesture with some of the material and have the other respond with theirs. The roundness of concentration is palpable in the room.

- Robin:* And then when we've recovered from the strange exhilaration we return to those objects we brought from place, and with a new supply of material, have a conversation, silently, with it.
- Sue D:* It's a different kind of drawing
This is a discovery draft
An exploration of possibilities
- Carolyn:* ...without speaking
the feeling that came out of the silence
It was moving
Connectedness
Conversation become sculpture
- Sue G:* Out of the installations
The revelations, the emotions
The feeling of freedom
- Jennie:* Just what you can use. You can't really say well I can't do it because I haven't got the right materials - it's there all around you.
- Wendy:* Picking up the odd feather or the little fern or whatever it was. And thinking, not thinking too much, and then going back to the hall with it and actually making something with it.
- Lynda:* Only to find ourselves talking to our mothering, our domesticity, our fragility, our strengths, our pleasure, our feeling in and out of place. Just as we developed our stories in the scribing process, we develop the possible stories of these pieces with each other, and in further exercises. Playing in another dimension. It was a real mind stretch.

(piece for two voices, alternately)

Catherine and Sue D:

bark postcards / buttonholed leaves / new ground discovers abundance
 experiments / makes connections communicates / but the familiar's become
 strange and the strange hasn't become familiar /
 gathering – wool gathering surprising - / I would not have thought at breakfast
 this morning I'd be / lovely outdoor activities / big messing learning to be
 patient / confining yourself to one thing / being precise wanting to do this all
 day / in some confusion disturbing/ revealing things you haven't thought about
 I don't know I can't – I can
 To create you need to go through new ground

Part 3

Laura: A month later we have a two-day workshop called *The Body in the Landscape*.

Sylvia: We want to consider the sensations and movements of our bodies as we engage
 with our different environments, whether it is bush, kitchen, garden or street.
 To think how to connect positively with a heightened awareness of body in
 place. To note our traces in place and place's traces on us.
 And to think how those traces can be present in our work

Laura: So Sylvia's going to lead us in a day of heightened sensory experience. We
 have to bring a photograph of our self in place, too, and we'll work with that
 before we head off to Sylvia's place for a walk and a picnic.

Robin: Port on the lips, burrs, dirt, smoke, ash

Sue D: When your nose stings from the cold

Wendy: Wind in your hair

Caroyn: Salt

Jennie: Smell of the whole place

Sue G: Sore muscles in the balls of my feet

Lynda: Eyes adjusting to the larger space

Catherine: Scratches all over me, which I've had ever since I've been here

Sylvia: I constantly have grease on my clothes from cooking

Robin: Loose skin on my stomach from having babies

Sue D: A frown between my eyes

- Wendy:* Glue on my fingers
- Carolyn:* Smell of sea, coffee, wet rolled up trousers
- Jennie:* Sandy seat
- Sue G:* Sandy feet
- Lynda:* Salty skin
- Catherine:* Warm
- Sylvia:* Fresh
- Robin:* Autumn air
- Sue D:* You know how it seems to envelop you somehow
- Wendy:* I felt totally in the landscape
- Carolyn:* I felt enfolded
-
- Jennie:* Smoky muslin in front of an image
- Sue G:* I was thinking of a fine fabric
- Lynda:* Like a voile that could overlay the story
- Catherine:* Layers
You know, how garlic grows in little clumps
-
- Sylvia:* You'd have to have something you could touch and feel the roundness
- Robin:* You'd have to go round it
- Sue D:* And be able to touch it
-
- Laura:* One small hitch to the day – rain. And more rain.
Will we even get across the creeks, let alone have a picnic? It's touch and go, a terrible time of decision, and then because it looks like it's easing off here in town, we set off.
I'm full of admiration for country women drivers- swollen creeks, slewing in the mud, sliding down Sylvia's track. And the irony of the morning's activity was not lost to us.
-
- Wendy:* There we had been, pretending, in the school hall, imagining walking through the water and the mud, and now we were actually doing it.

- Lynda:* A snail's trail in the pouring rain, through the puddles and the long grass, over the creek and it's saving, single file footbridge. Not minding at all, except a care for the terrain and our more fragile parts, new knees, adrenalin flushed hearts, a small child and lunch baskets
- Catherine:* To a shared feast and filling the space of this warm and embracing mud brick house
- Sylvia:* Feeling and thinking through this space from the inside out
- Laura:* We'd stay all day except we might not get back to town, and I feel responsible for all these women getting home safely
- Robin:* I was hoping you'd all come back to my place
And I'd pop you in the cabins
We'd have soup
And do scrapbooking on the dining room table
- Laura:* On Sunday, back in the school hall, I model the setting up and the practice of the pinboard.
- Jennie:* When people ask us what we're doing, one of the best ways for me to tell them is to express the pinboarding process. I can take all the ideas that have been running round my head for years, and physically pin them on a board, refer to them, and develop the ideas from there.
- Sue D:* But we won't get all the way today. As we speak to our pinboards, turn by turn, it's an intense and sometimes emotional experience, as we discover how potent our play is and just what it brings to the surface.
- Wendy:* Place stories can reach and stretch across generations, pains as well as pleasures, difficult questions.

This work with traces, making present what is not easily seen or apparent, needs a safe place, and a safe practice – safe enough to risk, to extend, but at one's own pace.

Lynda: What is so productive is the way everyone quickly engages with the other's field of interest, sparking off, supporting, cross referencing. We begin to feel the dynamics of a making process that is open to the possibility of collaboration and exchange. And this is so well expressed in a playful and impromptu group installation that brings us back together again lightly and makes a closure to the day.

Catherine: Taking all the sheets of butchers' paper writing we've produced so far, everyone takes a bit, ignores what is written on it, but cuts tears shreds rolls, pleats and unfolds however we like. The only assembling rule is that your bit, when laid down will touch another two.

Carolyn: The to and fro
between individual and group
me/us

Sue G: What's extraordinary, apart from the pleasure and energy of this piece is the way the text now comes to the surface too, each bit of writing almost magically appropriate to its form

Part 4

Laura: Now the last workshop was a four day one, very full and demanding and obviously its not possible to detail everything we did, but the chance to have an extended sustained experience like this has been so important to our process. Ruth Hadlow, textile artist and teacher, facilitated this workshop. Ruth's own art practice is very much concerned with sensibilities of place, and the framework that informed both this work and her teaching, resonated very strongly for us. Ruth explicitly values textile practice and traditions in its own terms, rather than from the historically privileged 'High art' perspective.

- Jennie:* She develops our knowledge of installation. Our awareness of ephemeral temporary art
- Robin:* Something about her apparent total simplicity. Looking at the slides of her work was just so inspirational
- Carolyn:* And disturbing at the same time. The thought that some of it was only going to be there for such a short time
- Sue D:* Like the intricate sand patterns she created on the floor of the gallery that were just swept up at the end
- Wendy:* Or all the tiny pieces of leaf she nailed to the wall to form light and airy drawings
- Laura:* Each of the four days had quite a different approach, but they were all, Ruth pointed out, different ways of addressing central issues. Not everything would appeal or work for everyone, but there would certainly be a point of connection for each of us.
- Lynda:* There was, for example, quite some dismay when we were informed that day one was designed around a series of doll projects. Dolls, we thought? Until we discovered how challenging it was to tear cut and paste our paper dolls, to rip limbs and body parts off, to interfere with and rearrange our self image, adding all manner of unlikely things.
- Sylvia:* And how startling it was to be given the magic but simple means of turning our lumpish doll patterns into the most exuberant spirits we could want to be.
- Catherine:* What struck me about the potency of Ruth's workshop is the power of play. This was play in a structured way but with loose goals and with inexpensive materials like recycled wrapping paper and seeds, leaves stones, bark from our natural environment. Lack of previous experience with the materials and the temporary nature of our projects seemed to allow such freedom of association

and creativity. The workshops previously had built a lot of trust and respect amongst us that we felt no efforts would be ridiculed.

This allowed for some deep exploration in which the outcomes were truly memorable. We were encouraged to speak about what we'd made. It was often in the sharing verbally with the others that precious insights were made

Robin: And working with such apparently ordinary objects
There are things that are potent
That can carry meaning
Often not comprehended in intellectual terms

Sue D: Discipline and structure
The simplicity of just taking one or two materials
and really looking at them
If you have a strong enough framework and enough limitations
it stops you from going into sentimentality

Carolyn: You can make a statement
Or make questions
If you can name the contradictions
You're getting into really interesting stuff

Jennie: Somebody brings a baby's jacket

Laura: When our child was born
Mum knitted this very fine cardigan
I don't knit
Whereas Mum can work sheepdogs
And all those sorts of things
My husband put it in the wash with the nappies
It's got a hole in it
It's filled with regret actually
It speaks a lot about the fragility
And vulnerability of being

Wendy: And we're stunned into silence later when we turn the corner at the far end of the pavilion, where we've been working, doing a show and tell round the of the installation exercise we've just been set. There's an audible intake of breath. The small white woollen cardigan lies on the floor beside the crushed black dirt that forms a compelling powerful dark hole, with a few small twiglets that speak rib, and unravelling threads

Lynda: The hole is much more important than the cardigan
Such a sense of loss
And huge issues of feminine experience

Catherine: Is it, like the butterflies, more exquisite, we want to know, because it's only going to last for a short time?

Sylvia: And this experience is to be repeated over and over again, as we are challenged to push ourselves to new limits, every one of us surprising ourselves and each other with our leaps and bounds and the potency of this way of working. In the transitory play of these exercises extraordinary beauty is produced, complex ideas emerge, and images that stay indelibly in memory. We learn about resisting the facile, when the materials are so inherently beautiful, and each with their own repertoire of marks. We think about the movements between the individual and the group

Robin: Scissors are for cutting things apart
But yours are for bringing together
You have to cut apart to bring together

SueD: Out of the play
Comes the discoveries

Carolyn: Out of the discoveries
Come the ideas

Sue G: Sharp and round

- Jennie:* Soft and strong
Wendy: Solid and ephemeral
Lynda: Swish and crunch
Catherine: Smooth and rough
Sylvia: Surrender and struggle
- Robin:* Rules are just structures
Sue D: We can choose to play that game
Carolyn: Or make up another
Jennie: Stories that contradict
Sue G: Stories that empathise
Wendy: Materials that contradict or empathise
- All voices:* The different voice/stories

Laura: The different voices, traces and outcomes of this journey are going to be present in a collection of artworks and installations, presentations and works in progress that will be exhibited from the 25th October through to November 7th. We hope you'll be able to join us for that.

We'd like to invite you now to take the opportunity to speak with some of the artists about their directions and work. Not all of us are here tonight, and some of our group have been in the audience, but you'll recognise us by our leaf name tags. We'd very much like you to have a closer look at our scrapbook. And we are going to be circulating a visitors' book. We'd love to have your responses, thoughts, comments on what you've heard, and any of your own feelings about the desire to make or say something about the way we inhabit place.

But first of all there's a supper laid out in the kitchen, please do help yourself. Thank you for coming and I hope you'll take up the conversation...

Liminality and performance

As a first stage of publication, this event is a very liminal product. Our talk forms and reforms (words disappearing into air, having already once been conversation, then text, then talk again). Our many voices come together collectively and separate again. Our accompanying materials, all our bits and pieces on display, are there to evoke a space between process and product - partial, incomplete, yet rich and suggestive enough to invite people's further engagement. The toolboard that also calls attention to process, is intended to at the same time draw attention to uncertain and shifting boundaries between work and play, hopefully exploiting and unsettling gendered assumptions about both.

The event is liminal in looking both back at where we've been and anticipating where we are yet to go. We are anticipating an audience for something as yet not completed, as well as presenting what we have already done. We are naming ourselves as artists in process, and at the same time constituting an audience in process. Positioning us all in acts of becoming? It is liminal in the way it occupies, like Carter's 'sounds in between', 'the borderline between what can be said and what can only be acted out' (1992b, 16). Carter reminds us, through his attention to the 'verbal gestures of first contact, the stumbling mimicry of the other person's speech' (1992b, 12), 'that our sounds begin in dialogue, not monologue. They signify people orienting themselves towards each other'(14).

...in the mere mimetic exchange of sounds which precedes trading in metaphors, swapping unlike for unlike, we are looking to give our own movements human rhythm and reference (Carter, 1992b, 12).

In constructing the evening we explore ways we can invite active response and participation. There are different ways people can move through the space, different sites and threads of exchange, different embodied ways in which to construct meaning around what may well have been on the edge of intelligibility for many. The end of the group's participation in the scripted piece is an invitation to the audience to share in food that the group has prepared, to move around the small presentations of material we have set out, to follow up with individuals. We invite them to offer something to a visitors' scrapbook, either in response to what they have just experienced, or in imagining what they themselves might have brought if they had been a participant. We ask if we can scribe some of their responses that strike us as they talk. In a sense we are asking them to think out loud and through the body, as we have

been trying to do. The different responses accrued in this way demonstrate some of the frameworks audience members use to understand the way connections are made.

Puzzlement and uncertainty remain for some - *I'm not sure I know what they are doing - and I'm not sure that they do either*, but it is imbued with a sense of powerful dynamic - *Oh, what can I say – I was puzzled before I came – maybe I still am! But what enthusiasm you have created, all of you deserve congratulations.*

Some confess to *Getting the 'sense' rather than all the words*, while others remark on the potency of *melody and word songs*. Yet others again find resonances within very conceptually different frameworks. The multi voiced script is compared with multifaceted crystals, redolent of New Age sentiment - *It's all crystal clear – crystals that reflect, vibrate, energize and make wise*. Pieces penned privately on scraps of paper discreetly added to the scrapbook appear to link it with Christian faith.

*In a sentence where each word is sacred
In a day where each second is weighed
In a body where each breath is counted
and communion is where life is made*

*Half of it was conversation
Half of it was mucking round,
And in the mess of all that belief
A few special prayers were found*

Life is Not elsewhere

Carter suggests that mimicking or 'parroting', echoing anything that might, by chance, have meaning – a syllable, a phonological unit that is seized, guessed at for some remote echoing connection with our own tongue – produces 'sound in-between', what I have called elsewhere 'babble' (Hartley, 1995, 17).

Such a sound is not then simply a performative strategy. The mimicry it employs is not meant to parody communication, to undermine assertions of authority. It is

a historical device for keeping the future open, for delineating a space where, in future, misapprehensions and differences can begin to form the basis of a new cross-cultural *argot*, one based on the incremental convergence of sounds and gestures (Carter, 1992b, 12-13).

Is it a kind of hybrid vigour, the dynamic of a different desire at work that produces expressions of wonder, surprise, fascination, magic, delight, difference, excitement, and many comments of envy or regret at not having been part of the project ?

Wonderful - so surprising having so many voices, Totally different made it so much more shareable

I'm green; green with envy! It looks like you have all learnt a lot about yourselves

The sound of the combined voices was like a melody I regret that I didn't continue with the group

Envy excitement pleasure

It was an encouragement to keep my creative finger pulled out. The sense of enjoyment and excitement was obvious – congratulations

Scientific stuff seems very dull after all this

Delight in belonging to a community in which such wonderful things can happen

This is pure enthusiasm nothing artificial

It's wonderful what you see when you look

Certain magic that comes out when people put in

A fascinating event of space and function

So pleased to be part of your evening

You just don't know how envious I am. I really wanted to do this.

Lewis has suggested that 'the production of shared meanings is one of the ways we experience deeply felt moments of psycho-sexual pleasure, whether across or within gender' (1993, 171). And Butler asks - 'what kind of gender performance will enact and reveal the performativity of gender itself in a way that destabilises the naturalized categories of identity and desire[?]' (1990, 139). The audience of this present text doesn't have the advantage of the combined embodied presence, the give-away body language of our nervousness, the rise and fall of our separate and combined voices, the subtleties of rhythm and volume and accent that add invisible layers to any telling. [Fir instinz if yoo wur ta heeyer thi sowend uf ma voyess].

Passing glances, touches, the heightened charge particularly between partners, the change in stature I observed amongst some of the group by the time the event was coming to a close (taller somehow, confident in posture and movement) - all seem to attest to the eroticism, excitement and pleasure in the poetics of our performance and in the very self conscious attempt to communicate across recognisable differences and gaps. Partners, family, friends and strangers.

But one of the women records an exchange that seems to mark at least a consciousness of gender performance.

These two men, they both said – ‘it’s all beyond me ... why can’t men do that?’

‘They could’, *I said.*

‘No’, *they said.*

A husband of one of the participants plays with both the notion of ‘journey’ and ‘altered consciousness’ (with its implications of drug taking) in an attempt to express (and perhaps contain) the powerful and passionate dynamic he has been observing. He’s not sure what ‘trip’ we’ve been on but he’s glad we are back safe?

I think about Betsy Warland’s words in ‘*the breast refuse*’ –

you may or may not understand my dialect

i may or may not understand yours

in this, at the very least,

we admit

how little understanding has been exchanged

when difference is denied

by the illusion

of a shared language

in naming our selves

we finally accept

our babbles’ necessity

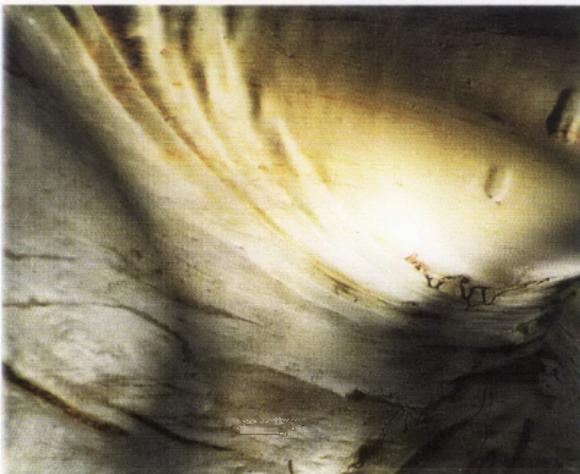
(Warland, 1990, 33)

I hoped this event would provide the audience with fresh ways of engaging with whatever we finally produce as art, fresh ways of contemplating the notion of *art/work* and what might be entailed in *artworking*. I hoped it would make more visible and palpable the embodied pleasures of communicative effort, a basis for considering how and whom we can meet and engage around and through the material we produce. By insisting on making the physical body, and the space contingent on the body's gestures and voice, the central event, as Carter describes (1992b, 177 -191), I hope we have invited people to risk thinking aloud and through the body, in the space of in-between.

It seemed we had achieved a response from the public that gave our work so far, and what we were about to complete, wider meanings without fixing or preempting them. It made what we had been doing seem all the more worthwhile and potent. It provided impetus to complete works that might continue and extend that dynamic. It produced a particularly heightened sense of that psycho-sexual energy (desire as a Deleuzian force that connects, produces) and a new level of engagement with sexual/ body politics.

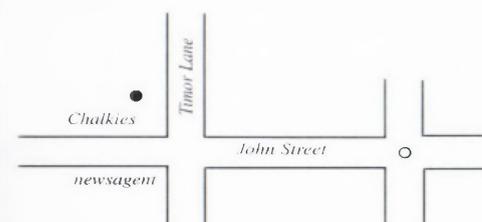
When we reflect as a group on the evening, the audience's responses and recorded comments prove particularly provocative. We have our first sustained overt discussion about hetero and homosexuality and a debate opens up about both the limits and the consequences of the way we choose to speak. As we decide on the image that will go on our exhibition invitations (the possibilities lie between various photographic images of local eucalyptus rossii – their limbs joints and creased skins lusciously evocative of flesh) we negotiate the extent to which we will claim an eroticised body and landscape.

Image by: Lou Rozensteins

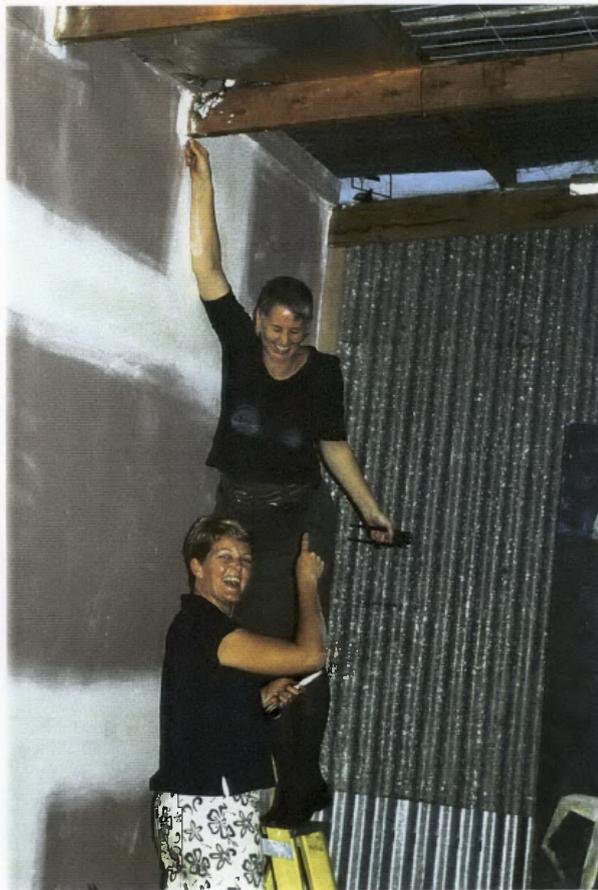


**Expressions of Place
Women and Art in Coonabarabran**

25 October - 7 November 1999
Chalkies Gallery



**Exhibition Opening Night
Tuesday 26 October 7.30pm-9.30pm.**



Performance 2.

Exhibition.

Expressions of Place: Women and Art in Coonabarabran

October 25 – November 7, 1999.

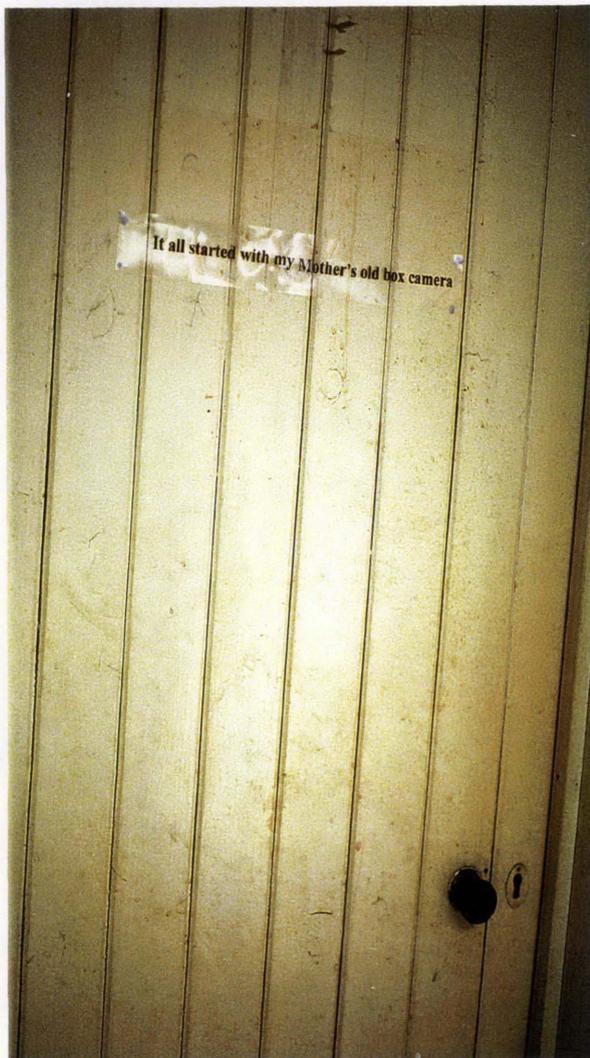
Chalkies Gallery

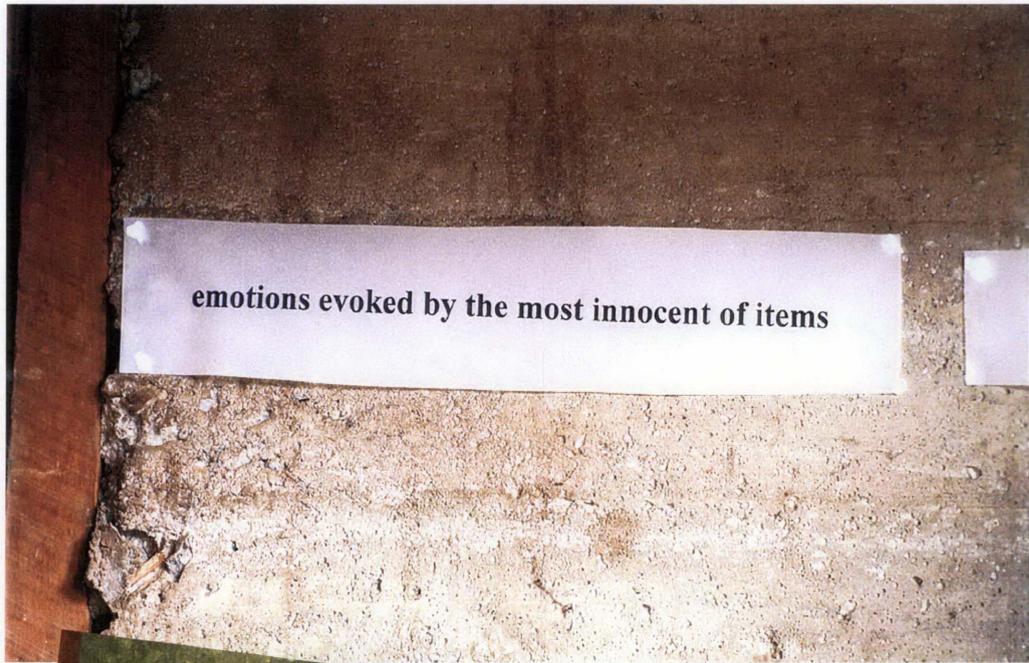
Women-work and spaces of transition.

The space used for the exhibition is located at the rear of a shop, part of one of the oldest remaining commercial buildings in this country town. There are plans underway to convert these storerooms into a café but so far they remain untouched. Dust is so thick it has felted into wads of brown fabric.

We move tons of rubbish, cart heavy pieces off to other sites to be looked after – cram everything else into a concrete bunker room (it's to be the kitchen eventually, we hear). We sweep, hose, vacuum, mop, scrub, repair.

The timber uprights of original shelving bear pencilled sums and addings up, the price of goods in shillings, pence and pounds scrawled on zinc aluminium doors, and it feels all the more appropriate to add our own performance of place to these layers.





Text/ure

texture /ˈtɛkstʃə/, *-n.* 1. The characteristic disposition of the interwoven or intertwined threads, strands, or the like, which make up a textile fabric. 2. The characteristic disposition of the constituent parts of any body; general structure or constitution. 3. The characteristic appearance or essential quality of something, esp. as conveyed to the touch. 4. The structure of the surface of any work of art, or the simulation of the surface structure of the skin, garment, etc., of the object represented in paint, stone, or other medium. 5. *Music.* a. a combination of timbres or tone colours. b. the patterns of relationship between the parts of a musical form: contrapuntal texture, harmonic texture. 6. Anything produced by weaving, woven fabric. *-vt.* 7. To give a specific or desired texture to, as clothes. [late ME, from L *textūra* weaving]

(Delbridge et al, 1991, 1810)

text /tɛkst/, *n.* 1. the main body of matter in a book or manuscript, as distinguished from notes, appendixes, etc. 2. the original words of an author as distinct from a translation, paraphrase, commentary, or the like. 3. the actual wording of anything written or printed. 4. any of the various forms in which a writing exists. 5. the wording adopted by an editor as representing the original words of an author. 6. any theme or topic. 7. the words of a song or the like. 8. any group of utterances or sentences which show cohesion; a unified passage. 9. a textbook. 10. a short passage of Scripture, esp. one chosen in proof of a doctrine, as the subject of a sermon, etc. 11. *Eccles.* the letter of the Holy Scripture, or the Scriptures themselves. [ME, from ML *textus* wording (of the Gospel), L structure (of a discourse), orig. texture. See TEXTURE]

(Delbridge et al, 1991, 1810)

In developing pieces in relation to the space, we wanted to think how different qualities of the buildings met different needs of each work and how the artworks could work with, rather than against or in spite of any idiosyncrasies of the place. Several took the opportunity to fully crystallise a work in situ in this way. A short, dark, narrow corridor with enigmatic fire-warning sign, ripe with suggestions of chimney and the possibility of image projection, brings ‘*Keeping the home fires burning*’ into being. A waterfall-like installation emerges in the

strange atmosphere, unusual height and broken play of light from high leaded windows in another space. Elsewhere structural nooks and crannies, the colour and patina of surface, miscellaneous surviving objects, stimulated final forms and significances.

We thought closely about how we could invite people to move around and through the exhibition, spend time being in the presence of each work, on the understanding that an engagement with the works and the exhibition as a whole is very much an active spatial experience. The library night and its participatory conversational nature was important in paving the way, providing a model for such an engagement.

The term 'conversation' in its most enhanced sense, unfolds into so many nuances. 'Converse', going to and fro, versing to and fro. But it also has suggested 'dwelling among', even defined as 'living', and then 'converse' the opposite, the negation of verse, and 'conversio' a transformation. It also means sitting down with someone, someone who is not abhorred or hated, to have a conversation. (Schwartz, 2001, *Encounter*, ABC Radio National 23 September)

The relationship with conversation was evinced partly through traces and fragments of story placed throughout the sequence of rooms. A poetically evocative word or phrase that hoped to touch and move the viewer in subtle ways might appear along the skirting board, a door, a lintel or curve of tin. Many of the women included text in their work, and domestic and textile materials featured often as the artists used familiar skills and materials to make a point of connection with the viewer and at the same time avoid conforming to traditional high art forms. Many of the works aimed to engage the viewer in a physical, interactive, wholly embodied way (not just visual) that would raise attention to the complexity of bodily experience itself. Asking viewers to work with the artist, to open the experience of the work and extend their repertoire of responses.

Installation as a concept was very important in this regard, since, as Bruce James points out, it allows for the observer to occupy space with the observed, and to exist in the same temporal frame, and this participatory aspect becomes inseparable from its success as art (2001, 16). There is an immediacy, Julie Ewington says, an 'inescapability, of a one to one relationship between the work and the body of the viewer' (1994, 242).

Objects and elements experienced in the same space as the viewer exert a powerful force upon those entering their field of attraction ... Offering neither escape into the fantastic space of the painted image, or the comfortable domination secured by small scale objects, installations demand engagements by the viewer (Ewington, 1994, 242).

As Ewington describes it, installations can also work powerfully because they, the questions they raise, do not fit easily into pre existing categories of enunciation. They can set radically different elements into play – images, texts, objects, constructions, natural elements, the participation of the human presence – without insisting on a closed reading of the entire ensemble. The interplay between these new art materials can generate a kind of hybrid energy that is very exciting and appealing because it is at the same time unstable, unpredictable. While one can achieve chains of meaning across and between elements, the work as a whole will resist recuperation (Ewington, 1994, 228-247). It is hard to appropriate the meanings, to pin them down neatly and control them, when the materials will stubbornly persist in being themselves (beans, leather, fabric) *as well as something else* (a story, concept, memory).

A door opened to surprise, to another way of knowing people and experience, to an unexpected perspective

(Sue D., October 1999)