

Playing With the Image:  
In Conversation with Margaret Roberts

INTRODUCTION

In April 2006, Sydney-based installation artist, Margaret Roberts, visited the School of Art at Otago Polytechnic in Dunedin, New Zealand and presented a research seminar on her own practice. Intense discussion between Roberts, faculty and students followed her seminar. It became clear that her practice is connected to many important issues in contemporary art practice. In order to document and discuss some of these issues, I interviewed Roberts with a view to publication, as the written format would allow for the expansion of key moments in the interview. The result of the exchange between Roberts and me – academic coordinator for research and postgraduate studies at Otago Polytechnic School of Art – follows the traditional question-answer format below, with additional text boxes containing elaborations by myself on a set of eight issues key to Roberts' practice. The contents of these boxes are not continuous with the conversation but should rather be read alongside it .

**Leoni:** Margaret, I am interested in the ways in which your work engages with history.

*Margaret:* I think I am incorporating history in my artwork when I use real space as a part of the work, because real space is continuous with the past. The effort that individual people put into many things so easily gets forgotten. So little is recorded, and history is so selectively written and interpreted, that subsequent generations do not understand much of what happened before them.

I hope that, in a tiny way through my work, I can acknowledge the past that created me and the present. *Red Check* (at the Tin Sheds in 2004) and the *Reception* (at Hill End in 2003) do that in different ways.

I made *Red Check* (see images 1-4) because the Tin Sheds gallery represents an attempt in the 1960s and 70s to intervene in the course of history in one Sydney suburb, Darlington, and it failed. It was the base for grass-roots activities which people now have a tendency to dismiss,

not seeing the significance of what others were trying to do then, their genuine commitment and the personal risks they were taking. That little attempt to do something failed a long time ago, but the sheds themselves, and the gallery set up in the early 80s, both remained until quite recently. *Red Check* farewelled them. Then the buildings hung around for another year or two, and finally in the last month, they have been pulled down.

Many contemporary arts projects engage with **history** or the 'past as remembered' in productive ways and draw strength from this engagement. Christian Boltanski's *Passion* (1996) exhibited with massed portraits of Holocaust victims; Hans Haacke's *Mixed Messages* (2001) juxtaposing objects from the historical collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum; Thomas Hirschorn's art history kiosks shown in Zurich (2001); and William Kentridge's *Black Box/Chambre Noir* (2005) at the Deutsche Guggenheim as a rewrite of the German genocide of the Herero people in Southwest Africa in 1904 are cogent examples. Ernst van Alphen writes: "...art functions as a frame, in the sense that it actively frames historically sanctioned habits of conceiving and endorsing... and the world in which the subject is situated. This framing must also be seen according to the negative, threatening sense of the word. As a frame-up, art exposes history." (2005: xviii)

In *Red Check* and *Reception* (see images 1-6 and 7-8) Roberts engages with the history of places. Her audience needs to have a knowledge of these histories in order to fully engage with the issues at stake. In discussing the notion of a "dialogical aesthetics", Grant Kester writes about "connected knowing" and points out that it is predicated on two conditions: "First, it is concerned with recognizing the social [and historical] imbeddedness and context within which [artists] speak, judge and act...This involves a recognition of the speakers' history and their positions relative to modes of social, political, and cultural power...The second characteristic of connected knowing...is grounded in our capacity to identify with other people [across historical] boundaries..." (2005: 82-83) *Red Check* invites its audience to 'play the piece' across the boundaries of the gingham squares so as to experience something of the earlier inhabitants' drive to freedom. Thus they gain connected knowing on a somatic level; while *Reception* provides a blank space for us to inhabit alongside the haunting presence of earlier occupants.

Elizabeth Grosz (1999: 5) has argued that a profound "somatophobia" is reflected in the Western philosophical tradition from Plato and Aristotle through Descartes and into our era. Vicente Berdayes et al (2004) explore how this fear of the **body** and its concomitant splitting off from the mind are aligned with other dualisms in Western philosophy. They point out that "the 'centrepiece' of dualistic philosophy in the West is the counterposing of human subjectivity with some objective, real or first principle." (6) They then explain how a chasm has come to divide the timeless, ordered, immovable and absolute first principle from quotidian human disorder, infirmity and contingency as experienced through the body. With reference to Friedrich Nietzsche's ideal of playful human activity when engaging with a language of communication, they argue that human beings "do not require some fixed principle to guarantee order and communication; instead, they are free to increase displacement in the games, and even to disorient it, in such a way as to make an unexpected 'move'. The contours of language games [including those playing out in the visual arts] and the social relations they generate are thus charged with creative human agency [and] this agonistic and erotic conception of truth is scandalous to theorists who have traditionally sought to constrain subjectivity by anchoring social

order on some transcendent principle." (12) Roberts' *Red Check* does not only allow the subjective body into the work; it is fully dependent on this body for its performance. One could, however, argue that it also problematizes a potential reification of somatic subjectivity. Reading the work alongside Catharine Clément's *Syncope: The Philosophy of Rapture* (1994), one can imagine the bodies on swings inside *Red Check* experiencing syncope as a movement in counter-time, a loss of breath, an ecstatic flight into another state of consciousness or space-time (see Jean Fisher, 2003: 220). "Syncope is resistance, rebellion, rejection of the world [and] dissolution of the subject" (Clément: 236) in order to become "enfolded within an interpretive community." (See Berdayes et al: 12.)

**Leoni:** *Red Check* also suggests another kind of engagement with history. I was looking at the images and thinking that before the people arrived, a particular kind of modernist aesthetic was very much in evidence in the work through the use of the grid and the neatness of the checks as part of the abstract visual vocabulary you were using. Then the people arrived and other things happened as the whole space became activated with people jumping all over it. Everything that was in a neat order within the grid became messy and wild, and I can imagine people laughing and playing on the suspended swings. In a sense, the visual aspect of modernism was complicated by the bodies acting within it. The hectic corporeal aspects 'took over', as it were. Did you plan it that way?

**Margaret:** Absolutely. I was relying on people's physical presence making a big impact. I wasn't thinking of the squares as modernist, but of a picnic scene – with gingham-patterned rugs and swings. I enlarged the scale of the squares to confuse and contradict the scale of the building. I thought the floor might seem to detach from the walls and roof, and show the floor as continuous with another time or space. I hoped it might suggest a different temporal or spatial context, because, being larger scale, the floor appears closer to you than the rest of the building. I guess that the modernist aesthetic is always suggested by the grid. But I would like to take geometry back and use it to hint at the fact of, as well as the complexity of, our occupation of space and time.

**Leoni:** It was also interesting for me to see that there are obvious moments in your work that provide opportunities for other people to also do things. I am thinking, for example, of the assistants you had for *Red Check* and the way their setting up of cleaning rags and water in spray-bottles in the gallery store-room inside your work also became another work (see image 5). Please talk about your collaboration with people, because it seems as if you create opportunities for people while other people create opportunities for you.

British artist Peter Dunn has recently made the distinction between artists as "context providers" rather than as "content providers" in relation to contemporary arts projects in which **collaboration** plays an important role (see Kester's "Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially-Engaged Art": 76). Although such a distinction smacks somewhat of an older and now discredited form and content divide, it draws attention to many practices today which facilitate a performative, process-oriented "creative orchestration of collaborative encounters and conversations [which] can catalyze

surprisingly powerful transformations in the consciousness of their participants”(ibid). German artist Johannes Birringer’s *Performance on the Edge: Transformations of Culture* (2006) maps a current territory for activist collaboration across social, cultural and political fault lines. He is one of many contemporary artists who are committed to collaborative political activism and the reconstruction of community through site-specific interventions into the social structures of abandonment.

Roberts’ *Red Check* intervenes with a specific place in an attempt to reinstate it as a site that has been abandoned – not as context, but as content. Through inviting her audience to become participants or collaborators, she realigns a particular context and content within the performance of the piece. She also allows her assistants to own a part of the play through their exhibition of sullied rags in a cupboard space, which becomes a museumic display of relics during and after the performance. Thus a temporality plays out between the 1970s activism associated with the Tin Sheds, the drawing of the piece in gingham checks, the performance by participants and the framing of the resulting detritus of this performance. At each point in this sequence, the relationship between the artist and others changes: from memory of, to making for, to allowing in, to bracketing off. Kester invites us to consider the “tension between a movement towards openness, sensitivity to difference and vulnerability, and the paradoxical drive to ‘master’ the viewer” or participant in collaborative practices. (80) With Miwon Kwon (2002) he warns against a collapse into a “mythic unity” as all collective identities are inherently corrupt and contends that “the only legitimate goal of collaborative practice is to challenge and unsettle...such forms of identification...it is possible to define oneself through solidarity with others while at the same time recognizing the contingency of this identification.”(85) *Red Check* achieves both solidarity and the impossibility of its stabilisation through the temporal sequencing of its acts.

*Margaret*: I like to use real space or found space because it is outside my control; it is full of life and anything can happen there. I would like to acknowledge that quality of the spaces I work in. It makes the work a type of experiment – you lay out a work and then bring the world into it and see what kind of engagement follows. I think that this attempt at engagement is there in other work of mine as well. That is how I think of it when I am making it. I love the notion of incorporating other people’s processes, their lives, into the work as an unpredictable component.

But collaboration is something one has to be careful about because people have to be equal in collaboration and it has to happen spontaneously. One has to discover someone and discover that you are doing something together and then you realise later that it has become collaboration. In the case of the performance with *Red Check*, it was not really collaboration so much as me providing parameters within which they could act. Their part was to work out how to offer to clean the feet of people as they were leaving the gallery, in other words to remove the red iron oxide from the shoes of those visitors who didn’t want to take it away with them. For me, that meant that people were being informed that they had some choice or responsibility in what they did with the red. Their performance had an important role in my work but I hoped they could also make it their own. The three artists were students I know well from Sydney College of the Arts, where I worked: Emma Nicholson, Kathryn Ryan, and Cameron Emerson-Elliott. Their performance had the potential to be like the performance of the general public that came in and had a good time. These are two different ways of involving real space in which people do things of their own accord.

The issue of **space (and time)** has become extraordinarily pervasive in contemporary thought. In *Thinking Space* (Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift eds, 2000) a wide range of responses – from the ur-texts of Walter Benjamin to Georg Simmel to Mikhail Bakhtin to Ludwig Wittgenstein; to configurations of space in the wake of '68; to the refiguring of spaces in the present are included. With regard to Roberts' practice, two of the entries seem especially relevant. One of these is Andy Merrifield's analysis of Henri Lefebvre's contribution to our thinking about space in *The Production of Space* (1974). Lefebvre coined the term "spatiality" to involve both physical space and social space. As a Marxist, Lefebvre was interested in the production of spatiality within a modern, urbanising capitalism. He attempted to trace generative moments in its production and for him "space becomes redescribed not as a dead, inert thing or object, but as organic and fluid and alive; it has a pulse, it palpates, it flows and collides with other spaces."(Merrifield: 171) *Red Check* happened in the physical space of the Tin Sheds gallery while reinventing an earlier social space which had positioned itself against the capitalist manoeuvres of the state. Roberts' planned *Decapitate* (see image 16) deploys a horizontal division of physical space to speak of the power inherent in the scopoc regime of the art gallery as a social space; a power which can protect the work inside it, but which can also perpetrate violence against the other senses for the sake of the visual.

The richness of spatiological – i.e. physical/social – space is explored by Bruno Latour and Michel Serres as included in *Thinking Space*. Latour writes: "my body...lives in as many spaces as the society, the group or the collectivity have formed...[through] the unique acts of 'timing' and 'spacing' by which place-events are 'folded' or 'pleated' into existence."(1997:178). Serres (1994: 71) stacks relationships in space: *within, out of, between, toward, in front of, behind, near, on, against, following, touching, among* – those relationships playing out in Roberts' projects, where these explore the effects of the body moving in time through its involvement with floor, wall, ceiling, window, roof, corner, square and door.

**Leoni:** There is something else about that work that I find really poignant but I am not quite sure why. I look at one image of the work and what I see is an oblique view of the door. I know by this time that the history of the Tin Sheds had played out inside that door. My oblique view of the door from the outside includes a little bit of red oxide walked out onto the exterior flooring in front of the door. This image (6) moves me and I do not know why. Can you respond to this?

**Margaret:** The way I saw it was that people would get the red on their feet through engaging with the work – walking through the red oxide and then walking it back into their lives, or out into the city or around the corner to the new gallery. But they would do it knowingly, in a sense, because they had an option to get rid of it – if they wanted to – by asking the attendants to wipe their feet for them. Those that walked it away did it themselves, knowingly. I saw in that the possibility that what the Tin Sheds represented could have another life; that even though the building was being destroyed and even though most of what was fought for in the past was lost, some of those values might remain in the minds of many people. I hoped that this possibility could be represented by the red they knowingly walked out with on their feet. Maybe what you call "poignant" or "moving" there might be the potential we have to maintain an active continuity with the past.

**Leoni:** It is interesting how the work is a political work but in a very subtle and covert way. People really need to understand the history of the space and they need to understand the kind of interventions they would be creating in the space you set up. Did you find that people understood that when they came to that event? On what level do you think they engaged with the work?

**Margaret:** I don't know. The level at which they engage is completely out of my control. The important thing is that their vigorous swinging and mess-making meant that they did engage with it on terms that meant something to them at the time. Anything can happen when you try to use live space as part of the work, but the other side – my side – of the work needs to be just as active in the interaction. At the end of the opening night, people wrote graffiti and made footprints on the walls with the red oxide and next day I decided to paint over that. Someone said I should just accept whatever's been done. But I thought I wasn't conducting empirical research, and I did not need to be completely passive. I was not simply laying out a ground for people to draw on with their feet. I was trying to construct a situation in which people participate to mark or enact continuity between that place's past and whatever future those people create with their lives.

**Leoni:** What is the title again of your 2003 work that engages with furniture?

**Margaret:** I called it *Reception (Jean Bellette's Studio)* and I made it during a residency at Hill End, near Bathurst in New South Wales. (No's. 6 and 11 in the collection are shown in images 7 & 8 here.)

**Leoni:** Was that work presented only in portfolio format or could people actually visit the real space?

**Margaret:** No, people didn't visit the place at Hill End. Apart from the white wall drawing which I remade again in the gallery in Sydney, this work consists only of photographs. I thought of them as documentation of an event in real space, of which I was the only human witness. The 'event' was the unplanned meeting between the unmade furniture I brought with me and the old furniture that I found there.

**Leoni:** The white shape creates associations with modernist architecture or items of furniture. You have inserted this shape in the space amongst old pieces of furniture and so you again create a connection with history. What made you decide on that particular place; did it have another association for you or was it the peculiarity of the furniture that attracted you?

**Margaret:** The resemblance between the white shape and modernist architecture is because the shape is made from opening out a commercial gallery reception desk into its plan. I took the plan of the reception desk at Conny Dietzschold Gallery with me to Haefligers Cottage in Hill End, where I had previously applied for a residency. I had not been to that cottage and studio before and had no idea that it was full of the eccentric furniture that Paul Haefliger and Jean Bellette had collected and brought there in the 1950s and then left when they moved on. So the meeting between my plan for a reception desk and the old furniture I found there was unexpected and coincidental. I installed the white shape in the studio; then photographed it with the mirror and furniture already in the studio and also with furniture I dragged across

the lawn from the cottage. So I didn't decide on that place to make this work. I discovered the work when I went there.

**Leoni:** In the current situation artists go on residencies that really encourage those kinds of coincidences to happen as artists are encouraged to work with what is at hand. Do you think that the system of residencies support your kind of practice?

*Margaret:* Yes, most residencies have been really useful, particularly living where studio space is expensive. For me the place is like a material and that place up there at Hill End was a particularly fantastic material, as it turned out. Bellette and Haefliger had left so much of themselves behind that I felt as if I was collaborating with them, even though they moved on and have since died.

**Leoni:** Five years ago when you came to our school on a residency you worked with students and staff here, for instance on the *Infinity Line* project in our foyer during 2000. This project brought home to many people the importance of collaboration and also the possibilities of using space and responding to space as a material. The work had a huge influence on the school and now, seeing the images you showed of that work again today, I can see that you subsequently documented the event in your drawings as something that had already happened. Did you experience the drawings as a whole new project?

*Margaret:* The line drawings in that project (see image 9) originated in the architecture of the foyer gallery and in a type of collaboration with the four students who did the actual clambering on ladders to work out where the line would go. I had just broken my arm by slipping on black ice on one of the steep roads in Dunedin, so I stayed on the ground. I can't say it was a full collaboration as, again, I had set some parameters. It was also a collaboration between a straight line and the found space, and it was up to those four students to discover what that collaboration would produce.

**Leoni:** In a certain sense you are creating your own history through the drawings because they refer to a five year old project. Do you agree that there is a process of historical archiving within your own work as well?

*Margaret:* I guess so, but I think of it more as a type of anti-archiving as new drawings can be made at any time from the record of the actual line. The drawings are generated from determining a viewpoint – it could be the foyer line as seen from the airport or from that hill up there. That particular foyer is such a complex little space; it creates an unpredictable variety of 'drawings' – the ones we did initially look like a penguin, a dog and a horse. If we made one from a tall building in the centre of town, it might look like a kookaburra. I say 'we' here, because Horst Kiechle made them in a 3D computer modelling program he devised, using the data I collected to record the actual foyer line. It is a form of archiving that is almost as alive and full of future unknowns as the foyer space itself (see image 10).

**Leoni:** In another work entitled *Promise* – painted on paved area in "Civic, DOMAIN: a temporary public art project" of the Canberra School of Art in 2003 (image 11) – you painted white shapes on the ground and, in the image you show of it, a little child runs around them and sees a different shape from each position. The shape depends on the positioning of the

participant. So, in a certain sense a shape is never really one shape because it depends on where one is. How did you actually work that out. Did you do it mathematically?

*Margaret:* Well, a cube is such a simple thing that it is quite easy to work out. I have made a number of works using a shape that is easily made and recognised, such as a square or cube. I thought there must be some way to have a series of such shapes which are the same on a plan, although you never see them all as the same; because you can only ever see them from one position at a time and so they all look different even though you know they are the same. I made another work at the Centre for Contemporary Photography in Melbourne, using one shape which was partly on the ground and partly on the wall, a shape derived from an earlier cube work. The same shape was repeated three times but you could only ever see them from different angles because you can only ever look from one position at a time. You could never stand in front of each of them at the same time and so you could never know just by looking whether they were the same or different. It's not really mathematics, it's just thinking about what we see, and trying things out in real space.

**Leoni:** In a sense many of the projects that we have been looking at today engage with a particular space and you have indicated that this is always important in your work?

*Margaret:* Yes, they use the particular qualities of the space more than it appears; and attempts to remake certain works in a different but similarly shaped space have failed. Nevertheless, I still expect that certain spatial shapes, such as the join of a wall and a floor, are so common that you could make some shapes work in lots of different places. Your position as a person moving around the space in which the shape is constructed is the key element as it shows its occupiable or live quality.

**Leoni:** Once again you are talking about position; about your position and the position of a participant. You are making us aware that the object doesn't actually exist as a discrete or finite item; as its configuration always depends on where one is looking from, on the position from which one is looking at it. Even when the object is a piece of furniture, you are providing us with a new and changing view on it. In a certain sense you are re-making the objects or re-creating them all the time. The other work of yours I really admire is *Unmade Histories* of 2005, in which one sees objects lovingly and carefully presented through your work with concrete materials and one cannot help but engage with them; whilst also knowing that they have been somewhere else or that they can go somewhere else in future. An example is *Unmade History (William Anastasi, Sink, 1963)*, image 12. So, again they are 'moving' in time and it seems as if this temporal aspect is always present in your work.

*Margaret:* Yes, because live space necessarily contains time.

**Leoni:** You foreground that, you make people really aware of it. People experience things in time, but they are not always aware that they are doing that and your work makes us aware of that.

*Margaret:* We often think of space as one thing and of time as another, whereas for them to actually be space and time, they must go together. One can only think about them as separate, as one cannot experience them as separate.

**Leoni:** There seems to be a refusal in your work to separate them. In a certain sense, this also represents a refusal of gender separation because space and time have been gendered for so long that people have come to accept them respectively as female and male.

*Margaret:* I had not thought about them as female and male. But, certainly that would be entirely consistent with what I believe, as we need to be regarded as people in the first instance rather than as female or male. The fact that we are male and female – and various other things – is also true, and affects our self-identity etc., but we need to treat everyone as people first. However, what I am really thinking about when I am making the work is the importance of the physical character of live space to our existence.

**Leoni:** You seem to use drawing in different configurations in your practice and at different stages of your projects and it seems integral to your way of working.

*Margaret:* I think all my work really came out of drawing because my first art practice was life drawing. I did that for several years, when I was still working full-time. I went to life drawing classes at East Sydney Technical College for several years, and also at the Art Students League for a while. I learned that in order to draw something realistically one had to turn it into something which only made sense within a two-dimensional framework. For a long time I was working with the way in which a drawing is supposed to represent something and yet the things that the drawing and the thing drawn have in common are actually really minimal. Their differences are much greater. For instance, if I were to draw that computer behind you – and it is a bad example as it is almost a drawing in itself – the scale and the size will be different, the material that they are made of is different and what they can do is going to be different. The only one tiny little similarity is that from one position they look about the same. That is one small thing they have in common and all those other things are just easily deleted in the process of life drawing. That was important to much of my work in the 90s – working with the ways in which representation over-rides so much of life.

In a letter to John Berger, James Elkins writes about the 'impossibility' of representational **drawing**: "Sometimes in the intense effort to see, the object in front of you starts to shrink. You make an armature of lines, trying to catch the key points, but the object wriggles free. You make a scaffolding to hold it in place, and it slips out. You hold your pencil in the clichéd gesture, but the object can't be measured. In this situation, the longer you look, the more distant and insubstantial the object becomes, and in the end it may even slip down to the bottom of the page and drift away." (2005: 108) In the same letter he writes about the ubiquity of drawing as "the invaluable record of the encounter of a moving, thinking hand with the mesmerizing space of potential forms..."(106). John Berger replies: "My hunch is that drawing is a manual activity whose aim is to abolish the principle of Disappearance. Or – to put it another way – to turn appearances and disappearances into a game that is more serious than life...Drawing is a ceaseless process of correction. It proceeds by corrected errors." (110)

Roberts uses drawing in various ways in her projects. There are drawn groundplans as exhibition preparation; shapes and lines drawn on floors and walls; 3-D modelling of architectures done with Horst Kiechle; and a sensitivity to imaginary lines – the ways in which a window intersects with a roof outside, for example – or the anticipation of lines created when a body moves diagonally

across a drawn shape on a floor or square. While resolutely avoiding a representational mode, drawing is everywhere in her practice as a tool for planning and for plotting position, direction and movement in space. Her drawing declares itself as a tool; it is not an end in itself but plays a facilitating role so that something else can happen: the body's experience in space. Emma Dexter writes about drawing's tautologous nature: "drawing forever describes its own making in its becoming...its eternal incompleteness always re-enacts ...incompleteness." (2005: 6) It is only through their play by the human body that Roberts' drawings are momentarily completed.

**Leoni:** I often remember two particular works of yours, the *Untitled (Square)* drawing (image 13) over one corner with red iron oxide powder and plaster done at your Newtown Flourmill studio (1991) and the *Untitled* chalk drawing (1994) made on the cement floor at the East Perth Boans Warehouse (image 14). From photographs one cannot decide whether one is looking at something which is vertical or horizontal. Maybe it is their contradictory nature which draws me to these works.

**Margaret:** I've loved them too. On the surface, these drawings are made for the camera as they were set up to be recognisable from one viewpoint. But they have been done on the ground to question what an image is, to suggest that the image is merely a thing seen for a split second from a particular spot by squinting your eyes. In lived experience, however, we are actually always moving and we also see with two eyes. Another important thing about the second of those photographs is that there was a bright patch on the cement caused by daylight coming from above and to reduce that glare I threw red oxide on it, because I simply had some handy. That is what creates the red smear, introducing a painterly aspect to the relationship between the red patch and the white lines. Then when photographed, it becomes an image that is more than just the documentation of the game of lines and viewing position.

**Leoni:** You also use drawing to plan what you are going to be doing in an installation?

**Margaret:** Sometimes I use drawing to plan a work and then later the documentary photographs resemble that original drawing more than they do the installation as it was set up. A lot of the installations I did in the 1990s were made to see what the drawing becomes in real space, rather than just existing on a flat page.

However, I called a lot of my 1990s works "room drawings" or "drawing installations". This was partly because they were a mix of a shape that originated from two-dimensionality imposed on a three-dimensional space, as if it too was a drawing or a photograph – except that it wasn't a photograph, it was the space that people could occupy. It was also because drawing is the expression of the active mind, the mind working out something, and that seemed appropriate to accompany live space, or space in which the body is also active.

**Leoni:** In the *Reception* photographs (images 7 & 8 ) you placed your signature across the bottom edge of the prints, and in *DNA Converter and Other Machines* (e.g. *Cat's Cradle*, inkjet print, image 15), on which you collaborated with Stephen Sullivan, you also used your thumb prints to 'sign' the work. Was that a play with the notion of the signature or was it also a formal device?

*Margaret:* The thumb print was Stephen's idea initially. We had been trying to work out how to sign the work because it was going into a commercial gallery, and the work was part his and part mine – the photographs are of my work and the arrangement of the photographs is Stephen's work. Signing across the image and border was an important discovery that I made with the earlier *Reception* photographs. It was a distressing time initially because I was being told on the one hand that I had to sign it for buyers to be interested, and on the other hand, every time I signed it, it destroyed the work. Signing it above or below the image meant the signature was the boss, the thing that owned and closed off the image. Eventually I worked out that in signing across the join between image and border, the image was no longer closed off. It may be because the image then cut the signature in response to the signature cutting the image and so it was a mutual destruction, enabling them to co-exist rather than one dominating the other.

The artist's **signature** implies the presence of an individual of importance. Its deployment on a work of art hails back to Classical times, but it became a significant mark of genius only during the Renaissance with its humanistic focus on the creative presence of an individual. This presence was linked to the monetary value of the work, especially of the oil painting as a market commodity. In our post-Duchampian era, the artist's signature is, however, a contentious issue. Where previously it authenticated a work of art – if the signature itself could be authenticated – it now brings critical considerations into play. In the first instance its appearance on a work of art brings the history of art as commodity to mind. Secondly, the gendered history of genius and mastery in the fine arts since the Renaissance is connoted by the signature. Since R Mutt signed Duchamp's urinal, it has become difficult to conceive of the signature without irony. Michel Foucault's "What is an Author?" (1977: 124-127) points out that "authorship" is a concept which has not always existed; that it came into being in the modern era; and that it may pass out of being again. He points to the connections between such a concept and legalities around ownership and property. In Roland Barthes' "From Work to Text" (1977: 940-46), he contends that a work is traceable to a source, while a text – a field or event during which the work is read – has no one source and includes the author as a guest at their own table. Jacques Derrida (1995: 199-201) argues that there cannot be a signature for something original or inimitable as all reading involves the mixed experience of the other. Within contemporary discourse, a problematising of the signature now points to an acknowledgement of others' reading of a work; of collaborative efforts; and also to a critique of the commodity value system (including dealer galleries) in which artworks circulate.

*Leoni:* Your intimate involvement with every aspect of the work speaks from that action.

*Margaret:* The thumb print was another process. Stephen and I were trying to work it out and eventually he said "let's just stick our fingers on it". I couldn't understand it initially, maybe because it was I, not him, that had gone through the process of getting those images printed on precious paper and then they had to be wrapped in tissue paper and kept clean, and then – after all that – to stick our dirty hands on them! It took me an hour to see how it could work. Once I understood it, I could see it was obviously right and fantastic and we went ahead with it.

**Leoni:** On the one hand your work is very carefully crafted and on the other hand you allow people in and things happen and objects become messed up. There is also another contrast in your work as on the one hand it is very clean and precise and carefully considered and then on the other hand it contains a dangerous element. One example is the suggestion of decapitation in the work that you are planning to make at Sydney College of the Arts. In *Red Check* there is also a suggestion of blood and violence to the body.

**Margaret:** I agree there is the suggestion of violence, but the violence is not in what I do, it is rather what the work reveals within the situation that I am engaging with. For example, the reason why I thought to call the proposed SCA work you mentioned *Decapitate* is because I expect that when the object/structure gets made – which is a high, wide box lying down on the floor – we would only see other people’s heads when we look across it. (See plan in image 16.) I can’t be sure what it will be until it is actually made, but floating heads in the gallery seem appropriate because that is what a gallery does to the body. Mostly, a gallery asks one to come in only with one’s head or eyes and the rest of the body is not essential in itself. I am hoping that the work will reveal the nature of a gallery, namely that it only needs us in a ‘decapitated’ state.

**Leoni:** In *Red Check* the suggestion of violence comes about through the movement and actions of people. Do you think that recreated the energy of the 60s, which sometimes led to dangerous consequences but nevertheless conveyed a sense of urgency and commitment?

**Margaret:** The day after the opening it certainly looked as if there had been a massacre, and people had actually gone fairly berserk the night before. It reminded me not so much of the dangers of the political activism of the 60s and 70s itself, as of the dangers that activism was trying to take a stand against; of the political system that produced the massacres of, say, Richard Nixon and Pinochet. The Tin Sheds political movement partly rose out of the local situation of Darlington, a suburb with many little cottages, which the state government gave to Sydney University, which then bulldozed a lot of the area and people had to leave. People obviously don’t live there anymore now; it just consists of grass and institutional buildings. A few buildings, especially an historical school building, were saved, as I understand it, by community activism and the green bans of the union movement. So, I would see the violence as referring to the destruction caused by this progress, and that that destruction was largely of the personal; because it was the small dwellings, small living places, that were taken over by the institutional power of the university, which, ironically or revealingly, was mainly done by the architecture department.

With the white cloths smeared with red, and the wiping of hands and washing of feet, it also had a religious or ceremonial character – perhaps referring to the transitions of the creation and destruction of communities; the destruction of that building and what it represents; and the re-establishment of a new Tin Sheds gallery in another building, which is yet another step further away from what the actual tin sheds represented in the beginning.

**Leoni:** Thinking about that work, it is interesting how the vertical and horizontal act in your work. You have the horizontal playing field or picnic on the ground. It is low down and everybody can walk around on it and be active on it. But there is also the vertical – in that case represented by the swings – and this vertical is associated with the whole history of the visual, with us standing up and looking at something.

*Margaret:* Yes, I can see what you are saying. The swing of course is vertical when still, but it becomes diagonal when it is being used; and at the opening, people were swinging on them two at a time, standing up. Sometimes the swings were nearly horizontal, when people were trying to hit the rafters with their feet. Also, because there are two swings, and not three, people would sit on them in the weeks after the opening and have long conversations, swinging backwards and forwards.

**Leoni:** It is interesting how the acts of sitting and swinging disrupted the vertical and horizontal duality.

*Margaret:* I love the swinging business. There is so much in it. You go off into your head with your body. You leave the ground and you swing up there, taking a huge risk in flinging yourself through the air like that with such faith in the common old swing that you'll come down again in one piece.

**Leoni:** You consider the space outside the space in which you are working; thinking about the relationships between inside and outside.

*Margaret:* It has something to do with your earlier question about drawing. It's got to do with the power of our minds, of imagining and thinking and seeing and working out, but in relation to the space of our body. The drawn line is done with the body but it is directed by the mind, so it has to do with the mind's engagement in the world that the body occupies – drawing with chalk on the ground is like doing algebra, it's a process of working out. With the work proposed for the SNO (Sydney Non Objective) Gallery, which is related to *Decapitate*, I want to make a connection between the space outside, which we can only see, and the space inside, which we physically occupy. Looking through the window of the back room (see image 17), we see sloping roofs close up as well as in the distance, plus we see birds and sky. These roofs are only visually accessible to us. By constructing and positioning a box with a sloping top in the centre of the room, leaving a door-width to walk around it, we may feel like we are embedded with a form which is both roof and room together, though I will have to wait to see it to work out what that does to our sense of space.

**Leoni:** You are also making the point that what is happening in the gallery has some implications for what is outside the gallery?

*Margaret:* Yes, that's right. Sometimes that is to do with the fact that we are physically in the gallery space but capable of seeing or imagining a wider space. In an earlier Tin Sheds work I did something which I just realised is slightly like the proposed SNO work. I brought into the gallery the positions – in relation to the front footpath – of the front walls of the buildings that had existed in the past on that site and on the two neighbouring sites on each side. Those sites are numbers 150-158 City Road, which is what I called the work. They were collected together in the gallery over the top of each other, marked by differently-coloured masking tape. I was thinking of the gallery as potentially a place which can protect things from the destructive processes outside. The gallery is a place we occupy but it is a different sort of space; it's more protective in some respects and the rules that apply in the gallery are different from those applying outside.

**Leoni:** You seem to have a rich and ambiguous relationship with the gallery because on the one hand it is the white cube that you want to mess up and subvert. You also feel that it can 'decapitate' us but at the same time it protects certain things and you continue to engage with it.

**Margaret:** What I object to about the white-cubing of buildings is that it is an attempt to pretend that the building is not there. It pretends that real space does not exist and that a gallery is not part of that real space.

In "The Gallery is the Message" (1992), Roberta Smith discusses the acts of artists who have treated the **gallery** as artistic material rather than simply as a clean and well-lighted place to show art in. Such acts have – amongst other things – questioned the role of the gallery as a neutral space; as a space for purely aesthetic transactions; as a space apart from everyday life; and as a decontextualising chamber. Yves Klein's empty gallery (1960); Arman's gallery filled with tons of garbage (1960); Lucas Samaras' bedroom contents in a gallery (1964); Walter De Maria's three feet of solid dirt in a gallery (1968); Silvia Kolbowski's placement of the selling apparatus of the gallery in centre stage (1992); and Tirkrit Tiravanija's foregrounding of the clerical tasks and physical labour going on behind the office doors of galleries are cases in point.

Roberts' projects make us aware of the connections between the gallery and the world it is part of (see for example image 17). Her work is sometimes not presented in a gallery at all (see for example image 11). Furthermore, her installations invite the corporeal involvement of her audience and this in itself threatens the very nature of the art gallery so predicated on acts of looking (not touching) and retaining the docility of the body. In *Installation Art: A Critical History* (2005), Claire Bishop writes: "Rather than imagining the viewer as a pair of disembodied eyes that survey the work from a distance, installation art presupposes an embodied viewer whose senses of touch, smell and sound are as heightened as their sense of vision. This insistence on the literal presence of the viewer is arguably the key characteristic of installation art...[and] the space, and the ensemble of elements within it [including the viewer] are regarded in their entirety as a singular entity." (6)

**Leoni:** So, you are against taking the gallery out of time, space and place; against aesthetising, de-politicising and de-contextualising the work?

**Margaret:** Yes, I am objecting to the passive acceptance of the conventions of gallery space and art space. It has a potential which some artists have used in creative ways. My complaint is that people ignore that potential time and time again by not trying to take on some responsibility or control of the gallery. Even though it may be difficult and revolutionary to actually change the relationship between the space of art and the gallery, and the space outside of it; using the conventions in critical ways is still valuable.

**Leoni:** Tell me about the furniture again because there were two projects in which they were used, the *Reception (Jean Bellette's Studio)* photographic work mentioned earlier and then where they were hanging from the ceiling in 2005 and called *Objects to Be Saved* in the Gonsky Studio at Bundanon (see images 18 and 19 for a view and a detail).

*Margaret:* I didn't actually decide to work with furniture. It is just the coincidence of Conny's reception desk, the Hill End furniture, and then later finding myself in the Gonsky studio at Bundanon with a lot of things, the bigger ones being furniture. At Bundanon, I had been reading about Gordon Matta-Clark and the way he seemed to me to love to convert occupiable space into art-space, by tearing great holes in buildings, scaring the wits out of his viewers. In a more conventional way, the Gonsky studio, which was once a barn, part of the farm there at Bundanon, had also been converted into a less inhabitable space, an art studio. In *Objects to Be Saved*, I attached the objects occupying this potentially dangerous space of art to the remnants of the barn, to the two beams which the conversion could not eliminate, thus saving them. I myself just escaped out the door, but maybe I should have built a shelter for myself on the beams. It was an experiment with how I could distinguish between these two types of space.

I guess I am just using furniture because it occupies space like we do. The Hill End furniture work was partly a joke about site-specificity, because the white shape is conventionally site-specific when it's in Conny's gallery, because that is its place of origin; and by taking it to Hill End I was taking it somewhere else, which, conventionally, reduced its site-specificity. It is a form of migration as it leaves its home and goes to another place where it settles in, meets the other furniture that had arrived much earlier, and begins to become part of that new site as much as a visitor to it, and therefore begins the process of being site-specific again.

**Leoni:** This also happens with the First Church of Otago in Dunedin, a structure we discussed during your visit here.

*Margaret:* Right, that's right: placement of an introduced object somewhere begins to alter the site to accommodate it.

**Leoni:** So, would you say that site-specificity is always relative in terms of time?

*Margaret:* It is in the sense that I have just been talking about it. However, I feel ambivalent about that word 'site-specific' because its meaning has been so reduced by over-use. I think its underlying interest to me is that it recognises the space that we occupy and claims it has some significance. There are two different approaches to site-specificity - one focusing on the particular way in which a place is occupied, and the other on its physical occupiability in contrast with non-concrete space within an image or plan. Both are good to work with, but the latter is the more important.

**Leoni:** Still, you engaged with those pieces of furniture at Hill End as if they were site-specific.

*Margaret:* Yes, but the cottage at Hill End is partly defined now as a collection site for displaced objects, giving it a ready-made capacity to problematise some aspect of site-specificity. The furniture items in the cottage and studio seemed to come from random sources. They were presumably collected from various places, of which there is now probably no record. They each had different associations - the one with eight legs has a Middle Eastern architectural character to it, in my mind, and the table and four chairs seem comfortably English. They are like migrants, but they belong in the Hill End cottage more than the white shape because

they have been there longer. It was a strange coincidence to find them there as the object that I in turn brought with me was also a bit of furniture. It took me a while of working there to see that connection and how I could use it.

**Leoni:** You talked about “giving agency to space”.

*Margaret:* Yes, that idea came from the work that I had done with Horst Kiechle which is on hold at the moment. In this work I was interested in documenting the significance of three-dimensional space in the process of making a drawing. It is a system – we put a straight line and a real space together to see what they make. And we see they make various shapes. That shape is produced by the space, which is what I mean by giving it agency. We have a plan for a project in which we set the parameters for other people to select a building, measure it up, and provide some sort of documentation about the space – like one would for a person represented in a catalogue for a big group show. There they might have had a photograph and a little bit of text about the person. In this case we would ask for a photograph of the space, the room or building and a little information about that building and why they chose it. So the space has a sort of – excuse me tending to anthropomorphise – significance in the world and that is where the term “agency” becomes important. The space partly determines the line, what the bend of the line will be. This work entails collaboration with a space. I’ve always thought of my work as collaboration with a space, because the space partly determines the work.

**Leoni:** Would you like to comment on installation and its documentation; about the difficulty of working in and with space and then documenting and showing the work through photographic images?

*Margaret:* I guess it is ironic because presumably one of the reasons why installation evolved, and probably why I discovered I liked doing it, was because it was undermining the dominance of the image. An image just selects one small aspect – what something looks like – and presents that as the whole. Everything else is deleted. The problem is not so much that reduction, but that, in Western culture, the image dominates, and what is excluded from the image, the space we occupy, is then devalued. Installation can undermine that by re-asserting the value of the space we occupy. But then, when you document the installation again in a photograph, you convert it back into an image, which is the very thing it set out to undermine.

“In the contemporary Western cultural value system, the space of representations is valued more highly than the space we physically occupy. That does not mean to say that the latter has no value at all, but that the space of representation (such as within an **image**) is regarded as more significant. The effect of this is an underlying acceptance of the destruction of physical space.” (Roberts, 2006: in conversation) Henri Lefebvre makes a distinction between “representations of space” and “representational space” in *The Production of Space* (1974/1991: 33-50). For him, “representations of space” are abstract, conceptual and constructed by the dominant ideology in a capitalist society, in which they impose order through frontal relations (including the space within

images). Lefebvre frames "representational space" as directly lived space which does not conform to imposed order: "it speaks...has an affective kernel...and thus immediately implies time...[it is] situational or relational, because it is essentially qualitative, fluid and dynamic." (42) Lefebvre then identifies a third possibility as "spatial practices" which mediate between the two registers mentioned above. According to him, these practices bring the two opposites together in a dialectical interaction. One could argue here that Roberts' work inside the institutionalised spaces of the gallery and the representation of space implied in her two-dimensional images on the one hand; as against her corporeal disruption of the gallery idiom and her unease about the two-dimensional image in her practice, constitute responses to Lefebvre's challenge towards what he calls "spatial practices".

In *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (1994), Martin Jay discusses the primacy of the frontal, distancing, visual sense in Western culture. He refers to an essay by Hans Jonas entitled "The Nobility of Sight" in which the author contends that sight "is preeminently the sense of simultaneity, capable of surveying a wide visual field at one moment. Intrinsically less temporal than other senses such as hearing or touch, it thus tends to elevate static Being over dynamic Becoming, fixed essences over ephemeral appearances..." (24) Roberts' practice creates spaces in which this 'imbalance' can be corrected through the play of bodies in space. 'Playing' with the image provided by the artist in her projects is not merely recreational, but primarily a critical act. Simona Livescu (2003) invites us to consider the seriousness of 'play' in its critical mode with reference to Johan Huizinga's writing on ludic play: "The spirit of play... is, as a [critical] social impulse, older than culture itself and pervades all life like a veritable ferment. Ritual grew up in sacred play; poetry was born in play and nourished on play; music and dancing were pure play ... We have to conclude, therefore, that civilization...played. It does not come from play...it arises in and as play, and never leaves it." (Huizinga:1938/1950: 173) Roberts plays with the image, handles the image, strives towards "spatial practices" which mediates between Lefebvre's notion of the dominance of "representations of space" and his argument for "representational space" as lived by the embodied subject.

**Leoni:** Is that positive or negative for you, or is it just part of the process?

**Margaret:** It is just ironic I guess. It means that the next step is that I will have to work out a way of dealing with the image again, and so I keep going on in circles. The image is the problem, somehow, or at least the way it dominates is a problem. It is connected to what is wrong with Western culture, which is the devaluing of the space that we occupy. That is the space outside the image, the space that gets overshadowed by the image. We can't change the culture that much. We can just keep attacking the bits that are wrong. That's all you can do.



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- 1 Margaret Roberts, *Red Check*, 2003 (before the opening), photograph: Chris Fortescue.
- 2 Margaret Roberts, *Red Check* (during the opening), photograph: Jan Carter.
- 3 Margaret Roberts, *Red Check* (during the opening), photograph: Jan Carter.
- 4 Margaret Roberts, *Red Check* (after the opening) photograph: Chris Fortescue.
- 5 Cameron Emerson-Elliott, Emma Nicholson & Kathryn Ryan, storeroom remnants of feet cleaning performance in Margaret Roberts, *Red Check*, photograph: Margaret Roberts.
- 6 Margaret Roberts, *Red Check* 2003 (after the opening) photograph: the artist



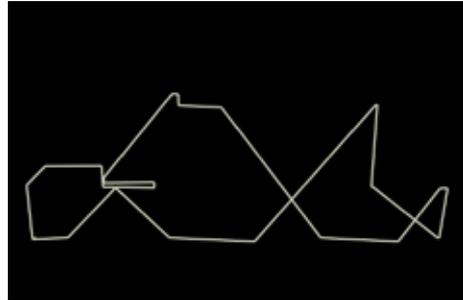
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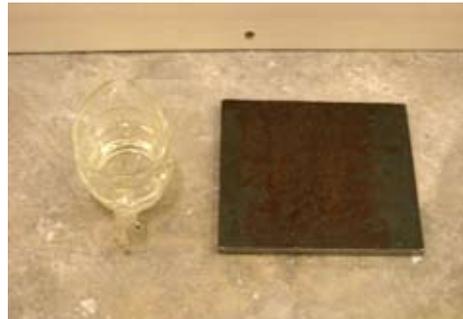
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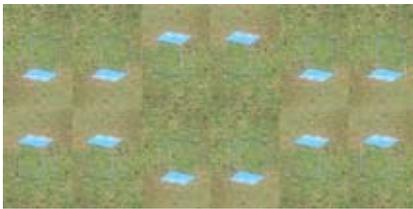
- 7 Margaret Roberts, *Reception (Jean Bellette's Studio)* documentation (6) 2003. Photographic print.
- 8 Margaret Roberts, *Reception (Jean Bellette's Studio)* documentation (11) 2003. Photographic print.
- 9 Margaret Roberts in collaboration with Abby Little, Debi Thompson, Jane Venis and Ewa Zlotkowska, *Infinity Line*, Foyer Gallery Otago Polytechnic School of Art, 2000, photograph: Margaret Roberts.
- 10 Horst Kiechle & Margaret Roberts, documentation (horse) of *Infinity Line* in the Foyer gallery of the Otago Polytechnic as seen from directly above the gallery.
- 11 Margaret Roberts, *Promise*, in Civic in: DOMAIN, temporary public art project, ANU School of Art in Canberra, 2003, photograph: Denis Wilson.
- 12 Margaret Roberts, *Unmade History (William Anastasi, Sink, 1963)*, 2005, Rocketart, Newcastle, New South Wales, photograph: the artist.



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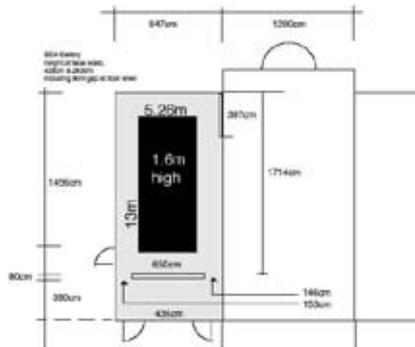
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- 13 Margaret Roberts, *Untitled (red corner)* 1991, photograph: Chris Fortescue.
- 14 Margaret Roberts, *Untitled (chalk drawing)* 1994, photograph: the artist.
- 15 Margaret Roberts & Stephen Sullivan, *Cat's Cradle*, 2005, inkjet print.
- 16 Detail of plan of Sydney College of the Arts Gallery with *Decapitate* proposal.
- 17 View from back window of Sydney Non Objective Centre, Marrickville.
- 18 Margaret Roberts, *Objects to be Saved*, Gonsky Studio, Bundanon, 2005, photograph: the artist.
- 19 *Objects to be Saved* (detail).

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