

'SURVEYABLE BY A RE-ARRANGEMENT': WITTGENSTEIN,  
GRAMMAR AND SCULPTURAL ASSEMBLAGE

by

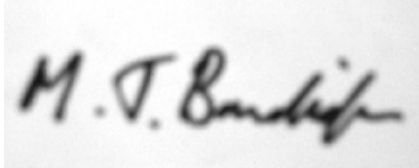
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Thesis submitted to the University of Edinburgh in fulfilment  
of the requirements of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

November 2011

I certify that (a) the thesis has been composed by the candidate, (b) the work is the candidate's own, and (c) that the work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification except as specified.

Signed

A rectangular image showing a handwritten signature in black ink on a light-colored background. The signature is written in a cursive style and appears to read "M. J. Bowdidge".

Michael Bowdidge

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## **Abstract**

Certain aspects of sculptural assemblage remain largely unexamined in an academic context. I contend that this mode of practice is not in need of theorisation, but that it can fruitfully be brought into dialogue with philosophy. Doing so may shed light upon assemblage and the contextual thinking which frames it.

I undertake the re-evaluation of this medium by means of a reflexive engagement with the processes and concerns of my own assemblage practice. By detailing the shifts and movements of my own making, I explore the tensions and connections inherent in the historical development of this media.

I discuss a connection (or family resemblance) between aspects of my sculptural practice and Ludwig Wittgenstein's methods of grammatical disruption and displacement. I argue that thinking about sculptural assemblage grammatically provides a way of re-framing the relationship between my artworks and their contexts. This in turn facilitates an examination of the practical and philosophical implications of the 'fitting-together-ness' of assemblage. It also brings into view a possible re-thinking of relations in a way that emphasises connective potential rather than difference or similarity.

## Introduction

Don't apologise for anything, don't obscure anything, look and tell how it really is - but you must see something that sheds a new light on the facts (Wittgenstein, 1998, p.45).

This is an investigation into the context and possibilities of assemblage. These explorations are undertaken primarily in relation to the world of things and objects, rather than people or places, although sometimes my practice (and this project) overflows into these areas. I am interested in exploring the effects of displacement, or as the painter and collagist Max Ernst termed it, 'the cultivation of the effects of a systematic putting out of place' (1948, p.21).

Ernst knowingly alludes to a line taken from the nineteenth century poetic novel *Les Chants de Malodor* by Comte de Lautréamont (Isidore Ducasse): 'Beautiful as the chance meeting upon a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella' (1874, pp.289-290). Ernst's phrase clarifies and simplifies Ducasse's original, but what is lost is the excitement of juxtaposition.

While this activity plays a major part in my sculptural practice, my interest extends beyond juxtaposing objects to include the consideration of how things come together and fit together. My work is driven by a longstanding and fundamental sense of excitement about the visual richness of everyday stuff and its potential for recombination and reconfiguration. This approach echoes that of the 'bricolage' described by the anthropologist and ethnologist Claude Lévi Strauss, as 'the rules of [the] game are always to make do with 'whatever is at hand' and 'elements are collected or retained on the principle that 'they may always come in handy'' (1966, p.11).

That is not to say that I find all everyday objects potentially useful (or attractive). The choices I make rest upon a process of contingent discrimination, which takes into account what has been useful previously and what seems like it might be useful in the future, yet still remains open to possibility and surprise. There are no hard and fast rules for this process, only a general set of guiding principles subject to constant change, negotiation and revision as they apply to specific objects.

I choose the term 'assemblage' deliberately, informed by the historical origins and use of this word in relation to contemporary object-based sculptural practice. For the past ten years I have felt a steadily increasing need for a deeper understanding of my creative practice and its broader context. It felt appropriate to reach out towards this new understanding from *within* my practice, to develop 'an experiential approach to theory *from within practice*, rather than a discursive approach *outside* of practice' (Susan Melrose, 1995, quoted in Paul Clarke, 2003).

Artist and academic Derek Horton's practice-based doctoral research on assemblage focused primarily on the extent to which 'material objects embody their history of use and exchange' (2003, p.2). He refers to a similar (yet subtly different) process of extension in relation to his doctoral project:

At one level the text is the history of an attempt to theorise the predominantly 'making' practice that preceded it, prompted it and continued during its production. But, importantly, it is also an element in the development and extension of that practice as text (p.6).

The difference between Horton's methods of research and my own, lies in his framing of the creation as text as part of an artistic practice rather than as a development of it.

Many years of making work shaped my thinking, providing me with a set of methods that I know and trust. These methods can be adapted to other ends, and so my research continues and develops the processes of finding, juxtaposing and reflecting which I have used for the past twenty years. Finding contextual materials for this dissertation has been akin to finding pieces of wood, lumps of metal and bits of broken mirror, so there is an element of bricolage at play in this thesis too.

In both areas of activity I have selected only that which I thought might prove useful. The texts I employ must have the potential to connect fruitfully with aspects of my sculptural practice or my written work. The materials that I use in my studio must hold the promise of similar utility. This 'assemblative' approach refers to that taken by the artist and academic Mirja Koponen (2005). She argues that 'theories, brought together in a novel dialogue' can be 'used as conceptual tools in discussing the ways art-making as method produces new questions' (p.1). She describes this approach as 'essentially assemblative, hybridizing and emancipatory in nature' (p.1).

The primary philosophical engagement of this project is with *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) by the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. I also refer to his texts *Culture and Value* (1998) and *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* (1967). This engagement came about through the recognition of a resemblance between features of his work and a parallel process in my artistic practice. It originally emerged from consideration of the following passage, in which Wittgenstein critiques an essentialist view of language:

For they see in the essence, not something that already lies open to view and that becomes surveyable by a re-arrangement, but something that lies *beneath* the surface. Something that lies within, which we see

when we look into the thing, and which an analysis digs out (1953, p.43).<sup>1</sup>

The idea of bringing something to visibility by re-arranging what is in plain sight strikes a powerful chord for me, as this is one of the primary aims of my sculptural practice. This has led me to study Wittgenstein's textual and contextual displacements and from there to the appropriation and reworking of his notion of grammar (and its disruption) as a means of re-thinking sculptural assemblage. There has also been a more general engagement with the movement of his philosophical practice and the emphasis which he places on clarity as a means of producing the understanding which consists of 'seeing connections' (1953, p.49).

I am by no means the first artist to connect with the work of Wittgenstein. The literary critic Marjorie Perloff suggests that it is perhaps 'the curious mix of mysticism and common sense... that has made Wittgenstein... a kind of patron saint for poets and artists' (1996, p.3). There is some truth in Perloff's statement, and I suspect that the breadth of artistic engagement with Wittgenstein's work stems at least in part from the particularities of his concerns (specifically his focus on the philosophy of language) and the depth and nature of his explorations.

Joseph Kosuth is probably the artist who has engaged most profoundly with Wittgenstein's thought, although his works tend to focus on what he terms 'a *play* with the meaning system of art' (1991, p.249) which draws heavily upon

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<sup>1</sup> The fourth edition of the *Philosophical Investigations* (2009) is a revised translation. In this version the word previously translated as 'rearrangement' is now translated as 'ordering'. This seems to change the sense of this passage significantly. 'Ordering' implies a moving away from a state of chaos, whereas 'rearrangement' suggests a new arrangement, but does not seem to carry any connotation of a change in the level of chaos present. While Peter Hacker and Joachim Schulte argue that their revision of G.E.M. Anscombe's earlier translation is more accurate than her version, hers is the text which inspired the connections I have made. All references to the *Philosophical Investigations* are to Anscombe's translation in the third edition unless otherwise stated.



the linguistic aspects of Wittgenstein's thought. My own interest arises in connection with the nature of Wittgenstein's methods, and the way in which he attempted to teach what the philosopher Marie McGinn terms 'a method or style of thought, rather than doctrines' (1997, p.10).

One of Wittgenstein's primary aims in the *Philosophical Investigations* (which is the text which provides the most considered deployment of his later thinking) is to 'battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language' (1953, p.47). According to the philosopher Beth Savickey, this is achieved by means of 'diverse and distinctive uses of ordinary language, questions, language-games, particular cases and analogies' (1999, p.3).

Wittgenstein's preoccupation with particularity, and his emphasis on solving particular philosophical problems is one which resonates for me. It connects with my underlying desire to engage with the specificities of the materials with which I work. In turn, this stance has shaped my research, and my desire for clarity, in relation to the revelation of my practice.

Certain aspects of the work of the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin also inform this thesis. Drawing upon *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981) and *Speech Acts and Other Late Essays* (1987), I use his concept of the dialogic context to frame the juxtapositional encounters with the works of other artists which play an important role in this thesis. A more general application of his notion of the dialogic underpins the relationship between my sculptural practice and the theory and philosophy with which it interacts, *i.e.* there is a desire for equal and reciprocal dialogue between these areas, which produces significant new knowledge.

This knowledge arises mainly in relation to my sculptural work but also occasionally in other areas (such as art history or philosophy). These contributions to knowledge can be generalised to differing degrees. This

variability arises from the individual nature of each insight and the specific disciplinary context in which it is embedded. I find myself broadly in agreement with Graeme Sullivan:

The important point... is that the plausibility of research findings grounded in observations or real world actions, events and artifacts relies on the acceptance that outcomes can be interpreted as connections between the 'specific and the specific.' In other words, what is seen to be real in one observed setting can have a parallel relevance in a similar situation (2005, p.59).

During this project my sculptural practice has evolved in a number of ways. My thesis articulates those changes, and the ways in which my writing and my making have shaped one another.

### **Writing and making**

My practice (and my desire for a deeper understanding of it through engagement with a research process) can be framed in the following Wittgensteinian terms:

The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something, because it is always before one's eyes) (1953, p.50).

In their edited collection of writing on practice-based art research *Thinking Through Art*, Katy Macleod and Lin Holdridge posit that:

The predominant preoccupation of the art research community since the early 1990s has been the making/writing issue and the complex implications surrounding it (2005, p.2).

In an earlier paper, Macleod argues that in relation to fine art there are 'three types of higher degree practice research'. She defines them as follows:

...type A which is defined as positioning a practice; type B defined as theorising a practice and type C which has been given the in-progress definition of revealing a practice (2000, online).

Macleod's taxonomy is useful<sup>2</sup>, as consideration of these categories provides a means of bringing the specific qualities of a research project into focus. My work overlaps and overflows these categories to some extent, but the third (type C) offers the best approximate fit. Macleod's observations of the interaction between writing and making in these projects are also of interest:

After the completion of one phase of the written text... the ensuing work on the art project would destabilise what had been achieved to the point that when the researcher returned to the next phase of research on the written text... the text had to be completely reconceived... Thus, the written text was instrumental to the conception of the art projects but the art projects themselves exacted a radical rethinking of what had been constructed in written form (Macleod, 2000, online).

Macleod paints a compelling picture of an active relationship between the written and artistic components of a programme of research. It articulates something of the way in which these activities have interacted in relation to the revelation (and development) of my sculptural practice during this project.<sup>3</sup> A process of dialogue and destabilisation between making and writing

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<sup>2</sup> In relation to taxonomies of practice-based research, Macleod and Holdridge refer to the schema suggested by Christopher Frayling (1994) which they summarise as follows: 'research into art and design (historical, perceptual, cultural, iconographic *etc.*): research through art and design (materials, technological *etc.*) and research for art (*sic*)' (2005, p.4). Macleod and Holdridge suggest that Frayling's rewording of 'research for art' as 'research as art' in the foreword of their 2005 book provides a credible starting point for a reframing of this field. The utility of these taxonomies for the doctoral student should be considered against the background of their broader functionality, *i.e.* the way in which such schemas pragmatically facilitate the integration of art-as-research (or research-as-art) into wider academic contexts. Graeme Sullivan's useful in-depth appraisal of this subject professes a similar goal: 'to present a theory of visual arts practice as research' in order to rectify the undervaluation of artistic practice in academia and beyond (2005, p.xi).

<sup>3</sup> Derek Horton (2003, p.11) elaborates on the distinction between theory and practice: '...Neither are text and artwork, or word and object, synonymous with

can continue indefinitely, but the timetable of a PhD demands that (as Wittgenstein puts it) 'explanations come to an end somewhere' (1953, p.3).

What then takes place is the fitting together of the various written elements which have accrued, which allows for a movement to take place through them. This is not the movement of a linear narrative, but one which ranges backwards and forwards through the project. It must maintain sufficient compositional cohesion for the necessary connections between themes, areas and artworks to be made. The writing is active as it has been through the act of writing that a great deal of my thinking has been clarified.<sup>4</sup>

Chapter 1 of this thesis provides an initial demonstration of the methodological framework of the project. It does so by detailing the construction of one of my assemblages (*Upwards and Onwards*) and the dialogic connection between it and Robert Rauschenberg's *Monogram* (1955-1959). This relationship is subsequently expanded to include two versions of William Holman Hunt's painting *The Scapegoat* (1854-1855 and 1854-1856).

Chapter 2 broadens the dialogic context established in the first chapter through an examination of William Seitz' seminal 1961 exhibition *The Art of Assemblage*, and its relationship to the 2007 New Museum exhibition, *Un-monumental, the Object in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. I then contextualise my own practice in relation to these events. The medium of assemblage is subsequently considered in relation to Wittgenstein's notion of grammatical

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theory and practice. In considering the meaning and possibilities of theory and practice, practice cannot be seen as merely the physical body of work nor theory as the constellation of ideas and reflections, whether written, spoken or thought, which surround it.'

<sup>4</sup> For a summary of recent research into this phenomena (writing as thinking) and the Wittgensteinian roots of current cognitive integrationist thinking on this subject (*i.e.* that thinking of this type is as much constituted by the external manipulation of sentences as it is by neural processes) see Richard Menary in *Language Sciences* 29 (2007, pp.621–632).

investigation. This leads to an exploration of the parallels between his practice of grammatical disruption and my site-specific work, and the development of the notion of grammar and its disruption into a descriptive, iterative framework for understanding assemblages. The chapter ends with the consideration of a group of temporary assemblages which functioned as a lexicon of mimetic possibilities.

Chapter 3 begins with a reappraisal of the role of representation in historical assemblage and my own practice, and brings that group of ideas into dialogue with Wittgenstein's work on aspect, with a particular focus on the figure of the Duck-Rabbit. This juxtaposition sheds further light upon the role of the animal in my practice, while the consideration of the proximal otherness of animals and furniture brings an aspect of the later thought of Wittgenstein to reciprocal visibility. Finally, two temporal facets of assemblage are revealed as a result of the specific qualities of a set of sculptures and the way in which they were exhibited.

Chapter 4 details my investigations of the capacity of personally significant materials to connect with the past. I describe and discuss artworks which were constructed from objects inherited from family members or from materials gifted to me by my father. I show that working in this way can reveal hitherto unsuspected intergenerational patterns of bricolage. This chapter culminates in the description of *The Long Haul*, an assemblage which crystallised my desire for connection and 'bringing forward' at formal and personal levels, and in relation to the wider consideration of the medium.

Chapter 5 begins with an examination of 'fit' in two of my earlier, larger works. I then summarise the developments which led me to embark on my recent body of wall-based assemblages. In relation to these works I show the importance of 'putting out of place' as a strategy for bringing to light the 'sculpturality' of these objects, as well as the way in which the 'connective

aspect' made visible by certain materials brings to light the assemblative potential of everything else, much as the 'Duck-Rabbit' renders perceptible the way in which we habitually view everyday objects. The notion of grammar is also revisited with a view to articulating the grammatical disruptions particular to these works.



**Figure 1: Michael Bowdidge, *Upwards and Onwards* (2007)**





**Figure 2: Michael Bowdidge, *Elephant* (2005)**

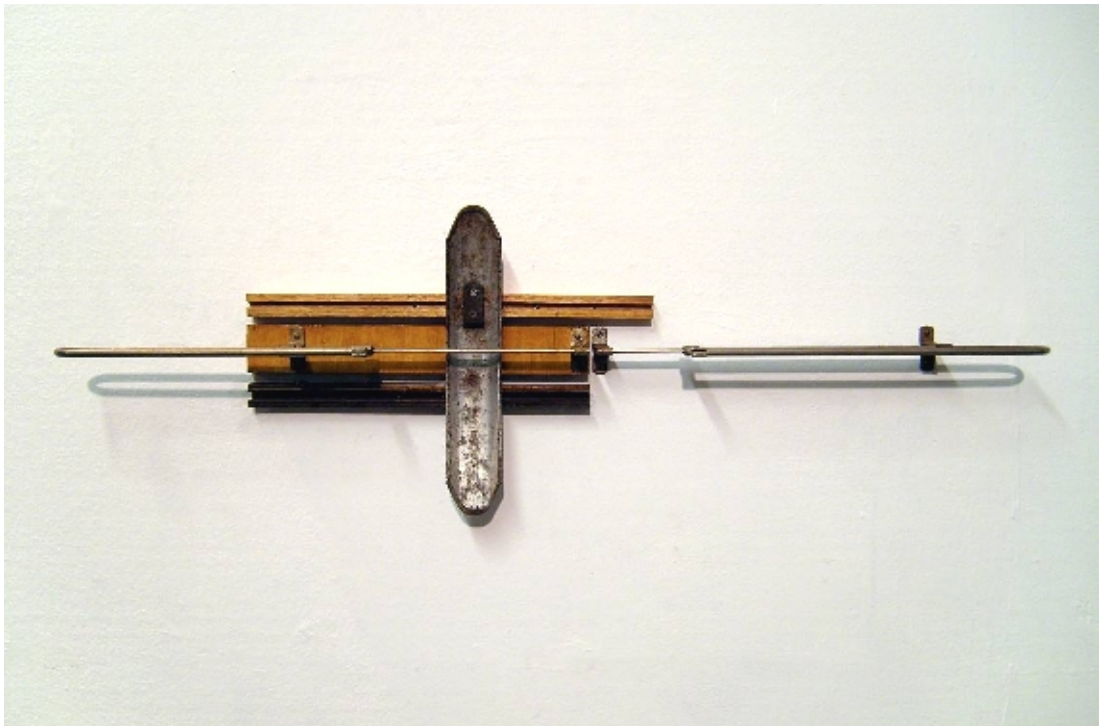




**Figure 3: Michael Bowdidge, *Huey, Dewey & Louie* (2005)**



**Figure 4: Michael Bowdidge, *Caught* (2006)**



**Figure 5: Michael Bowdidge, *Conditional* (2006)**



**Figure 6: Robert Rauschenberg, *Monogram* (1955-59)**





**Figure 7: William Holman Hunt, *The Scapegoat* (1854-1856)**



**Figure 8: William Holman Hunt, *The Scapegoat* (1854-1855)**

## **1. Three and a half goats, two sunsets and a piece of red tape**

One of the lessons for art which we can derive from the *Philosophical Investigations* is that I believe the later Wittgenstein attempted with his parables and language-games to construct theoretical *objects-texts* which could make recognisable (*show*) aspects of language that, philosophically, he could not exert explicitly. This aspect of philosophy, *as a process to be shown*, resists the reification of the direct philosophical assertion (Kosuth, 1991, p.249).

In this chapter I outline part of the methodological framework employed in this project. I use the work of Mikhail Bakhtin to open up a space for the dialogic investigation of the relationship between four specific works of art. These matters lead to a bringing-to-visibility of the movement of my research (and an additional unexpected but fruitful discovery).

### **The movement of research**

Estelle Philips and Derek Pugh (1987, pp.82-83) suggest that doctoral research can be represented as a conical structure in which the project moves from larger to smaller degrees of uncertainty (represented by the 'shrinking' of the cone over time). Although the figure is 'quite crude' (p.82) and intended only as a rough guide, it has had a certain utility in relation to my own research process.

Philips and Pugh's diagram emphasises the temporal movement of the research process over time (much as Macleod's notion of a 'see-saw' between writing and making does). The fact that it uses a form (in this case a cone) to do so is of particular interest. As a sculptor it seems natural to me to view my

research as having a 'shape' and a certain degree of plasticity, which in turn implies movement, both of the researcher and of the 'materials'.<sup>5</sup> This process of movement and development can be understood at least partially within the reflective framework described by Donald Schön (1983). He sought:

...an epistemology of practice implicit in the artistic, intuitive processes which some practitioners do bring to situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness and value conflict (p.49).

John Furlong emphasises Schön's insistence that such an epistemology must come out of the 'careful examination of what professionals actually *do*' (2003, p.22) and describes the framework which Schön develops from these observations as follows:

[a] threefold definition of professional practice... The three different levels are 'knowing-in-action', in which thinking is entirely implicit, embedded in the act of doing itself; 'reflection-in-action' when, because of some problem or difficulty, we draw our interpretive processes to the level of consciousness but without stopping what we are doing; and 'reflection-on-action', which takes place after the event, when we try to articulate... the processes that were going on in our actions (p.22).

Schön's writing stems from his desire to rehabilitate professional practice as a result of a 'crisis of confidence in the professions' (1983, p.4) in the late 1960s and early 1970s. He continues to provide a useful way of thinking about the processes of practice (and, by extension, contemporary practice based research),<sup>6</sup> however Furlong suggests that:

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<sup>5</sup> My view of the plasticity of doctoral research can be interestingly contrasted with Robert Rauschenberg's comments on beginning a collaboration with the engineer Billy Kluver: 'Normally I work very much by hand, I rely on the immediate sight and actuality of a piece. Moving on to theory and its possibilities was like being handed a ghost bouquet of promises'. Quoted in Barbara Rose (1987, p.67).

<sup>6</sup> Schön's continuing relevance is shown by Terry Atkinson and Guy Claxton's description of their own edited collection of writing in this field (*The Intuitive Practitioner*, 2003) as 'a reconceptualization and rehabilitation of Schön's... original concept of the reflective practitioner' (p.4).

The notion of reflection has proved a weak defence in the battle to support professionalism. Professionals themselves may believe that writers such as Schön capture more of the complexities of their day-to-day lives than the traditional theory based accounts of a previous generation. But when it comes to ever more invasive forms of central control, the argument that professional knowledge is essentially personal and situationally specific has not proved particularly robust (2003, p.23).

It should be remembered that this criticism is in relation to the utility of Schön's theory for defending (professional) practice in a wider, perceived as hostile, environment. The relevance of his work as a framework for the thinking of practice by practitioners is not called into question here.

The work of Schön provides a useful schema for thinking about my research. Throughout my career as an artist I have worked (albeit unknowingly) within a reflective framework like that of Schön. The benefit of becoming aware of these classifications is that I have become more conscious of my own processes. This has increased my propensity to reflect as a means of problem solving (in relation to my thesis and my creative practice).

Schön articulates a process that 'spirals through stages of appreciation, action and re-appreciation' (1983, p.132). This does not completely account for my experience of the non-linear 'movement' of creative practice (or practice based research). This is partly because of his focus on a somewhat instrumental notion of 'problem-solving'. For me, the inclination of practice (and its extension as research) is to wander and meander (purposefully) in directions that are of interest but which may not always make sense in relation to a more linear model of progression. To quote Wittgenstein, 'my thoughts were soon crippled if I tried to force them on in any direction against their natural inclination' (1953, p.vii).

I have been 'following my nose' for my entire career, and I realised the importance of continuing to do this at an early stage of this project. Over the last six years I have explored a number of different sculptural concerns: movements towards and away from representation, differences in size and complexity of manufacture, differences in placement (*i.e.* whether they are wall-based or free-standing) and the degree to which the works have been site-specific.

A gradual clarification of my aims and interests forms the argument of my thesis and manifests itself (for example) in the predominance of wall-based work towards the end of my research. Questions posed by one piece are not necessarily answered by the next one. It often takes me a significant amount of time to reflect upon and understand the questions which were asked and the answers that were uncovered. While that is happening, something else will have caught my eye and another piece will have begun.

This movement through an area (or landscape) of interest is comparable to Wittgenstein's description of his own 'journeyings' in the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), wherein he was compelled:

...to travel over a wide field of thought criss-cross in every direction. – The philosophical remarks in this book are, as it were, a number of sketches of landscapes which were made in the course of these long and involved journeyings... The same or almost the same points were always being approached afresh from different directions, and new sketches made (p.vii).

Wittgenstein appropriates the activity of the artist to describe his philosophical practice. A spatial metaphor of this kind facilitates an understanding of the processes of research. It allows the practitioner to grasp that the ebb and flow of the importance of the 'features' of the project (which can seem disconcerting) are merely by-products of a movement in 'a field of thought'.

Dead ends and wrong turnings are as much to be expected as sudden recognitions and crystallisations of thought.

Henry Staten (1986) seeks to link aspects of the thought of Wittgenstein and Jacques Derrida. He suggests that the later philosophical practice of Wittgenstein can be profitably viewed as a 'deconstructive syntax... that continuously varies and finds new directions' (p.65). He suggests that this movement is driven by '[a] renewed perplexity about what he himself [Wittgenstein] has already resolved, a loosening up of the bonds of syntax of what has already been written in order to write anew' (p.65).

This 'wandering', described by Wittgenstein and reframed by Staten, is in resonance with a similar movement in my research. I did not set out at the beginning of this project with the conscious intention of using this methodology. Instead I have come to recognise, over the passing of time, that this kind of 'movement' bears a resemblance to something in the process of my research, which itself extends from the methods of my artistic practice. Such a movement might also be framed as a series of 'tacitly related' experiments (or investigations) of various aspects of the production of assemblage sculpture.

This insight into the 'movement' of my project became visible to me through reflection upon my assemblage *Upwards and Onwards* (2007, Figure 1, p.19) and the circumstances of its production. This in turn led me to connect the characteristic trajectory of my work with the movement inherent in Wittgenstein's philosophical practice.

I did not make this artwork with the intention of 'illustrating' this insight. Rather it became apparent to me after I completed it that it appeared to 'give form to' and clarify 'the movement' of my research. In order to say more



about this it I must describe the processes and context in which the artwork was created.

### ***Upward and Onwards***

I assembled this sculpture in May 2007. It takes the following form: a small, folding, veneered dining table (partly stripped on one side) was placed at an angle across an old piece of board. The board rests upon a large handle on its underside (causing the board to slant slightly) and has a grid-like pattern of wooden beading on top. The table has six legs, three of which are placed on the board, while the other three remain on the floor. Affixed to the table at an angle is the central section of a discarded lectern, and into this are screwed four legs from an old coffee table. This sub-assembly is angled so that it aligns with the board on which one end of the table rests.

Up until this point my larger sculptures often consisted of two or three complete items of furniture assembled together. *Elephant*, 2005, *Huey, Dewey & Louie*, 2006 and *Caught*, 2006 are examples of this kind of work (Figures 2, 3 and 4, pp.20-21) whereas smaller, wall-based works such as *Conditional* (2006, Figure 5, p.22) were usually created from a larger number of smaller components. I had been trying for several months to see if I could make this more complex (and for me more involving) approach work at a larger scale, but with little success.

The catalyst for the construction of *Upwards and Onwards* came from finding an abandoned lectern in a skip. I brought this object back to the studio and began to disassemble it. An initial reduction of things to their component level is often a part of my working process. This allows me to access specific components which I think may be useful.

James Hall (1994) identifies a similar desire to 'dismantle and re-assemble the real world so that all its component parts can be fully comprehended' in relation to the work of Robert Rauschenberg (p.206). To do so is to increase their potential for bricolage, as the number of potential reconstructions is multiplied by the fragmenting of the original object.

I removed the stained and somewhat tatty veneered chipboard top of the lectern as I was not particularly attracted to it, but retained the welded steel plate which it had been bolted to it, as this fitted into the shaft of the stand in a satisfying way. Next I removed the plastic feet which were screwed into the base of the lectern. Their removal also created the option of adding something else in their place.

As there were four holes, my first thought was to find a group of four things that would fit into them.<sup>7</sup> I had to hand (and 'in mind' as I had considered using them in another piece) a set of four conical, veneered coffee table legs with protruding threads at their bases. These were an exact match for the holes on the base of the lectern. The steel plate onto which the top of the lectern had been bolted was added to this by simply sliding it into the opposite end of the hollow shaft in its original position. The work completed at that stage would eventually become the top half of the finished sculpture, as far down as the table top, although this was not apparent to me then.

I came to a halt, unsure how I should proceed. The steel base plate, with four neatly drilled holes to which the discarded top section of the lectern had been bolted, provided the most obvious point of connection. I had considered (and tried) simply fixing the completed structure to the wall, but this did not seem

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<sup>7</sup> If I were to work with a similar piece of material again, I would now be tempted to fill each of these four holes with a different object, rather than with four identical objects, as I think that compositionally this would prove to be a more challenging (and thus for me a more interesting) task.

compositionally satisfying. As it was late and I could not see a way forward I decided to stop working on the piece and return to it another day.

I did not go back to the studio for several days, as I was preparing for a group tutorial with my supervisory team.<sup>8</sup> In that meeting it was agreed that I would begin writing my first draft chapter. I agreed enthusiastically, feeling excited that the project was moving into new territory. This development is relevant to my reflection on the finished sculpture.

That afternoon I returned to the studio in high spirits and started working on the sculpture again. I had discarded the idea of fixing it to the wall, and was looking instead for another object to connect with it. I tried several options, including a chair and various pieces of wood. I was growing frustrated with the process when my eye fell upon the small gate-leg dinner table which I had been using as a desk for the past few weeks.

I had found this table in the street outside the studio and decided to bring it in, not with a view to working with it creatively, but simply to use it as a piece of furniture. The table had been very badly stripped of its veneer on one leaf and on its top surface, and this had put me off of using it sculpturally, as it had looked spoiled. Although nothing about it had changed, the table now shifted in my perception from being a piece of furniture to a potential solution to the problem of how to continue the sculpture. By now I was sufficiently frustrated to be willing to overlook the qualities which had caused me to reject it as sculptural material initially.

I tried experimented with adding the table to the composition in various ways until I eventually settled upon an angling of the lectern/table leg upon the top of the table. Now it was obvious to me that this section was part of a larger,

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<sup>8</sup> At this point my supervisory team consisted of Professor John Newling, Dr Neil Turnbull and Dr Kevin Love. Dr Love has remained on my supervisory team after the transfer of this project to Edinburgh College of Art in 2008.

unrealised whole. This arrangement had a certain vitality to it; it looked like part of it was turning, or caught in motion. It also suggested that the finished sculpture might allude to an animal, possibly a goat or sheep, albeit one with unfeasibly large horns (or antlers).

This was partly because of the size and shape of the table and its feet, though the fact that there were six of them disrupted this notion slightly, and stopped the reading becoming too obvious (or settled). I had now started to see the partially removed veneer as being akin to a half sheared sheep. I liked the way that this 'creature' presented itself to the world differed depending on which side it was viewed from, with the top and one side raw and stripped, while from the other side the illusion of normality was preserved. 'Shedding a skin' as a metaphor for being re-born or transformed was also on my mind.

After fixing the 'horns' to the table (by drilling into the table and bolting them on) I was reasonably happy with the way the sculpture was taking shape. How it 'sat' upon the ground still appeared to be unresolved. It seemed to require a 'setting' – as if it needed to be in a 'slice' of its natural habitat (or an explicit context). I had in mind illustrations of animals seen in childhood books, where the context in which an animal is found is shown, usually by displaying an appropriate backdrop (*e.g.* part of a rocky hillside for a goat, or a section of jungle for a gorilla).<sup>9</sup>

I began to look around my studio for something which might fill this role. I soon settled upon the piece of board with the beaded grid upon it mentioned previously. This was an object which had been left over from a previous project. It was probably used for making patterns in either plaster or concrete, as the 'grid' pattern on its upper surface resembled brickwork, both in terms of scale and in the way that the rectangles created by the grid overlapped.

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<sup>9</sup> Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2006) suggest that the use of settings of this kind in contemporary Western sculpture is comparatively rare (p.243).

It occurred to me that it would be interesting to use the handle on its underside as a 'rest' for the board, allowing it to slope upwards. It then became apparent that the 'creature' would need to be placed half on and half off the board for reasons of stability, although this worked well compositionally too. I wanted to avoid 'marooning' the creature on an island, as had been the case when I had tried positioning it wholly on a larger wooden pallet. It felt important for the creature to be simultaneously 'in the world' and 'within its own world'.

Placing it in this way (half on and half off of the board) gave the impression of movement, allowing the 'creature' to climb a 'mountain' (or move from the world into its own pseudo-pictorial setting). Deciding to align the board with the thrust of the 'antlers/antennae' of the creature also provided a neat resolution to the formal dilemma inherent in the angling of the antlers in relation to the table top. Although the turning (or twisting) of the 'horns' had added vitality to the composition, it had still looked a little arbitrary to me – it needed something else to make sense of it, which the parallel angling of the base provided.

There is another way of looking at this: if the 'antlers' were turning or twisting, what were they turning or twisting in relation to? The answers to both formulations of this problem are the same but expressed differently – the 'antlers/antennae' twist to align with the new territory that they are 'moving into' and the alignment of the board with the sub-assembly provides a greater degree of compositional cohesion. As the eye moves down (or up) the sculpture, a 'twist 'away' is resolved by a further 'twist' back into alignment.

With the addition of the board, the sculpture appeared complete and the title came quickly to mind (*Upwards and Onwards*, Figure 1, p.19). This provided an appropriate description of the movement (and exaggerated physical

characteristics) of the horned animal alluded to in the work (that is to say, a 'moving forward', which is also a 'reaching out' and a 'climbing and turning to align with a new territory'). It also supplied a gently ironic commentary on the efficacy of such progress.

Several days later, I realised that this assemblage 'gave form to' and clarified 'the movement' of my research (in particular my contemporaneous move into a new phase of the project, *i.e.* agreeing with my supervisory team to begin writing). A note in my sketchbook (dated 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2007) shows that it was at this point in time that I recognised that *Upwards and Onwards* references Robert Rauschenberg's Combine *Monogram* (1955-59, Figure 6, p.22).

The obvious link here is that *Monogram* features a stuffed goat and *Upwards and Onwards* refers to (or nods in the direction of) a goat or goat-like creature.<sup>10</sup> It is possible to make connections between *Upwards and Onwards* and any number of artworks, sculptural and otherwise, but here I am specifically interested in the dialogic relationship between these two artworks and the light which they may shed on one another. I now want to say something about the term 'dialogic' within this thesis.

### **The dialogic context**

The term 'dialogic' was coined by the Russian philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975). It is a key concept in his work and comes to greatest prominence in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981). I use the term as shorthand for a methodological framework in which theory (or philosophy) and artistic discourse are placed in dialogue with each other on equal terms. They are seen as mutually transformative.

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<sup>10</sup> I am not making claims as to the representational efficacy (or otherwise) of my assemblages (or attempting to measure such a quality). I seek an ambiguity of form and content which allows multiple readings of the artwork.

Bakhtin use the term dialogic in several different ways: as one half of a couplet (along with the term 'monologic') describing texts which admit polyphony (that is to say, more than one voice) and as a more general descriptor for the process of dialogue. I focus on his recognition that there can be a dialogue between temporally separated texts. In *Speech Acts and Other Late Essays* he terms this 'the dialogic context':

There are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future). Even past meanings, that is, those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all) - they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue (1987, p.170).

This articulates the way in which the reading of an artwork (in any medium) can be 'shifted' by past or future work (in that medium or in others) which refers (explicitly or otherwise) to its predecessor. Changes in social and cultural context precipitate similar re-evaluations. Hence the Bakhtinian notion of unfinalizability.

Bakhtin also articulates temporality in relation to the work of art in terms of the 'chronotope'. He describes this as 'the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are expressed in literature.' Deborah Haynes (in Smith and Wilde, 2002, pp.292-301) defines the chronotope:

There is no experience outside of space and time, both of which always change. Subjectivity dictates that artists create objects that are always constituted differently. The fact that all conditions of experience are determined by space and time, which are themselves variable, means that every artwork exists in a unique chronotope (p.298).

There are broad similarities here to some of the points made in T.S. Eliot's essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1921), particularly in relation to the

idea of contemporary and historical art being capable of mutual transformation:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists... what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (p.42).

Haynes goes on to suggest that, in order to understand an artwork (particularly one from another era) it is necessary that 'a viewer... must recognize not only his or her chronotope but also the unique chronotopes of the artist or object' (p.298). Bakhtin does not clarify the extent to which the viewer must enter into the chronotope of the artist or object, or whether a more general awareness of the chronotypes of artist or object will suffice.

Despite this issue, the extent to which the viewer understands the historical context of a work's creation does not preclude the possibility of the work's reinterpretation in the light of subsequent production. This allows the past to be put into dialogue with the present, via the dialogic context. With this in mind, I argue that new work in the artistic medium of assemblage changes the ways in which historical works in the same medium can be read (and of course, *vice versa*) and that the 'dialogic context' provides a useful framework for the examination of these processes, opening up a space, to quote Eliot, 'in which two things are measured by each other' (1921, p.45).



## Robert Rauschenberg's *Monogram*

The superficial link between the artworks in question is that *Monogram* features a stuffed goat and *Upwards and Onwards* makes a visual reference to a goat or goat-like creature. It now seems appropriate to say something about the origins of *Monogram*.

Rauschenberg made his Combines over a relatively short period (1953-64). They hover somewhere between sculpture and painting, and incorporate found objects and pieces of collaged material, alongside the loose, gestural painting which Rauschenberg borrowed from Abstract Expressionism. H.H. Arnason (1969) suggests that:

[They] have their origins in the collages and constructions of [Kurt] Schwitters and some of the other Dadaists. His motivation and approach, however, are different not only in the great spatial expansion, but in the use of the topical, the specific association... this attempt to create a unity out of impermanent materials, topical events and an expressive brushstroke... gives his paintings their particular qualities (pp.579-80).

In *Monogram*, the displacement of the pictorial plane from the wall onto the floor questions and expands the notion of the pictorial, making use of sculptural 'in-the-roundness'. Despite this, many critics still place it within the tradition of painting (Arnason, 1969, O'Doherty, 1974 and Krauss, 1997). The emergence of collage (and assemblage) from early twentieth century painting rather than from sculpture may explain why critics tend to see *Monogram* as a painting, rather than thinking of it sculpturally (after Koed, 2006).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Erik Koed makes a compelling case for an account of the sculptural which relates to sculpture in the same way that the notion of the pictorial relates to painting, drawing and photography, without becoming a specific quality of any of those media. This can be summarised as follows: 'Only for sculptural works are the three-dimensional properties of the material art-object artistically relevant. A work will be sculptural, on this account, just to the extent that the use of the three-dimensional properties of materials functions as a medium' (2006, p.151).

The opposite is true of *Upwards and Onwards*, as this is an artwork that seeks to explore the pictorial from a sculptural perspective. In this case that exploration is undertaken in a free-standing, floor based context. *Upwards and Onwards* deals with the problems involved in the creation of a setting or framing device for an object (which is also part of the object).

*Monogram* reaches out from painting towards sculpture, while *Upwards and Onwards* performs an opposing manoeuvre from sculpture towards painting. Both artworks are informed by a proximal discipline which can be seen as 'other' in some sense. They meet in a common space of liminality. The dialogic consideration of the relationship between them brings this 'mirroring' of differences and similarities into play.

Thought of pictorially, the 'creature' in *Upwards and Onwards* is caught in a moment of transition as it moves onto the board (or into the 'frame', one might say). The goat in *Monogram* remains *within* the pictorial plane. It does not overlap the horizontal edges of the board on which it rests. It ruptures and obscures the integrity of the (displaced) pictorial plane vertically by being placed directly onto it. As Rosalind Krauss describes it, 'the stuffed goat... placidly bearing witness to the transformation of the visual surface into – as Rauschenberg puts it 'pasture' (1997, p.207).

### **'The generosity of finding surprises'**

The notion of Rauschenberg's goat as a creature which grazes upon images is by no means accidental. Krauss describes Rauschenberg's interest in what Brian O'Doherty terms 'the vernacular glance' (1974, p.198, quoted in Krauss, 1997, p.207) which she goes on to summarise as follows:

With its voraciousness, its lack of discrimination, its wandering attention, and its equal horror of both meaning and emptiness, this levelling form of perception... not only accepts everything – every piece of urban detritus, every homey object, every outré image – into the perceptual situation, but its logic decrees that the magnet for all these elements will be the picture surface (1997, p.207).

This passage describes the accretion of found materials in both artworks, but the materials in question have, in reality, been subjected to a much more rigorous process of selection than is indicated in Krauss' somewhat stylised account.

In a relatively recent interview with Rosetta Brooks (2005, online), Rauschenberg related his desire for materials (at the time of making the Combines) which were 'something other than what I could make myself' and also says that he 'wanted to use the surprise and the collectiveness and the generosity of finding surprises'. The critic Robert Hughes (2007, online) describes Rauschenberg's work as 'full of the pleasure of finding and using'. The precise criteria Rauschenberg used for choosing the materials which make up the Combines are difficult, if not impossible to establish with any degree of certainty.

In my own experience, the selection process that such materials undergo is a complex one in which several factors are important. There are practical considerations, such as whether I am able to return to the studio with my find, or whether it is small enough to carry with me. There is the question of whether the object is likely to prove useful or not. This is not necessarily defined by previous utilisation of similar objects (although that may play a part). Finally there is the question of whether the object is in some way attractive to me – it has to make me *want* to bring it back with me.

Here Lévi Strauss' notion of the 'bricoleur' comes back into play, as the collection of materials against which the new addition is weighed represent

'the contingent result of all the occasions there have been to renew or enrich the stock' (1966, p.11). Such decisions inform a process in which:

..[the] first practical step is retrospective. He has to turn back to an already existent set made up of tools and materials, to consider or reconsider what it contains and... engage in a sort of dialogue with it and, before choosing between them, to index the possible answers which the whole set can offer to his problem (1966, p.12).

Psychologist Paul Camic (2007) researched the creative use of found objects<sup>12</sup> and concluded that there are cognitive and emotional components within what he terms 'a found object process' (p.7):

Many responses included how looking for the object was important. Terms such as 'excitement', 'instantaneous surprise', 'joyous discovery', the 'adventure of looking for new treasures' and the 'moment of discovery' seem to indicate that both emotional arousal and cognitive engagement are aspects of this process (p.7).

These findings suggest that the reading of Rauschenberg's goat as a 'grazer' of (and for) found images and objects is a meaningful one. The ceaselessly foraging goat is placed at the centre of the artwork, making a witty and apt reference to the artist as bricoleur. Similarly, *Upwards and Onwards* can be read as a metaphorical re-enactment of movement (in artistic practice and doctoral research). Both artworks reflexively encode within themselves something of the processes and movements of the artistic practices which brought them into being.

A great deal has been said about *Monogram* and several threads in that discourse open up a space for (and contribute to) the dialogic consideration of the two artworks under discussion.

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<sup>12</sup> Camic undertook a qualitative survey amongst users of found objects, including visual arts practitioners, teachers and academics. A Grounded Theory analysis was then undertaken to identify trends within the results.

Robert Hughes frames the work (and the relationship between the stuffed goat and the automobile tyre which tightly encloses its midriff) as 'the most powerful image of anal intercourse ever to emerge from the rank psychological depths of modern art' (2007, online), basing this assertion on the notion that 'the goat is an archetypal symbol of lust'. Rauschenberg's homosexuality at least makes this plausible. Once again the artist is symbolically present at the centre of the artwork. Hughes also argues for the artist's inclusion of the goat as evidence of his 'tenderness... towards the inarticulate natural world, which filled his combines with its relics, such as the goat: a stuffed eagle... chickens, guinea hens, a heron, [and] a pheasant' (2007, online). He goes on:

The presence of once-living things in the combines is a form of redemption for these harmless creatures, a tiny resurrection, a declaration that, tattered and mangy as they are, they still have value as reminders of the frailty and persistence of life.

In relation to what Hughes terms 'the persistence of life', the use of the motif of the climbing goat in *Upwards and Onwards* has a certain vitality, a movement that ascends and moves forward (into the unknown) which could also be characterised as a (dialogic) 'reaching out' to (or engagement with) otherness.

At this point in his career, Rauschenberg's approach to his materials is redemptive (as is mine), given that they are literally taken from the gutter and transformed (or given new value) through their incorporation into art. Taxidermied animals, with their unique quality of 'life in death', make the redemptive process especially visible. The idea of 'redemption' is also important for another related reason. We can expand the dialogic context further backwards in time to encompass another earlier artwork (or in fact, two versions of an earlier artwork).

## **Expanding the dialogic context: *The Scapegoat***

Kevin Nolan (2003, online) suggests that '*Monogram*...' depicts in three dimensions the he-goat image sacralised into an icon of kitsch self-pity by William Holman Hunt's *The Scapegoat* (Figure 7, p.23), a pictorial re-enactment of the 'Day of Atonement' ritual described in *Leviticus 16*'. Kenneth Bendiner (2006, online) describes this ritual (and Hunt's interpretation of it) thus:

Each year during Yom Kippur the sins of the Israelites were placed on the head of a pure white goat, and when the goat died in the wilderness the sins of the Israelites died with him. Holman Hunt, who was an exceedingly earnest Christian, understood the scapegoat ceremony as a foretelling of Christ's sacrifice... The... goat in Hunt's painting represents Christ.

Bendiner suggests that Nolan 'apparently does not see *Monogram* as a specific re-working of the Victorian painter's famous image'. Bendiner argues that as 'the goat and its accessories reached their final configuration gradually over the course of four years' it seems unlikely that the artwork is the result of 'some momentary outburst of chance and mayhem' and therefore, a link between the two artworks can be made; the objects and images of *Monogram* were carefully chosen to reference Hunt's painting. Bendiner's rationale for Rauschenberg's interest in this image is as follows:

Hunt's hallucinatory vision of the Old Testament's scapegoat, dying on the shores of the Dead Sea, was once a familiar and revered image in the English-speaking Protestant world. It was just the sort of icon that would have been familiar to the congregation of the Church of Christ in Port Arthur, Texas, where Rauschenberg worshipped in the 1930s (online).

Bendiner makes many connections between *Monogram* and *The Scapegoat*, providing a compelling art historical case for the linkage between the two. The

first of the connections between the goats is perhaps the most obvious.

Bendiner describes how:

The stuffed goat... replicates Hunt's animal, the paint on its head somewhat akin to the red wreath on Hunt's beast. (The red fillet of Hunt's goat... was supposed to turn white at the goat's death if the sins of Israelites were absolved)

In relation to the tyre which encircles the goat, he suggests that:

Rauschenberg placed a tyre on the body of his goat to depict the beast's burden... here, I would suggest, the tyre represents Christ's burden as the 'wheel of life', the 'wheel of dharma'— mankind's sensual and suffering life in the mortal world. It is a Buddhist concept applied to a Christian subject.

Given Rauschenberg's closeness to John Cage and the latter's interest in Buddhism, this interpretation may not be as far fetched as it might first appear, but there is possibly another explanation for this juxtaposition. There are in fact two versions of Hunt's painting: the one which Bendiner refers to and a smaller, more loosely painted, study (Figure 8, p. 23).

It is reasonable to assume that if Rauschenberg was familiar with the larger of Hunt's two paintings of *The Scapegoat*, and *Monogram* came about as a result of serious consideration of how best to reinterpret this image, then Rauschenberg may also have been familiar with the smaller study. If so a different interpretation of the relationship between stuffed goat and automobile tyre can be made.

The major difference between the painting and the study is that the latter incorporates a rainbow at the right of the painting. This curves leftwards into the sky and is also reflected beneath in the shallow waters of the Dead Sea, giving rise to a semi-circular form. Hunt places formal emphasis on echoing the curve of the rainbow in the goat's rear flank. The goat is 'enclosed' within

the picture plane by the curve of the rainbow and its reflection. Thus the enclosing of Rauschenberg's goat within the tyre would be a deliberate formal reference to the study.

Hunt's paintings retell a biblical narrative, which as Bendiner points out, was understood as prefiguring Christ's own sacrifice. He emphasises this through the metaphorical placing of the dying goat at the edge of the Dead Sea. This 'betweenness' is accented by the temporal setting of the paintings: in both instances the animal is seen at sunset, caught between day and night. The animals in these paintings are (quite literally) 'on their last legs' – in both cases the stance of the creature conveys that all is not well. The stance and lighting make it obvious that the animal is close to death even for a viewer unversed in biblical narrative.

The goat in *Monogram* exists in a state of transition; it is literally caught in the process of 'moving through' the tyre (a transition made poignant when considered in the light of the formal resonance it shares with Hunt's study). Its status as a dead animal incorporated into an artwork, rather than a representation of a dying one, allows for what Hughes termed a 'tiny resurrection': it is given 'new life' through its re-inscription as a component in this artwork.

To return to *Upwards and Onwards*, it is clear to me now that this artwork also evokes a process of transition. There is a movement onto the board which is literally 'frozen' in time. Like *Monogram* and the two versions of *The Scapegoat*, this movement is a 'snapshot', and it carries with it an implied sense of a past and a future. We can imagine what has passed, and what is to come next. It shares with *Monogram* the redemption (or resurrection) of what has been discarded (or devalued) – Rauschenberg's goat was actually purchased from an office equipment store. The significance of the creature



ascending seems to have grown in significance too. *Monogram* had perhaps been lurking in hircine fashion somewhere in the back of my mind.

The consideration of the relationships between these four artworks within a dialogic context forces a re-evaluation of my reading of *Upwards and Onwards*, and I am now inclined to make a small addition to my piece (perhaps in the form of a piece of red electrical tape, wrapped around one of its 'horns') in order to acknowledge this additional transition, to let it speak of what it has spoken to.

## **Conclusion**

The dialogic consideration of temporally separated artworks links my own practice to a particular moment in the history of assemblage. This arises in part because of the specific imagery linking these artworks, but also because of a more general sense of continuity with earlier practice in this medium. These ideas underpin my desire to reclaim something in relation to the notion of assemblage. An examination of why and how this takes place forms the starting point of the next chapter.



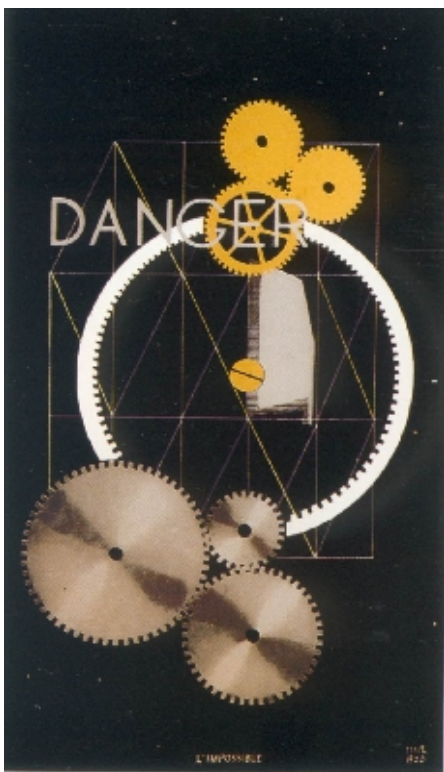
**Figure 9: Kristen Morgin, *Lion* (2006)**



**Figure 10: Victor Brauner, *Wolf Table* (1939-1947)**



**Figure 11: Rachel Harrison, *Huffy Howler* (2004)**



**Figure 12: Man Ray, *Dancer Danger* (1920)**





**Figure 13: Michael Bowdidge, *Pseudorchard* (2007)**



**Figure 14: Michael Bowdidge, *Ring* (detail, 2007)**





**Figure 15: Michael Bowdidge, *Slant* (2007)**



**Figure 16: Michael Bowdidge, *Process(ion) - arches* (2007)**



**Figure 17: Michael Bowdidge, *Process(ion) - tables* (2007)**



**Figure 18: Michael Bowdidge, *Process(ion) - pews* (2007)**





**Figure 19: Michael Bowdidge, *Process(ion) - blocks* (2007)**



**Figure 20: Michael Bowdidge, *Process(ion) - ladders* (2007)**



**Figure 21: Michael Bowdidge, *Process(ion)* - chairs (2007)**



**Figure 22: Michael Bowdidge, *Process(ion)* - brush (2007)**





**Figure 23: Michael Bowdidge, *Process(ion) - trestle* (2007)**



**Figure 24: Michael Bowdidge, *Process(ion) - rack* (2007)**

## 2. 'Surveyable by a re-arrangement'

For they see in the essence, not something that already lies open to view and that becomes surveyable by a re-arrangement, but something that lies *beneath* the surface. Something that lies within, which we see when we look into the thing, and which an analysis digs out (Wittgenstein, 1953, p.43).

This chapter outlines some of the historical, philosophical and theoretical context of assemblage, and suggests a way in which this medium might be reframed by being brought into dialogue with aspects of the later work of Wittgenstein.

In the previous chapter I explored a specific dialogic relationship between a work by Robert Rauschenberg from the early 1960s and one of my own artworks. I now want to consider the general context which surrounds that particular moment in the history of assemblage in relation to my own practice. I will begin by considering the dialogic relationship between two exhibitions of work in this medium.

### **A tale of two catalogues**

William Seitz used the term assemblage<sup>13</sup> in the title of an exhibition that he curated at The Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1961 (*The Art of*

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<sup>13</sup> Seitz (1961, p.93) suggests that the artist Raoul Dubuffet was responsible for coining the term 'assemblage' in 1953 in relation to his own works, having felt that the term 'collage' should be restricted to earlier works by artists such as Pablo Picasso, George Braque and the Dadaists. Roger Shattuck corrects Seitz's chronology and suggests that the first use of the term 'assemblage' for an artwork was by Helen Comstock in 1925, in a review in *Art News* of Arthur Dove's work in Alfred Stieglitz's exhibition *Seven Americans* (Shattuck in Elderfield, ed., 1992, p.119).

*Assemblage*). The art historians Roger Shattuck (in Elderfield, ed., 1992, p.119) and Dore Ashton (1982, p.107) think this was instrumental in its popularisation. Seitz' colleague at MOMA, Peter Selz (then a curator there) had independently planned an exhibition provisionally entitled *Collage and the Object* as early as 1958. Selz had sought to differentiate three-dimensional works from their (nominally) two-dimensional counterparts, but according to John Elderfield (1992) Seitz intended the notion of assemblage to include work that was 'collage in two or three dimensions' (p.7).

Some clarification on this matter is provided by the artist and academic Gillian Whiteley (2011), who quotes Seitz in correspondence with Herta Weschler: '[the exhibition] will largely consist of objects/collages of found materials and [I] will eliminate... work in which collage is a substitute for paint' (p.45). This distinction led him to exclude [Henri] Matisse's late collages, on the grounds that they used collaged paper as a means to articulate the flatness of the picture plane (Whiteley, p.45).

Shattuck suggests that Seitz had two main aims in relation to the 1961 show and its attendant text. One of these was 'to associate assemblage with the ethos of Dada before and after World War 1' (Shattuck in Elderfield, ed., 1992, p.120). This is borne out by the works selected for exhibition and the membership of the panel of the accompanying symposium: Lawrence Alloway, Marcel Duchamp, Richard Huelsenbeck, Robert Rauschenberg, William C. Seitz (who acted as a moderator) and Shattuck himself.<sup>14</sup>

Seitz's second aim was 'to develop the notion of assemblage into a coherent theory that could serve as a rationale for the new developments embraced by the exhibition' (p.121) – this is why he included work by 'Neo-Dadaist' artists such as Robert Rauschenberg. The extent to which Seitz achieves either of

<sup>14</sup> The transcript of the symposium is published with an introduction by Shattuck in Elderfield (ed., 1992, pp.118-159).

these aims in the exhibition is debateable, but he does clarify the methods and materiality of assemblage in an essay written for the catalogue of the exhibition:

1. They are predominantly assembled rather than painted, drawn, modelled or carved. 2. Entirely or in part, their constituent elements are preformed natural or manufactured materials, objects or fragments not intended as art materials (Seitz, p.6).

While the arrangement of the components is new, the components themselves are not – they have a history. Seitz clarifies the implications of this:

When paper is soiled or lacerated, when cloth is worn, stained or torn, when wood is split, weathered or patterned with peeling coats of paint, when metal is bent or rusted, they gain connotations which unmarked materials lack (p.84).

This makes it clear that these materials function indexically – they always point to something else.

David Joselit suggests that assemblage as a distinct mode of artistic practice comes to an end in 1970 (2004, pp. 242-245).<sup>15</sup> This is not to say that assemblage 'stops' at any point, but that art historical narratives (such as Joselit's) locate the focus of attention elsewhere during seemingly quiescent periods. By the end of the 1960s assemblage is assimilated into a 'toolbox' of sculptural methods and is often used alongside other artistic strategies of production rather than as a medium in its own right.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Joselit does this by means of a graphic timeline which outlines the approximate duration of various artistic movements (see 2004, pp.242-245).

<sup>16</sup> The 'New British Sculpture' of Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, Barry Flanagan, Richard Long, David Nash and Bill Woodrow which emerged during the last two decades of the twentieth century demonstrates this multiplicity of methods admirably. See *A Quiet Revolution*, edited by Terry Neff (1987).

This shift towards a range of methods which has broadened its scope to encompass objects made by the artist (and incorporated into assemblages)<sup>17</sup> is reflected in the writing of Laura Hoptman, whose description of the materials and methods of assemblage contrasts interestingly with that of Seitz. In an essay for the flagship exhibition *Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century* at the New Museum in New York in 2007 (which was similar in scope and range to *The Art of Assemblage*) Hoptman claims that:

After a hiatus of perhaps as long as forty years, sculpture is again leading the contemporary arts discourse. Not all sculpture, but a particular kind that isn't cast, carved or molded, but rather built, sewn, glued or tied together. It often has many components, some of which are found, some of which are made and some of which are detritus (Flood, Gioni, Hoptman et al, 2007, p.128).

Hoptman describes a reinvigoration of object-based sculptural practice which she ties to a notion of un-monumentality. Massimiliano Gioni coins this term in his own essay earlier in the catalogue and suggests that it opposes the monumentality of Minimalist sculpture and the grandiosity of installation by '[tracing] a new lineage in which the pauperism of Arte Povera is rediscovered but tuned into [sic] a society that is far from poor' (2007, p.64). Hoptman asserts that the majority of the sculptures concerned have 'a punky, insouciant contemporaneity' (p.128) and that:

If the term 'monumental' connotes massiveness, timelessness and public significance, the neologism 'un-monumental' is meant to describe a kind of sculpture which is not against these values... but intentionally lacks them... the piecemeal, jury-rigged or put-together state of these new sculptures lends a distinct sense of contingency (p.138).

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<sup>17</sup> That Hoptman is referring to components made by the artist rather than industrially manufactured components seems a valid assumption. Many of the works which feature in the catalogue make obvious use of parts which were fabricated by the artist. Works by Rachel Harrison and Elliot Huntley provide two obvious examples of this (2007, pp.102-103 and p.130).

In contrast to Seitz' attempt to establish a connection between Dada and the Neo-Dadaists (such as Ed Kienholz and Rauschenberg), Hoptman argues against making a linkage onwards to contemporary practice in this area. She acknowledges that 'the visual comparisons' which led Seitz to draw his conclusions 'must have been striking', but suggests that attempting 'to extend this pseudomorphism and perpetuate the myth that the classic avant-garde is still among us... would be wrong' (p.129).

Hoptman is correct – the conditions of production have changed drastically – but her claim sits uneasily with some of the work included in the 2007 show. The 'visual comparisons' which led Seitz to draw his conclusions persist in the selections made by Hoptman and her colleagues. A particularly good example of this is provided by the inclusion of Kristen Morgin's *Lion* (2006, Figure 9, p.46), which connects formally and in terms of its subject matter with Victor Brauner's *Wolf Table* (1939-1947, Figure 10, p.46). The difference between them is that Brauner's reflects the political realities of the time of its construction in a way that Morgin's piece does not.

Using the Combines of Rauschenberg, which she describes as 'an apex of assemblage of the late 1950s and early 1960s' (p.129) Hoptman constructs an account of them which emphasises the differences between Rauschenberg's works and contemporary practice. This is to ensure that the visual resemblances which occur between these different periods of production do not render the formulation of un-monumentality critically untenable.

Her account incorporates a quotation from John Cage (originally used by Seitz in his catalogue) which compares the Combines to pages in a newspaper: 'There is no more subject to a Combine than there is in a page from a newspaper. Each thing that is there is a subject' (Cage, 1961, pp.36-50, quoted in Seitz, 1961, p.116 and Flood, Gioni, Hoptman *et al*, 2007, p.132).

Hoptman admits that 'subsequent scholarship calls into question exactly how much chance operations played a role in the composition of the Combines' (p.132) but her primary aim is to emphasise the role of chance in historical assemblage. She quotes Seitz to this end: 'The precondition of juxtaposition is a state of total randomness and dis-association' (Seitz, p.38, quoted in Flood, Gioni, Hoptman *et al*, p.129). This seems to suggest that Seitz is describing the preconditions for juxtaposition as a movement. The wider context from which Hoptman selects her quotation is shown below:

The method of assemblage is inconceivable without Dada's negativism, for the precondition of juxtaposition is a state of total randomness and dis-association. Like a beachcomber, a collector or a scavenger wandering among ruins, the assembler discovers order as well as materials by accident (Seitz, 1961, p.38).

Seitz refers initially in this passage to the art historical developments which give rise to assemblage, but he then moves on to describe the *preconditions* and *processes* of this way of making (which Hoptman omits). This points to a fundamental difference in the focus (and utility) of these two dialogically linked but temporally separate accounts of this medium.

The consideration of the above passage from Seitz (and the earlier quotation from Cage) provides a useful clarification of the way in which meaning appears to be generated in the Combines (and by extension in many other related works). Their diverse elements allow the viewer to make connections both within the work and out into the world (much as the varied stories in a newspaper provide a picture of a day or a country). Meaning is discovered by artist and viewer alike in a generative, emergent process. Barbara Maria Stafford (1999) eloquently summarises this as:

A dizzying host of autobiographical and personal references...  
Fragments engage in a suggestive dialogue across the vast surfaces of

these multi-directional and non-hierarchical paintings, whose meaning is impossible to pin down with precision (p.148).

This is broadly analogous to Michael Kirby's notion of 'compartmentalisation', which he deploys in relation to Rauschenberg's Combines. Kirby suggests that the elements of such an artwork do 'combine [but] they do not relate to each other in any logical way: they exist in simultaneous compartments' (1965, p.14). This would appear to disavow the meaningful connections suggested by Bendiner (2006, see my discussion in Chapter 1, pp.42-44) and alluded to by Stafford (1999, see above).

In order to establish a critical distance between contemporary work and historical production, Hoptman largely disregards the model of practice (and reception) suggested by Seitz. Instead she echoes Ducasse by characterising twentieth century assemblage as largely in thrall to 'the magical frisson created by two unrelated objects meeting on the strange ground of art' (p.133). This contrasts with her description of more recent work, in which:

...organisation has replaced chance... [in] stunningly intelligent arrangements strung together in ways so clever as to make one bark with laughter or gasp with astonishment (p.133).

Hoptman provides an example of such a sculpture: Rachel Harrison's *Huffy Howler* (2004, Figure 11, p.47), which she describes as:

A work... which in its incorporation of seemingly random chunks of the manufactured and natural worlds is visually not unrelated to a Rauschenberg Combine, is in intention nearly its opposite... it is a sharp criticism of a cultural moment... The *Howler* takes down its prey – in this instance the laughable matinee idol-cum-hysterical-anti-semitic Mel Gibson and his phony tales of macho heroism – with a precision which leaves no room for aleatory musings (p.133).



Writing in *ArtForum*, Saul Anton (2002) supplies an alternative view of the way these artworks function:

Harrison approaches sculpture via the royal road of the image rather than through notions of objecthood and materiality... she rejects any priority of the three-dimensional object over the image... Harrison incorporates photographs and Pop images into nearly every work she makes. The manner in which she does so suggests that her sculptures – or 'structures'... are more like picture libraries, hieroglyphic mysteries that must be deciphered even though they tend to frustrate easy reading (p.164).

It strikes me that there is an ambiguity and playfulness about Harrison's complex assemblage (and in the wider sphere of her practice) that Hoptman does not address (and that Anton comes closer to articulating). *Huffy Howler* features a bicycle, while Harrison's later *Nice Rack* (2006) includes a snow shovel. Both objects were included in (or appropriated as) works by Marcel Duchamp, but Hoptman's writing makes no reference to Harrison's choices. An approach which teases out differences *and* continuities would have resulted in a more balanced appraisal of the relationship between historical and contemporary work in the medium.

While attempting to create a critical differentiation Hoptman's essay succeeds only in re-emphasising the strength of the dialogic relationship between this exhibition and that organised by Seitz.<sup>18</sup> What was at stake in both instances was a re-formulation of the notion of assemblage in an institutional setting, but they were undertaken for quite different reasons.

Seitz tried to position post-war assemblage in relation to earlier work by (somewhat unsuccessfully) equating aspects of their respective historical

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<sup>18</sup> The double page juxtaposition in the *Unmonumental* catalogue of Harrison's *Blazing Saddles* (2003) with Rauschenberg's *Untitled Combine (Man with White Shoes)*, 1955 (pp.130-131) provides a particularly good example of this, as while it attempts to articulate the differences between these works, it only succeeds in re-emphasising their formal similarities.

contexts, but allowed (through his promotion of the term assemblage) three-dimensional work with found materials the possibility of being verbally distinguishable from collage.

Hoptman suggests in relation to Seitz' promotion of the word that 'the term assemblage never gained enough currency to name a movement, let alone a period' (p.134). The significance of Seitz' choice is that it supplied a name for, and clarified, a medium rather than a movement. He also provided a formulation of the term which was sufficiently open to encompass a wide range of works and the processes by which they are created.

What Hoptman and her colleagues attempt is significantly different in aim and utility. While they also try to position a body of work in relation to previous practice, they do so by emphasising difference rather than continuity. That said, the notion of un-monumentality articulates something useful about a particular thread in contemporary sculptural practice, but it often fails to adhere to the works in the exhibition. Specific qualities of the sculptures do not match up with the *idea* of un-monumental sculpture they describe.

A good example of this lack of fit is provided by the inclusion of Martin Boyce's precise, welded constructions in the exhibition. Boyce's constructions are meticulous, well crafted and have a professional, powder-coated finish. These are qualities which seem far removed from being 'cobbled together, [or] pushed and prodded into a state of suspended animation' (Flood, p.12, in Flood, Gioni, Hoptman *et al*, 2007).

## **Assembling assemblage**

The consideration of the dialogue between these two catalogues and their accompanying exhibitions in relation to my own practice yields several insights. Firstly, I create artworks in a way which broadly aligns with that described by Seitz, *i.e.* I largely '[discover] order as well as materials by accident' (1961, p.38). The meaning of my work is derived from the same process of finding and assembling. It is rare for me to begin a sculpture with a view to making a specific meaning explicit.

Secondly, while Hoptman is correct to insist on the temporal specificity of the different periods of assemblage practice despite their visual similarities, there are aspects of the connective interpretation proffered by Seitz which merit further investigation.<sup>19</sup>

Although the reasons for doing so vary from period to period (and artist to artist), working with found materials has been part of western sculptural practice for over a century. Whiteley (2011) notes that:

...although assemblage is generally associated with twentieth century art, the fundamental processes of collecting, sorting and arranging objects and paper based ephemera has a long history in folk and popular cultures. Collage has diverse roots from twelfth century Japanese text collages to German folk-art weather charms of the eighteenth century (p.34).

Uncovering the connections which can be made in and around this medium strikes me as a meaningful way of exploring this legacy. This approach

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<sup>19</sup> Krauss (1979) famously argues against the urge to historicize, stating that: 'The new is made comfortable by being made familiar, since it is seen as having gradually evolved from the forms of the past. Historicism works on the new and different to diminish newness and mitigate difference. It makes a place for change in our experience by evoking the model of evolution... we are comforted by this perception of sameness, this strategy for reducing anything foreign in either time or space, to what we already know and are' (p.30).

reflexively derives its *modus operandi* from the medium it interrogates, as well as chiming with Wittgenstein's emphasis on gaining understanding through 'seeing connections' (1953, p.49).

Seitz' term (assemblage) is most usefully deployed as a way of thinking about three-dimensional works, allowing the notion of collage to cover the production of wall-based works which are oriented towards a pictorial plane (or its negation). Given such a distinction, assemblage can be seen as beginning with Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* of 1913, as this is almost certainly the earliest example of industrially produced objects being brought together to produce a free-standing sculptural structure (rather than it being carved, moulded or cast). This artwork provides a succinct statement of the formal possibilities inherent in the juxtaposing of everyday items.

Duchamp asserted during the *Art of Assemblage* symposium in 1961 that 'the choice of [the] Readymades was never dictated by an aesthetic declaration' (quoted in Elderfield, ed., 1992, p.135); but there is a playfulness to *Bicycle Wheel* which opens up the possibility of a different kind of engagement with the found object. Duchamp states that 'in 1913 I had the happy idea to fasten a bicycle wheel to a kitchen stool and watch it turn' (p.135) and Shattuck posits that '[these] words project a whole universe of aesthetic contemplation in that rudimentary act of watching' (in Elderfield ed., 1992, p.122). Given these contradictions, it is difficult to read the Readymades with the 'visual indifference' (Duchamp in Elderfield, ed., 1992, p.135) which Duchamp had claimed to inspire.

In his book *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, the art historian and philosopher Arthur Danto suggests that:

It is (just) possible to appreciate his acts as setting these unedifying objects as improbable candidates for aesthetic delectation... Even the

familiar porcelain receptacle [*Fountain*, 1917] may be perceived as 'white and glistening,' to use Saint Luke's language... [this] would be but a laboratory comment on a theory as old at least as Saint Augustine... the aesthetic transform of an essentially Christian teaching that the least of us – perhaps especially the least of us – is luminous in holy grace (1981, p.vi).

Danto labels this position untenable, as it does not address 'the profound philosophical implications' (vi) of Duchamp's work with found objects, but after a century of assemblage Danto's declaration is no longer stable. The appraisal of the aesthetic qualities of everyday things, particularly those which are repurposed as art materials, has undergone significant shifts, as Camic (2007) makes clear in his study of creative found object use. His research details the variety of emotional and cognitive responses that such materials provoke (see my previous discussion of his findings in Chapter 1, p.40).

The reappraisal of assemblage as a connective tradition of making art can also be viewed in Bakhtinian terms: understanding the chronotopes (or unique contexts) within which these works were produced is important, but it is inevitable that there will be shifts in their meaning as a result of new activity in the dialogic context in which they participate.

Thirdly, my approach to materials is redemptive - I want to give the objects I work with a new life. This parallels the approach of Rauschenberg described earlier. Similarly Cian Quayle (2001) describes the artist Kurt Schwitters as being interested 'in the formation of a new understanding of materials' and in 'their potential for transformation' (p.2).

Much as my research methods grew out of my sculptural practice, my desire to extend the life of materials through their transformation into art can be applied to the medium itself. The notion of assemblage can be given fresh impetus through a re-examination of the continuities and connections which are

inevitably present in a century of bringing together objects for sculptural purposes. To do so is to act within the spirit of the medium.

Having considered use of the term assemblage in an artistic context I now want to discuss a more theoretical use of the word in relation to the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.

### **Deleuze and Guattari's notion of assemblage**

The term assemblage<sup>20</sup> has gained a potency in secondary theoretical contexts within and outside the arts. This originates from its use in the work of the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and his sometime writing partner, the radical psychoanalyst Félix Guattari. In relation to this use, George E. Marcus and Erkan Saka (2006) suggest that:

The concept of 'assemblage' provide[s] a structure-like surrogate to express certain prominent values of a modernist sensibility in the discourse of description and analysis. Assemblage is [an] antistructural concept that permits the researcher to speak of emergence, heterogeneity, the decentred and the ephemeral... currently assemblage is enjoying a popularity... because of the continuing fascination of the work of Deleuze and Guattari (p.8).

Deleuze and Guattari deploy their notion of assemblage primarily in *A Thousand Plateaus (Capitalism and Schizophrenia, Volume 2, 1988)*. Their

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<sup>20</sup> John Philips (2006) suggests that the French word 'agencement' is mistranslated as 'assemblage' in English translations of Deleuze and Guattari's work: 'Agencement is a common French word with the senses of either 'arrangement', 'fitting' or 'fixing' and is used in French in as many contexts as those words are used in English... In contrast, the word assemblage in English means more or less the same as its actual French counterpart, assemblage, a word that Deleuze and Guattari use less often and certainly never in a philosophical sense' (p.88). Accordingly, the temptation to align and equate a Deleuzian notion of assemblage with the overtly sculptural definition of the term promoted by Seitz is, at heart, a somewhat spurious one.

most succinct statement of what this term encompasses is provided by their description of the book itself:

In a book, as in all things, there are lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification. Comparative rates of flow on these lines produce phenomena of relative slowness and viscosity, or, on the contrary, of acceleration and rupture. All this, lines and measurable speeds constitutes an *assemblage*. A book is an assemblage of this kind (1988, pp.3-4).

Their form of assemblage is fourfold. Deleuze and Guattari suggest that:

Every assemblage is basically territorial... the territory makes the assemblage. The territory is more than the organism and the milieu, and the relation between the two (1988, p.504).

In addition, it is also 'constituted by *lines of deterritorialization* that cut across it and carry it away' (p.504), which allow it to open onto other assemblages, either territorially or through other aspects of their formulation. This forms one axis of the assemblage. The other axis is delineated by content and expression, that is to say 'expression in it becomes a *semiotic system*, and content becomes a pragmatic system, *actions and passions*' (p.504). This can be thought of more simply as what the assemblage says and does (in the broadest sense of the words).

In keeping with these themes, Deleuze and Guattari emphasise the transformative potential of art in *A Thousand Plateaus*. An example of this is provided by their rethinking of the Readymade as a kind of emergent territorialisation (pp.315-316). In this text the authors engage in depth with the specificities of individual artists and writers (such as Paul Klee and Henry James) but they make no reference in *A Thousand Plateaus* to assemblage either as an artistic medium, or as the source of one of their most important (dis)organising principles.

They specifically discuss assemblage artworks (in the non Deleuzian sense of the word) in one essay (*Balance Sheet—Program for Desiring-machines*, 1977, available in Guattari, 2009, pp.90-119). Here the assemblages of Man-Ray and Jean Tinguely, along with the Merz house of Kurt Schwitters, are re-thought as 'desiring-machines'. They focus particularly on Man-Ray's *Dancer-Danger* (1920, Figure 12, p.47) and discuss the 'two degrees of absurdity' in the piece (a collage between two pieces of glass): i) that the wheels of which is constructed are not able to turn, and ii) 'the impossibility of a machine' to 'represent the whirl of a Spanish dancer' (p.91). They then undertake the following appraisal of the function of this artwork:

But one can also say: there must be a dancer here who functions as a part of a machine... The object is no longer to compare humans and the machine in order to evaluate the correspondences, the extensions, the possible or impossible substitutions of the ones for the other, but to bring them into communication in order to show how humans are a component part of the machine, or combine with something else to constitute a machine (p.91).

While this is an interesting analysis, their goal is to subsume the assemblage to the theoretical aim of their project, *i.e.* to show that Man-Ray's assemblage always extends outwards to include the viewer in a 'machine'. This is unsurprising, given that an interest in the revolutionary possibilities engendered by 'flux and becoming' lies at the core of their writing (Schroeder, 2005, p.288). The sociologist Dr Peta Malins (2004) emphasises the vital, organic exteriority of these processes:

All bodies – human and non-human, political and institutional – are continually forming connections with other bodies. It is these connections or assemblages which allow desire to flow and which have the capacity to transform bodies and produce new social formations (p.6).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> It should be understood here that the Deleuzian assemblage can assimilate any living or non-living component onto its material axis. Similarly, for Deleuze and



The philosopher Manuel DeLanda suggests that Deleuze and Guattari's concept of assemblage serves primarily to destabilise notions of interiority in relation to the parts of a whole (DeLanda, 2006, pp.8-10). The components of these arrangements are often only contingently related, and have an exteriority (or outward-facing-ness) which allows for their parts to be removed from one assemblage and inserted into another. DeLanda also says that 'Deleuze considers heterogeneity of components an important characteristic of assemblages' (p.11).

In relation to sculptural assemblages, this would seem to imply that juxtaposed objects ought to be heterogenous, but this is often not the case. Some aspects of two juxtaposed objects may appear homogenous whereas other qualities are more heterogenous. It is also possible to juxtapose identical or near identical objects. This tendency to assume the heterogeneity of assembled components renders Deleuze and Guattari's notion of assemblage somewhat prescriptive.

Another issue is raised by Deleuze and Guattari's emphasis on exteriority and flux. This has a great deal of utility as a means of providing insights into social and biological connectivity, and it can perform a similar role for artworks. However when it does so it is inevitably within the conceptual schema which Deleuze and Guattari set out, so that any articulation which takes place is always (and quite literally) on their own terms.

The Australian artist and academic Barbara Bolt (2004) undertakes a similar assessment of the extent to which sculptural assemblages can usefully be thought of in terms of Deleuzian assemblage. She notes that some linkages can be made (particularly in relation to works like Jean Tinguely's *Homage to Guattari* expression is by no means delimited by human language – birdsong features prominently in *A Thousand Plateaus* (see pp.310-351).

*New York*, 1960) which seem, through their active, 'self-constructing, self-destructing' nature to embody something particularly Deleuzian. Bolt then moves on to consider the wider implications of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of assemblage for a performative re-working of creative practice without resolving the issue of the relevance or otherwise of their theories to sculptural assemblage.

Deleuze and Guattari put the concept of assemblage to work to produce a radical and elegant *theory*, and therein lies its unsuitability in relation to this project. For what is required is not a *theorisation* of assemblage (which renders sculptural assemblage the subject of a theoretical discourse – as seen in the example of Man Ray's collage) but a *descriptive* framework for rendering the functionality of sculptural assemblages visible.

I argue that aspects of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) are of relevance to the articulation of sculptural assemblages and the physical and cultural spaces in which they operate. Wittgenstein's use of linguistic displacements as a means of exposing the contextual nature of meaning resonates with the practice of juxtaposing found objects to create artworks. This leads to the development of a framework for understanding assemblage sculptures grammatically. With this aim in mind I will now discuss the relevant sections of the *Philosophical Investigations*.

### **Grammatical investigations**

The philosopher Stephen Mulhall (1990) posits that, 'for [Wittgenstein], any philosophical investigation was a grammatical investigation' (p.127). He clarifies this term as 'a process of delineating the conceptual structures

pertinent to the issues and confusions under examination' (p.127). Beth Savickey, writing in *Wittgenstein's Art of Investigation* (1999)<sup>22</sup> suggests that:

The investigation of grammar is (variously) descriptive, responsive and preventive of philosophical misunderstanding... [and that]... there is no short answer, explanation or definition of this term (not because such an answer, explanation or definition is missing or yet to be determined, but because this is not what we need to clarify our confusion or misunderstanding) (p.100).

The origins and use of Wittgenstein's notion of grammar are linguistic. Grammar provides a way of thinking about structure relevant to the study of assemblage, since we must use language to discuss such matters (and all others). To quote Wittgenstein, 'grammar tells us what kind of object anything is' (1953, p.116).

Grammar also provides a useful way of describing the 'normative structures' of life. An example of this: if we walk into a bar that we have not visited before, initially we would be unfamiliar with the precise location of the facilities, and yet (unless it was a very unusual bar) there would be certain features present (a bar, bar staff, tables and chairs) which we would expect to see. Their precise location might vary according to the specifics of the site, nevertheless we have a sense of what should (and should not) be there and how it might be used. The common features of their relationships to one another (*i.e.* chairs arranged around tables) can be thought of as supplying the 'grammar' (or 'normative structure') of a bar.

The links that we can perceive between these individual environments and arrangements of components (*i.e.* between one bar and another) can also be

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<sup>22</sup> Savickey's study was one of the first books to examine Wittgenstein's *methods* of grammatical investigation in detail and identify all of his key strategies. As such it represents part of a growing body of text which stresses the indivisibility of his methods from his ideas.

usefully framed within the Wittgensteinian concept of 'family resemblance' (1953, pp.31-32). Wittgenstein clarifies the notion of family resemblance elsewhere in the *Philosophical Investigations*:

We see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail... I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities other than 'family resemblances'; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc, etc, overlap and criss-cross in the same way (1953, p.32).

The point being made by Wittgenstein here is that likeness (amongst different uses of language, or to use his phrase, 'language games') is best understood within a kind of fractal system of similarity-in-difference.

Wittgenstein's latter philosophical method (as demonstrated in the *Philosophical Investigations*) can be characterised as an interest in, and practice of, the *disruption* of grammar. Judith Genova (1995) describes this:

The direct address of the text invites readers to scrutinize a belief, to see in this light instead of that, to vary circumstances and stretch the imagination. His repeated demands to 'suppose this' and 'imagine that' urge us to stop reading and perform the experiment itself to see if it is valid (p.2).

A good example of this process of displacement and substitution occurs at the beginning of Part II of the *Philosophical Investigations*:

'For a second he felt violent pain,'- Why does it sound queer to say: 'For a second he felt deep grief'? Only because it so seldom happens? (p.174).

'Grief' is substituted into a grammatical structure which would normally be more appropriate for the word 'pain'. The sentence makes perfect grammatical sense in relation to the rules of language. It would not if the words were

jumbled or re-arranged in such a way as to make the sentence nonsensical. What is revealed here is how we normally experience grief (*i.e.* as a feeling which tends to preoccupy us for long periods of time). It is possible to imagine a situation in which this sentence made sense or provided an accurate description of circumstances, but the word 'grief' seems more out of place in this sentence than the word 'pain'. In this example Wittgenstein draws our attention to similarities and differences in the use of two words to show us that it is their normative context (or the grammar of their use) which determines their sense.

There has been some debate as to whether Wittgenstein himself uses this word (grammar) in an 'ordinary' sense or not.<sup>23</sup> Here though I want to distinguish between a use of the word derived from his thinking and a use which does not. This is to facilitate a brief examination of the notion of a grammar of images (or art). It will be seen that this has some utility in relation to the matters under discussion.

The idea of such a grammar is not a novel one, although the term is rarely used with reference to the work of Wittgenstein in this context. An exception to this rule is provided by the writer Robert Steiner (1992), who describes a Wittgensteinian grammar of abstraction in relation to the painting of Jackson Pollock. This relates to a specific aspect of Pollock's work: namely the non-representational line, and is achieved through consideration of the ways in which such a line differs in form and purpose from a representational line. An undertaking of analogous scope in relation to this project would be the development of a grammar of nuts and bolts (for example). This would be useful, but it would not articulate sufficiently the broad way in which sculptural assemblages interact with their contexts.

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<sup>23</sup> For clarification of this, see Michael Forster (2004, pp.17-18).

I now want to briefly consider the work of Gunter Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2006), who use the idea of grammar as a framework for the syntactical description of visual design in primarily pictorial contexts. Writing from a combined background of linguistics and visual media, their thinking is derived from the social semiotics of linguists such as Michael Halliday, who saw 'grammatical forms as resources for encoding interpretations of experience and forms of social (inter)action' (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, p.1).

Kress and van Leeuwen aim to provide 'a quite general grammar of contemporary visual design in 'Western' culture'. They are careful to position their work as descriptive rather than prescriptive, although they admit that 'work such as ours can or will pave the way' (p.3) for a world in which visual literacy will become a social necessity. This is because 'others will transform... the descriptive into the normative, for instance in education' (p.2). They also stress the situatedness of their grammar; 'we would say that it describes a social resource of a particular group... and its use in the practices of this group' (p.3).<sup>24</sup> This statement echoes the Wittgensteinian notion of a 'form of life' and his emphasis on the way in which meaning is generated by the context in which a word is used (*Philosophical Investigations*, pp.14-20).

'Form of life' is a difficult Wittgensteinian concept to elucidate. It refers to a way of living in the world, recognisable to those that share it, which incorporates and enfolds the overlapping fields of the physical, the cultural and the social in a living linguistic mesh. The philosopher of art Richard Wollheim describes it as:

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<sup>24</sup> Note the use of the indefinite article in the quotation from Kress and van Leeuwen above ('a grammar'), which contrasts with the subtitle of their book (*The Grammar of Visual Design*). Judith Rubin (2009) makes a similar claim for a unified grammar of art in relation to art therapy: 'A literate understanding of the language of both form and content is vital to an art therapist's functioning. The complex intertwining of these two variables constitutes the grammar of art, which is mastered by art therapists in order to develop visual literacy in their work' (p.138).

The complex of habits, experiences, skills, with which language interlocks in that it could not be operated without them, and, equally, they cannot be identified without reference to it (1980, p.104).

Much of Kress and van Leeuwen's analysis is detailed and well-informed, but there are occasions where they might usefully leave more space for the reader to draw her own conclusions.<sup>25</sup> By failing to do so they risk a slippage towards a more prescriptive approach. This loses the interpretive richness that Halliday suggests allows grammar to become 'a means of representing patterns of experience... [as] it enables human beings to build a mental picture of reality (Halliday, 1985, p.101, quoted in Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, p.2). Halliday elaborates on this point elsewhere:

A grammar is a theory of human existence... or rather it **includes** a theory of human existence, because it is also something else besides. Like any other theory, grammar is something to think with. It is through grammar that we make sense out of our experience, both in the world that we live in and the world that lives in us (2002, p.370).

In short, the notion of grammar is at its most useful when we make use of it as a means of creating our *own* understanding of the structures which surround us.

Wittgenstein's tactic of disrupting grammar throughout the *Philosophical Investigations* as a means of making something visible has important parallels with assemblage as a mode of artistic production. This is made particularly clear in his description of the problem of 'the function ... [and] structure' of language (1953, p.43), *i.e.* that the target of such investigations is 'something that already lies open to view and that becomes surveyable by a re-

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<sup>25</sup> A good example of this is provided in Kress and van Leeuwen's analysis of a Ford Mondeo car advertisement: 'As a result of the angle and the social distance (a low angle 'long shot', with the car in the foreground), viewers are then... made to 'look up to' them and they are made to see them as if they noticed the stylish couple and the car from across the street, with envy' (2006, p.132).

arrangement', as opposed to 'something that lies beneath the surface... and which an analysis digs out' (p.43).

This implies that the normative structures of the world (and the objects of which it consists) can be re-appraised or made 'surveyable' through their recombination and reconfiguration into new forms. The desire to cause the viewer (or reader) to see something anew (be that an object, an idea or a philosophical problem) is by no means unique to assemblage artists (or Wittgenstein).

There are parallels here with the idea of 'defamiliarisation' put forward by the Russian Formalist literary critic Viktor Shklovsky, who suggested that:

The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object: the object is not important* (1965, p.18).

The critical difference here lies in the way that Shklovsky stressed the unimportance of the object in relation to the work of art, and placed primary emphasis of the perception of 'artfulness'. It strikes me that the object and its displacement are both essential to the 'bringing-to-visibility' that art entails. Accordingly, an iterative Wittgensteinian notion of grammar (and its disruption) provides a better solution for the type of descriptive problem posed by sculptural assemblage.

The rich, associative qualities of the materials used in this art form (as suggested by Seitz, 1961, p.84) and the fact that these materials are drawn directly from our cultural and physical environment means that assemblage is



particularly well adapted for exposing the unseen grammar of our 'forms of life'.

If these processes are parallel, then looking at assemblages in grammatical terms can be a fruitful way of understanding some of the capabilities of the medium. Wittgenstein asserted that 'the work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose' (1953, p.50). The best way to proceed is to use an active, descriptive grammatical framework (after Wittgenstein and Halliday) and its disruption as a lens through which to view specific artworks, and gain insight into the ways in which they function. Doing so provides way of understanding assemblages which uses an accessible 'ordinary language' terminology.

### **Grammatical disruption in my own practice: *Pseudorchard***

The strand of my practice to which this method can mostly obviously be applied involves temporary site-specific works and installations. The parallels between Wittgenstein's methods of substitution and displacement, and the way in which certain of my artworks take form through a temporary (and often simple) re-arranging of the materials found at a given site, are at their most visible here.

Around 2007, I was offered several opportunities to create large scale installations. I used these projects to explore different ways of making temporary artworks using only the objects available at these sites. Examples of this are *Pseudorchard* (2007, Figure 13, p.48), *Ring* (2007, Figure 14, p.48) and *Slant* (2007, Figure 15, p.49). These three artworks were constructed as part of *Art Carnival*, a one day event at Bishops Hall Community Centre in Essex in July 2007. Of these three, I want to focus on *Pseudorchard*.

I had been given a medium sized room with which to work, as well as a large garden space and all the spare furniture from the storeroom. I had originally planned to use most of this material in my room, but it soon became obvious that there was too much furniture to produce a coherent installation there. I had built one piece in the garden that morning (*Ring*), so I decided to return to the garden, as it seemed a shame not to use all of the space available.

Earlier experiments in the room had resulted in a 'vee' formation of two tables placed back to back. I chose this arrangement for its elegance and simplicity after investigating other ways of combining them. I had enough tables for three of these structures. Having chosen the form of the sculptural elements, the remaining issues were number and placement. Three trees on the lawn formed another 'vee' shape, echoing the form of the table structures. I decided to place two of the structures equidistantly between the three trees, making an insertion into the grammar of the space. The formal integration of the sculptures into the setting was completed by aligning the legs of the tables so they pointed in the direction of the intervening trees.

Setting and artwork interacted and combined to create meaning. The sculptures became the focal points for a number of formal and associative relationships which depended on homogenous and heterogeneous aspects of the artwork and their setting. The rhythmic effect obtained by installing the work in this way created a tension for the viewer between the natural forms of the trees and the manufactured sculptural elements. Similarities in the distance between the trees and the sculptures produced a homogenous rhythmic structure, whereas the contrast between the interspersed natural and constructed forms was visually heterogeneous.

The most obvious formal congruity was between the upright, spreading forms of the trees and the intervening sculptural elements. In each case there was a (homogenous) emphasis on verticality which was in tension with the

heterogeneous contrast between the natural appearance of the trees and the manufactured appearance of the tables. The trees differed from one another in their specific patterns of organic growth, and this contrasted with the near identical appearance of the sculptures (closer inspection would have revealed differences in the markings of use on the tables, and other small changes in detail).

If the sculptures can be read as alluding to trees (because of the verticality of their forms and their insertion into a space where there are already trees) then several other possible associations can be made by the viewer. Processes of natural growth spring to mind, either in relation to gardening or things growing wild. Thoughts of this nature may then turn to the creative process itself, for in each case something has come into being, either from a literal seed or from the seed of an idea. I wanted to emphasise these aspects of the work in its title, in order to reflect the fruitfulness of my activities that day. The words which I assembled together for this (pseudo and orchard, hence *Pseudorchard*) were intended to echo the juxtapositional nature of the piece (and the blurring of categories and boundaries that it produced).

This artwork functions in a way which is similar to the displacement practised by Wittgenstein (as seen in the 'grief' example discussed earlier in this chapter). Something is added to a context where it does not quite belong. In this case, the addition of the tables is broadly analogous to the substitution of the word 'grief' for 'pain'. This is not to say that this particular pattern prevails throughout the *Philosophical Investigations* – Wittgenstein makes use of different displacements and questions throughout the text, but their commonality consists in their putting something out of place to gauge its effect or make a point. A similar example:

Why can't my right hand give my left hand money? – My right hand can write a deed of gift and my left hand a receipt. – But the further practical consequences would not be those of a gift (p.94).

Here the unusual movement of the money disrupts the normative grammar of the situation, and reveals the absurdity of giving something to yourself (in this context at least). Again, a displacement brings something to light.

This analysis indicates that there are parallels between Wittgenstein's disruption of grammatical structures and the way in which assemblage (and, to an extent, other forms of art) function. That this should be the case is unsurprising, as the objects from which these artworks are constructed have already participated in the normative structures of everyday life before their re-inscription as art materials (much as Wittgenstein draws upon everyday objects and situations to make his own points). What I want to outline now is the process by which I came to a greater awareness of the ways in which these objects speak of and to the world.

### ***Process(ion)***

Hilary and Marcus Hammond are the owners and directors of the itinerant gallery organisation Bendintheriver. Since 2006 they have also owned a desanctified church (aptly named 'x-church') in Gainsborough, Lincolnshire. It is a mixed use space in which community projects and youth groups deliberately jostle and overlap with artist residencies.

In the summer of 2007, Marcus and Hilary asked me if I would undertake a project at x-church. They had seen images of *Pseudorchard*, *Slant* and *Ring* and wanted me to produce something similar for them, as they had over 200 wooden chairs at the church. I enthusiastically accepted their invitation.

On my first visit I was struck by the size of the church – it is almost 300 feet long – and I realised that articulating the space would be a significant challenge. Throughout the project Marcus worked closely with me in a curatorial role. Our initial explorations focused on what eventually became the main piece: a series of three interlinked arches made from chairs<sup>26</sup> (Figure 16, p.49). After some experimentation, we settled upon arches which had four tiers of chairs on each side, as this was the largest number which could be arranged in a stable configuration.

Many of the chairs in the church were joined together by the addition of a piece of planking at the back. This had been done many years previously for health and safety reasons. This feature drew my attention to their connective potential, as they reminded me of the different sizes of lego bricks or Meccano pieces. That some of them were joined together simplified construction too. The arches were built by balancing the chairs upon one another. This approach required care and attention, as there was some variation between the chairs despite the fact that they were all nominally of the same type. No glue, screws or nails were used to fix them in place. When I produce temporary work I rarely fix things together - often because I am not at liberty to do so, but also because I like to work simply and elegantly with these materials. This contrasts with the way in which I work in the studio when I am able physically to fix things together.<sup>27</sup>

This arches functioned mimetically. Their shape made a formal reference to the architectural features of the building. The normal grammar of the space was disrupted by this, as the chairs were not where one might normally expect

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<sup>26</sup> There were wooden chairs of two similar kinds in the church. For reasons of simplicity Marcus and I had decided to make use of the predominant type in the construction of the arches, though the fact that there was another type present came into play in one of the other pieces made here.

<sup>27</sup> I elaborate on this difference at greater length in Chapter 5.

them to be. The chairs remained themselves, while alluding to something else through their relation to one another.

The tables stacked against the wall by the former altar (Figure 17, p.50) worked in a similar way. Their stacked forms echoed the steps that lead up to them. The small alcove directly above them alluded to the upended pews nearby, which I had placed where the altar would have been. The tables simultaneously made reference both to the space and to one of my interventions within it. The chair arches and the stacked tables both functioned by displacing objects in ways which resonated formally with aspects of the architectural structure. This was intended to bring these features of x-church to heightened visibility for the viewer.

The two upended pews placed at the altar worked in a different way (Figure 18, p.50). They filled the vacuum created by the absence of an altar and emphasised the verticality of the space. They also interacted formally with the stone and marble feature behind them. As they were closely pushed together they read as a single structure and became less recognisable as pews. This may have helped to diffuse any shock or offence which might otherwise have been inherent in such a manoeuvre.<sup>28</sup>

The four black painted stage blocks positioned immediately behind the chair arches fulfilled a similar role to the upended pews (Figure 19, p.51). They articulated the transitional space in front of the chancel. These were objects which I had to use as there was nowhere to store them. The same was true of the ladder and the full sized snooker table, which, along with the cover of the font, formed an assemblage immediately behind the chancel screen (Figure 20, p.51). Here I wanted to continue the sense of movement towards the altar which the other pieces had created. I did this by laying the ladder under the

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<sup>28</sup> It was important for me to be sensitive to the former function of the building as well as its current one.

snooker table in a gap in the parquet flooring (which was luckily the same length as the ladder). These pieces made no mimetic reference to the space.

A number of the remaining chairs were placed in front of the war memorial plaque on the wall in orderly rows (Figure 21, p.52). The fact that there were two types of chairs came into play at this point, as I used a quantity of one kind to represent the number of dead from the First World War, and a number of the second type to refer to the dead of the Second World War. The chairs were arranged so that they were mostly inaccessible: only the front rows could be sat upon. This piece was not mimetic, but there was a correspondence between the numbers of chairs of each type and the respective numbers of war dead. Here my intention was to respect what the space had been by creating a subtle disturbance in what it had come to be.

The smallest artwork made here consisted of an old wooden brush (from a dustpan and brush set) mounted upright on a small shelf in a corner (Figure 22, p.52). It did not refer mimetically to anything in the space (although I thought it slightly resembled a head with hair blowing behind it). This piece simply came out of having the brush to hand and a place to put it. I was interested in making a similar (but somewhat more light hearted reference) to that made by the chairs and the commemorative plaque by paying a small tribute to the people (and objects) that had kept the place clean over the years.

The final two assemblages functioned differently from those previously described. The first consisted of a trestle table balanced half opened above a small object found in a cupboard. This was a wooden box with a padded interior and a wooden cover (or roof) about twelve inches above it. I imagine that it had been used to display an object of some kind. Together they made reference to a house or open fronted building akin to that found in a nativity display, while still retaining their own identities (Figure 23, p.53).

The last assemblage was more complex. Near the entrance was a large, low tabletop raised upon breeze blocks. This item could not be moved, but I was allowed to work on it. I wanted to articulate the verticality of the space at this end of the building too, so I used the table as the base for a structure built from a displaced step ladder and an umbrella rack (Figure 24, p.53). This had a strong presence, although what it referenced was not easily pinned down, as in appearance it hovered somewhere between the organic and the mechanical. This can be explained in part by it being found in a context in which one could expect to encounter statuary. Given such an expectation, the artwork resonated with the scale of the object we might have expected to find there.

Earlier in the project Marcus and I had spent some time in the space experimenting with the chair arches. The seven other pieces were conceived and built during the last three days of the project. It is rare for me to work on this many artworks simultaneously, and equally rare to be able to spend a substantial amount of time reflecting upon them. These were key factors in my recognition of the diversity of their functioning. Put simply, I had made my own dialogic context (*i.e.* the relationships which exist between the artworks which I make) visible to myself in a way that I am not normally able to do.

This body of work was arranged along (and articulated) the physical axes of the space. Reflection upon it led me to realise that it opened up another axis for consideration. Producing and exhibiting this body of work gave me a deeper understanding of the range of ways in which objects function in my practice.

This includes (but is not limited to) making mimetic references, articulating space and disrupting grammar, as well as what I term conceptual



connections<sup>29</sup> (such as those made by the 'memorial' chairs to the remembrance plaque). Like many of the other insights which I have gained during this project, this came about as a direct result of the specificities of the artworks and the context for which they were developed.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I examined the broader dialogic context of assemblage to clarify the position of my own practice in relation to it. Bringing aspects of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* into dialogue with this way of working led to the development and deployment of an active grammatical framework for the medium. The diverse ways in which such artworks function raise questions about their capability for mimesis and representation.

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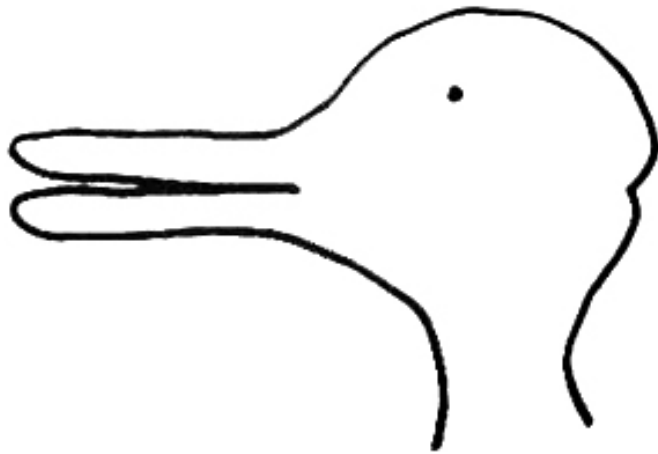
<sup>29</sup> I use this term to distinguish the functioning of this type of work from those works wherein a visual connection is more readily apparent. If this particular artwork were to fall into the latter category, it would probably have to consist of the number of chairs which is small enough to be taken in a glance. Wittgenstein suggests that five or six objects can normally be 'taken in' in this way (1953, p.6).



**Figure 25: Pablo Picasso, *Still Life with Chair Caning* (1912)**



**Figure 26: Pablo Picasso, *Bull's Head* (1943)**



**Figure 27: Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Duck-Rabbit* (1953)**



**Figure 28: Rosalie Gascoigne, *Italian Birds* (1976)**



**Figure 29: Michael Bowdidge, *Neptune* (1993)**



**Figure 30: Michael Bowdidge, *Ruminant* (2008)**





**Figure 31: Michael Bowdidge, *Joker* (2009)**



**Figure 32: Robert Rauschenberg, *Oracle* (1962-65)**



**Figure 33: Michael Bowdidge, *The Visitors*, left to right: *Pet, Father, Brother, Mother* and *Daughter* (2007)**



**Figure 34: Michael Bowdidge, work in progress (2007)**



**Figure 35: Tomohiro Nishikado, *Space Invaders* (screenshot, 1978)**



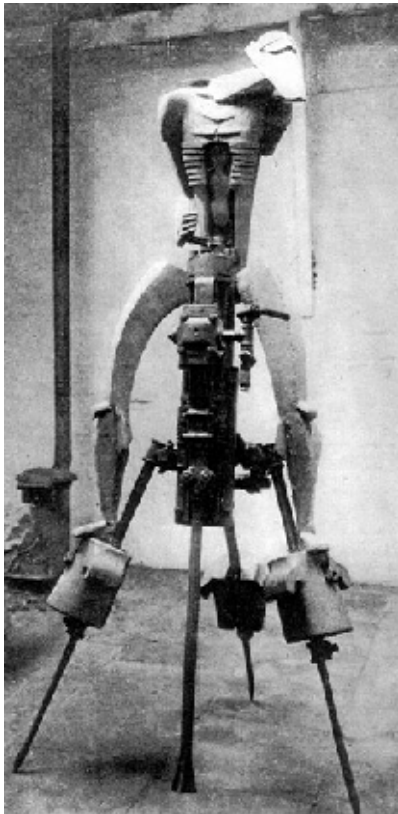


**Figure 36: Michael Bowdidge, *Mother* (2007) and *Daughter* (2007)**





**Figure 37: Michael Bowdidge, *The Visitors* (2007)**



**Figure 38: Jacob Epstein, *Rock Drill* (1913-14)**

### **3. Animal furniture space invaders**

Since so long ago, can we say that the animal has been looking at us? What animal? The other (Derrida, 2008, p.3).

I now want to consider the potential of assembled objects either visually to reference or in other ways *stand in the place of* something. I will begin by examining the mimetic possibilities of assemblage and the historical and philosophical context of such matters. This opens up the consideration of my own use of these strategies in relation to certain aspects of Wittgenstein's philosophy. I will then detail the construction and reception of a group of artworks which had as their starting point an explicit dialogic engagement with another set of sculptures.

#### **Assemblage and representation**

Assemblage can now be thought of as part of a range of sculptural modes of production including carving, casting and modelling. It emerges initially from the discipline of painting. Much of the major literature on the subject (Janis and Blesh, 1967, Waldman, 1992 and Flood, Gioni, Hoptman *et al*, 2007) blends assemblage into narratives which emphasise Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque's development of collage from painting. Marcel Duchamp's Readymades (and in particular the juxtaposing of wheel and stool which occurs in *Bicycle Wheel*, 1913) are also of importance at that point in time. Joseph Masheck (2002) suggests that the rationale for the Readymades was a strategic move on Duchamp's part in relation to his own practice of painting:

The readymade allowed Duchamp to introduce maximum *presentation* and to reduce representation to the amusing redundancy of each object fully, accurately, and effortlessly representing itself... as a unique entity... This involved an outwitting of Cubism in a chess-like way, where Duchamp had not done terribly well in the earlier stage of the painters' game (p.11).

Duchamp's Readymades circumvent representation without resorting to abstraction because, as Masheck points out, the Readymade object is 'an amusingly self representational sculpture' (p.11).

Seitz (1961) suggests that Picasso's *Still Life with Chair Caning* (1912, Figure 25, p.86) initiates traditions of collage and assemblage simultaneously. He traces a lineage from this work through to Picasso's *Guitar* (1912) and the subsequent *Mandolin* (1914). This is a useful clarification and sits well with his strategy of rendering assemblage identifiable as a medium, through his promotion of the term in the eponymous exhibition he organised; but these developments are still framed as 'violating the limits of representation' (1961, p.9).

This is unsurprising, given the critical climate of the time. Clement Greenberg's seminal essays on collage in 1959 (which Seitz does not reference) and modern painting (1960) had recently been published. The latter was instrumental in promoting the idea of a teleological development of modernist painting towards an ideal state of abstraction and flatness. This may explain why Seitz chose to emphasise the associative qualities of the materials of assemblage, rather than what they may become.

Hoptman (2007) refers to Seitz's discussion of *Still Life with Chair Caning* (1961, p.9-10) and notes the 'dual, oscillating identity' (2007, p.129) that the objects which make up assemblages can take on, *i.e.* they remain themselves while simultaneously playing another role in the composition (p.129). Picasso's *Bull's Head* (1943, Figure 26, p.86) uses a found bicycle saddle and handlebars

to represent a bull's head. Although this artwork provides a good example of the kind of oscillation to which Hoptman refers, it does not feature in the major literature on collage and assemblage (Janis and Blesh, 1967, Waldman, 1992 and Flood, Gioni, Hoptman *et al*, 2007).

Kendall Walton (1993) posits that 'the bicycle seat and handlebars... inevitably draw attention to themselves and to the fact that they are (bronze) bicycle parts, distracting the viewer from their representational function' (p.277), while Eric Gibson (2011, online) notes that '*Bull's Head* is Picasso's sparest sculpture. And it is unique among his assemblages for its transparency', *i.e.* the identity of its components remains obvious. He posits that this is as a result of a conscious decision by Picasso to '[take] on Duchamp on the Dadaist's own turf' and subvert his radical sidestepping of the issues surrounding representation and abstraction by turning the Readymade *back* towards figuration. Gibson suggests that 'his purpose in annexing Duchamp's aesthetic of the Readymade is not to embrace it but to neutralize it and thus trump it'.

*Bull's Head* makes simple but effective use of two objects which oscillate between their own identities and that to which they allude. It cannot be easily subsumed into narratives which relate the development of collage (and assemblage) to the violation of the picture plane (although *Bull's Head* is a wall-based work).

In short, objects seem to be at liberty to remain themselves, and occasionally vibrate in interesting ways, but their representational possibilities, *i.e.* that which they might 'become' or allude to (while still remaining 'themselves'), are largely neglected in the major literature on collage and assemblage.

In the previous chapter I showed that Wittgenstein's methods of grammatical disruption and displacement open up new ways of thinking about the ways in

which assemblages function in their spatial and social contexts. The examination of his work on 'aspect' (which deals with the way in which images or objects can appear to 'vibrate' between states) may shed some light on how representation functions in sculptural assemblage.

## **Wittgenstein and aspect**

Wittgenstein discusses aspect at length in the latter sections of the *Philosophical Investigations*. The artist and philosopher Justin Good (2006) posits that 'the whole discussion [in the *Philosophical Investigations*] of seeing aspects is introduced as an illustration of a grammatical distinction between two senses of the word " (p.6). This can be understood as the difference between seeing that there is someone standing in a doorway and then noticing that we recognise the person standing there. Wittgenstein outlines the concept of 'noticing an aspect' thus:

I contemplate a face, and then suddenly notice its likeness to another. I see that it has not changed; and yet I see it differently. I call this experience 'noticing an aspect' (1953, p.193).

Wittgenstein attempts to draw out a distinction between '*seeing*' and '*seeing as*'. Stephen Mulhall (1990, p.6) notes that Wittgenstein draws upon a variety of different examples in his exploration of aspect and 'in all cases the central features of the phenomenon are unchanged' (p.6). He adds:

In particular, the examples share the air of paradox which characterises aspect-dawning as an experience; for when we notice the change of aspect, we see the figure (or face) differently and yet we also see that it has not changed (p.6-7).

in the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein uses a simplified redrawing of the 'Duck-Rabbit' illusion (Wittgenstein, 1953, p.194 and my Figure 27, p.87). According to Eric Weisstein (2009, online):

The duck-rabbit was 'originally noted' by American psychologist Joseph Jastrow (Jastrow, 1899, p.312)... [and was] based on one originally published in *Harper's Weekly* (Nov. 19, 1892, p.1114) which, in turn, was based on an earlier illustration in *Fliegende Blätter*, a German humor magazine (Oct. 23, 1892, p.147).

The name of the figure reveals its functioning very clearly, as even if one is only able to see one or other of the two creatures present at any one time, the hyphenated name always alludes to the other (absent) creature. Rudolf Arnheim (1974) describes Wittgenstein as:

[Realizing] that this was not a matter of two different interpretations applied to one percept, but of two percepts. That two percepts could derive from one stimulus struck him as a cause of wonder (p.95).

This figure provides an atypical example of 'aspect-dawning', in that it 'oscillates' and we are normally only able to see either the rabbit or the duck at any one time. By so doing Wittgenstein draws our attention to less unusual examples of aspect-dawning (such as recognising a friend) and by extension to 'the continuous seeing of an aspect' (1953, p.194). The latter occurs in a situation where, as Wittgenstein puts it: 'the picture might have been shown to me and I never have seen anything but a rabbit in it' (1953, p.194). In short, the 'Duck-Rabbit' functions as a grammatical disruption, but the normative grammar which is revealed is the grammar of visual perception.

Good clarifies the notion of 'continuous seeing-as' usefully:

Noticing an aspect counts as an experience of sorts... [but] the notion of continuously seeing an aspect does not quite fit into the category of being an experience... In fact, it seems more accurate

phenomenologically to talk of continuous seeing as a kind of blindness stemming from taking something for granted (2006, p.30).

In relation to these matters, Good uses an imaginary sculpture to emphasise his assertion (after Wittgenstein) that while it may make sense in some situations to speak of 'seeing spoons as spoons', it does not *ordinarily* make any sense to do so:

For example, we could imagine a conceptual sculpture involving ordinary spoons, but constructed in such a way that the spoons appear to be anthropomorphic figurines or alien seed pods. In that context we can imagine saying of someone who does not understand the sculpture, 'He's seeing the spoons as spoons' (p.33).

While this rings true, it is equally the case that someone who does understand the sculpture should be able to see the spoons as spoons. To think otherwise would be to assume that the arrangement of spoons in Good's example was perceptually so confusing that the spoons would only revert to their original identity if one could not see them as seed pods or figurines. While this is not outside the bounds of possibility, it strikes me as far more likely that the spoons are readily visible as spoons, and can almost certainly be seen as something else (ether figurines or seed pods or something else) simultaneously.

Good's imaginary sculpture, existing as it does only as a prop in a philosophical argument, remains entrenched in a paradigm which allows the object only ever to be itself *or* something else, and never allows for the possibility of it being simultaneously itself *and* something else. Simultaneously, Good reduces art to a supporting role whose purpose is to illustrate philosophical arguments. Rather than being able to enter into dialogue with philosophy and theory directly, it remains 'subject to its applications' (Nixon, 2000, p.84).

A real example of a similar phenomenon is provided by *Upwards and Onwards* (2007, Figure 1, p.19). In relation to what it represents (or alludes to) there is no vibration between states: the 'body' of the creature remains a table. There is no oscillation between two mutually exclusive percepts as there is with the Duck-Rabbit. It is possible that a viewer may experience the 'dawning of an aspect' in relation to this work, *i.e.* that she may suddenly see it as an animal, but there is nothing which prevents her from seeing the table as a table while seeing the assemblage as (like) an animal.

A work which functions in a similar fashion to *Upwards and Onwards* in this respect is Rosalie Gascoigne's *Italian Birds* (1976, Figure 28, p.87). In both of these cases the representational qualities of the work are more allusive than illustrative; they are perhaps slightly closer to suggesting something, rather than overtly picturing it. What they do have in common with *Bull's Head* is that the identity of their components always remains visible. With these works in mind, representation in assemblage is best thought of as a continuum rather than as an 'either/or' condition of the artwork, or an avowed aim. As the sculptor George Fullard (1959) put it: 'the requirement is not for intentional resemblance to life, but for the phenomenon of coincidental significance' (quoted in Whiteley, 1998, pp.128-129).

### **Seeing-as and seeing-in**

Some light is shed on the differing degrees of simultaneity at play in these examples by Richard Wollheim's useful distinction between seeing-as and seeing-in (1980). He posits that to be able to see something *in* something else allows issues of locality to be circumvented. That is to say, any issues as to which *part* of something one is seeing as something else are sidestepped (p.211). As Wollheim posits:



If I see  $x$  as  $y$ , then there is always some part (up to the whole) of  $x$  that I see as  $y$ ... then I must be able to specify just which part of  $x$ , that I allegedly see as  $y$ . Seeing-as has to meet the requirement of localization, whereas no such restriction is placed upon seeing-in. I may see  $y$  in  $x$  without there being any answer to the question whereabouts in  $x$  I see  $y$  (p.211).

Wollheim develops this argument:

Seeing-in permits unlimited simultaneous attention to what is seen and to the features of the medium. Seeing-as does not... The seeing appropriate to representations permits simultaneous attention to what is represented and to the representation, to the object and the medium (p.213).

This development of Wittgenstein by Wollheim, which he terms 'twofoldness', would seem to provide a framework for understanding how representation can function in assemblages. What is not explained so far is how we recognise what we see in the assemblage artwork.

Marie McGinn (1997) summarises Wittgenstein's thoughts on this matter, suggesting that the experience of seeing duck or rabbit in the Duck-Rabbit is best understood in terms of making a connection from either of these visual experiences to other similar objects (p.195). In other words, we connect the duck to other ducks and the rabbit to other rabbits – we notice a Wittgensteinian *family resemblance*.

### **The animal aspect**

Keeping these matters in mind, I now want to discuss the subject of many of these representations. Over the past twenty years a small but significant number of my works have referred to the forms of animals or other living creatures. One of the earliest surviving examples of this is *Neptune* (1994,

Figure 29, p.88). Others include *Upwards and Onwards* (Figure 1, p.19) and *Ruminant* (2008, Figure 30, p.88).

In all of these cases there was no conscious decision to produce a theriomorphic representation at the inception of the piece. Rather, the forms emerged through a process of experimentation, and were embraced because they felt appropriate, or more accurately, because they persuaded me of their relevance (as with *Upwards and Onwards*). Often this recognition was one which has made me laugh aloud, and I have come to value this reaction as a barometer of progress on a given piece.

That this should happen is not unsurprising; Fred Licht describes sculpture as a 'bringing to life' of materials (1967, pp.24-25). To create something which alludes to, or refers to, something alive is to re-emphasise the nature of the process by which the work takes shape. This can also be understood as a reversion to the typically mimetic historic role of sculpture. I want every work I make to 'live', and I am restless until that process is complete.

James Elkins (1996) suggests that 'each object has a certain force, a certain way of resisting or accepting my look and returning that look to me' (p.70). This is echoed in a passage from my studio notebook, dated June 2009:

The quality may not be nameable (and I am not so naïve as to confuse what I am searching for with some notional 'essence' of these works) but there is something here I want to name. It is something a little like a stance, a way of facing the world. It is insistent, but not urgent or clamorous. It has perhaps something in common with Ernst's notion of 'Whisky-marine'.

Ernst describes this 'mental colour' as follows: 'Whisky-Marine – like aquamarine. A distortion, humorous and very serious at the same time' (Ernst, 1948, p.12). This excerpt from my notebook shown above was written in relation to a less representational work (*Joker*, 2009, Figure 31, p.89) but the

same quality persists in relation to most, if not all of my floor based works, and to a lesser extent in my wall-based pieces. Giving these arrangements of objects forms which allude to animals is a way of making this presence visible, of 'bringing them to life'.

This raises the question: why animals, rather than human figures? Until I began this research I had no idea, but I now have a clearer sense of why this may be the case, and what the further implications of this unconscious choice may be. Derrida (2008) suggests that:

The gaze called 'animal' offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human: the inhuman or the ahuman, the ends of man... the bordercrossing from which vantage man dares to announce himself to himself (p.12).

In similar fashion, McGinn (1997) posits that in the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein attempts to draw our attention to:

The qualitative difference between our experience of human beings and other animals... and our experience of machines and other inanimate objects (p.177).

It is clear that Wittgenstein makes a further distinction within this schema, and further teases out what it means to be human by asking us to consider examples in which animals feature strongly, *e.g.* 'if a lion could talk, we could not understand him' (1953, p.223) and 'a child has much to learn before it can pretend. (A dog cannot be a hypocrite but neither can he be sincere)' (1953, p.229).

Wittgenstein brings to our attention aspects of our forms of life by juxtaposing them with both animate beings and inanimate objects. What is made clear in these particular examples is the way in which language and the possibility of unethical (or ethical) behaviour are intertwined. The dog cannot attain

sincerity because there is no possibility of him being insincere: the child can pretend to be ill in order to avoid school. The possibilities for the child (of behaving well or behaving badly) emanate from the realm of human language, with its accompanying possibility of dialogue (within our form of life).<sup>30</sup>

The key to this is the Duck-Rabbit. It is here that we see what Wittgenstein terms 'the dawning of an aspect' exemplified through the presentation of an atypical example, but what is also significant is the animal nature of this 'picture-object' (to use Wittgenstein's phrase). Through consideration of these particular proximal others and the very different kinds of relationships we have with them (and with each other) it is possible to glimpse the dawning of another aspect: our capacity for language is brought to view (and thus its potential for dialogue) as something extraordinary, which can be seen anew and renewed, rather than taken for granted.

If this is the case then, like Wittgenstein, I have been 'assembling reminders for a particular purpose' (1953, p.50). To build animals out of the inanimate objects which people make and use, is to superimpose two of the forms of otherness on which Wittgenstein draws to illuminate the condition of language. Though this is not the sole function of these artworks, in this dialogue with philosophy I found insights as to how they function as artworks, and as a result of their consideration in relation to philosophy, the possibility of a small contribution to current thinking around 'aspect dawning' in the later work of Wittgenstein.

The exploration of the wider relevance of Wittgenstein's comments on aspect-seeing is an active thread in contemporary Wittgenstein scholarship, and

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<sup>30</sup> Whether a dog can appear sincere or insincere to another dog is a matter for dogs. Here care must be taken – as Derrida would be quick to suggest (see 2008, p.41) – not to conflate all animals together. The behaviour of whales, dolphins or octopi may offer very different possibilities for deception from that of dogs.

provides the rationale for philosophers William Day and Victor J. Krebs's recent edited collection *Seeing Wittgenstein Anew* (2010), which is the first collection to address this specific area of current Wittgensteinian philosophy. In their introduction they suggest that the examination of the remarks on aspect-seeing in relation to the wider field of Wittgenstein's thought:

[Brings] out a range of connections between Parts I and II of the *Investigations* that should interest Wittgenstein scholars whose central concerns would otherwise seem untouched by the discussions of aspect-seeing in the *Investigations* (p.1).

Day and Krebs posit that the reception and development of Wittgenstein's remarks on aspect-seeing over the past four decades has allowed their significance to grow in relation to the wider corpus of his work. Given the subject matter of these remarks they note that:

Philosophers of art [such as Wollheim] were among the first readers of the *Investigations* to take an interest in the aspect-seeing remarks [but]... it was perhaps only after Mulhall's *On Being in the World* that the remarks on aspect-seeing began to be viewed widely as significant for more than their merely local exegetical interest (p.8).

Day and Krebs characterise the essays included in their collection as reflecting 'three kinds of response' to the aspect-seeing remarks of Wittgenstein that broadly align with the development of their reception over the past sixty years. That is to say, in the first instance they are examined with a view to:

Describing and thinking through the central conundrum of aesthetic judgement – namely, how can an aesthetic experience be had... that another may not, or will not have... (p.9).

In relation to the second phase of the reception of the aspect-seeing remarks, Day and Krebs describe a broader reading of the *Investigations*, in which the aspect which comes into view is the 'the ordinary condition of our words meaning what they do', which can then be seen as 'the central topic of the

*Investigations* as a whole' (p.9). The third phase of reception, which they suggest arises at least in part as a result of Ray Monk's highly esteemed biography of Wittgenstein (1990) reads the aspect-seeing remarks as 'Wittgenstein's indirect meditation on the difficulties of receiving his late philosophical method' (p.10).

The extension of Wittgensteinian thought to include the arguments for the ethical treatment of animals has recently undergone a similar surge of activity. This stems largely from the work of the philosopher Cora Diamond, whose reputation has led to a recent collection of essays in her honour (*Wittgenstein and the moral life: essays in honor of Cora Diamond*, 2007).

Several of the contributions, including one from the noted Wittgensteinian Stanley Cavell, concentrate on what Cavell terms 'our entwinement with the nonhuman world of animals' (p.281), but in all instances the focus remains largely upon the ethical aspects of our relations with other species, and the extent to which the philosophical consideration of the extent of their subjecthood can shed light on these matters. The significance of animals as a means of bringing to visibility our habituation to language is not touched upon.

Given the extensive nature of the development of Wittgenstein's remarks on aspect detailed above, it strikes me that the connections that I have made through my practice in relation to these matters (*i.e.* that the re-consideration of the role of the animal in Wittgenstein's writing provides us with a way of seeing anew the condition of language) are both appropriate and timely.

### ***The Visitors***

I now want to move on to describe another set of works, which deal with a slightly different (but still very much connected) proximal otherness. *The*

*Visitors* came about a result of a development of my thoughts in relation to the making of *Upwards and Onwards* (2007) and its dialogic relationship with Rauschenberg's *Monogram* (1955-59). After reflection on that process I decided that I wanted to make something which began from an explicit dialogic engagement with another work of art.

While researching *Monogram* I came across a photograph of Rauschenberg's *Oracle*, a group of five floor based assemblages that he constructed between 1962 and 1965 (Figure 32, p.90). As a result of a complex piece of, what was at the time, state-of-the-art electronic engineering, the various components of *Oracle* literally 'talk amongst themselves': all of them contain loudspeakers which emit a constantly changing babble of pseudo-randomly tuned radio stations.

What struck me about this work was the way in which the artist had created a group of assemblages which had a formal 'conversational' relationship to one another (alongside their audible one) while retaining their individual identities. This suggested to me the possibility of exploring a similar paradigm. I wanted to extend and develop the 'relatedness' of *Oracle*<sup>31</sup> in my own group of assemblages by creating a network of family resemblances (*i.e.* a web of similarities and dissimilarities which could suggest biological and social relationships between the objects). I wanted them to talk to each other in formal, compositional terms, and define and differentiate each other through their mutual resemblances and differences. The end result of this process was the group of five assemblages entitled *The Visitors* (2007, Figure 33, p.90).

I started the first member of the group to be completed (*Father*) a couple of weeks earlier, before the idea of the group occurred to me. I juxtaposed a pine kitchen shelf unit and an old wheeled wooden television stand (Figure 34,

<sup>31</sup> For a full account of the construction of *Oracle*, see Billy Klüver and Judith Martin, *Working with Rauschenberg* in Hopps and Davidson eds. *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective* (1997, pp.310-313).

p.91). When I returned to the piece there was something about it that I liked (probably its slightly animal-like appearance), but I felt that I had not managed to resolve the work satisfactorily. I tried 'mirroring' the form of the television stand at the other end of the shelf unit by fixing the legs from an ironing board to the base of the shelf unit. Reflecting on this change, I was amused to notice that the assemblage now resembled a giant wooden alien or robot constructed from domestic items.

Although I felt that I had found a theme for the group, the initial piece still looked a little unbalanced, if not unhinged: it dominated the studio. After reflection I decided that the imbalance was related to the differences in form and structure between the television stand and the legs from the ironing board. I liked the tension which existed between the pine shelves and the ironing board legs – there was something about them which was reminiscent of a fatherly middle-aged male, one whose torso seems slightly too broad and heavy for his rather scrawny legs. The 'antennae' of the television stand (for I had come to see this object in that way) looked overly heavy for this role now. I also suspected that the television stand might be more usefully employed elsewhere, if I was going to create a group of five assemblages, so I removed the antennae.

My gendering of this sculpture began to inform my thinking about the nature of the rest of the group. Given the domestic nature of the materials in use, it seemed apt that the completed set of assemblages might in some sense comprise a typical nuclear family. I liked the incongruity of imposing a homely social structure onto a group of sculptures which I was thinking of as part-alien, part-insect and part-spaceship. On completion of the group I realised that, as a result of the age of the materials involved, I had created a set of fictitious ancestors for the bitmapped aliens from the popular 1980s *Space Invaders* video game (see Figure 35, p.91).



Using the structure of the domestic social unit allowed for a (literal) set of family resemblances (and differences) to be brought into play. These relationships simultaneously exaggerated and gently undermined stereotypical assumptions about gender roles. This occurred as a result of tensions between the associative qualities of the materials and the formal qualities of the sculptures themselves. The ambiguity of the grouping allowed a multiplicity of readings in terms of the 'sex' or role of the various assemblages within the family unit. For example, in *Father*, while the assemblage appears to have a masculine formal quality, the component objects (kitchen shelves and the legs of an ironing board) are things which were once associated (at the time of their manufacture) with a feminine domestic role.

The next assemblage of this group I constructed was *Brother*. Having completed *Father*, I had aspects of the appearance of *Brother* in mind. I wanted it to have a similarly flat and open structure at the top, and for that section to be supported on legs of some kind. The solution to this problem came quickly: I placed an empty drawer with three internal divisions (echoing the structure of the shelves which made up the top section of *Father*) on top of a child's wooden chair. Gaston Bachelard (1964) suggests that drawers are places of storage and secrecy, 'veritable organs of the secret psychological life' (p.78) but here the drawer is open, upended and empty. This assemblage was similar to *Father*, but smaller in scale.

*Mother* followed next. This assemblage needed to be a similar size to *Father*, with significant structural differences. Within the conceit of this group, I wanted the 'female' parent to appear to be capable of 'carrying a child' and 'giving birth'. I wedged a small table which had two folding leaves horizontally across the top of a wooden folding ladder. The leaves had the potential to be opened out (as can be seen in Figure 36, p.92) or closed so as to enclose the space at the top of the ladder (which can be seen more clearly in the side view, Figure 37, p.93).

This piece participates in several grammars (and simultaneously fractures them by doing so). The small space at the top, with its potential for shielding, protecting and then opening, makes metaphorical reference to the grammar of gestation and child birth. The steps which make up one side of the ladder (which would allow whatever has grown within that space access down into the world) allude to the structure of a rocket ship or moon-landing craft here. Perhaps this assemblage is best thought of as a Mothership.

*Mother* is probably my favourite of the group. There is a part of me that would like to be small enough again to climb the ladder, sit inside that cosy little space at the top and pull the table leaves shut. Bachelard (1964) describes the desire to return to such spaces in imagination:

In the daydream the recollection of moments of confined, simple shut-in space are experiences of heartwarming space, of space that does not seek to be extended, but would like above all to still be possessed (p.10).

The reaching back into time that this artwork inspires was to become of particular relevance.

The fourth assemblage I made was *Daughter*. I thought this might be a more difficult piece, as I had already established several constraints. I wanted the piece to have a formal relationship to *Mother* matching that between *Brother* and *Father*: the 'child' needed to be a smaller, less well-developed but still recognisable version of its formally related (female) 'parent'. Despite my concerns, this was achieved quickly and simply by placing a table on a stool. This assemblage sat slightly taller than *Brother*. I liked this effect, as it suggested that the *Daughter* was a slightly gawker older child who had already begun to grow towards adulthood. This differentiated her from *Brother*, who struck me as being somewhat younger.

The final member of the group was the simplest to construct (in fact, it required no construction whatsoever in the final instance). Despite this, its integration into the group proved difficult. This was primarily because I was undecided about the role and status of the fifth member. There were two options: to create something which broke the grammar of the family, by inventing a role for the fifth piece which was not a part of that structure, or to maintain the grammar of the family by including another entity whose presence would be fitting.

I thought there should be a fifth assemblage, because four felt overly symmetrical numerically and formally. I also wanted to maintain the numerical reference to *Oracle*. Rauschenberg's piece can, in fact, be seen as six sculptures, as one of his assemblages consists of a larger work linked by a chain to a smaller one, like a figure with a dog on a lead. Fracturing the grammar of the family did not appeal to me. It seemed important to retain its integrity, so as to counterpoint the absurdity of these entities existing in such a group. Instead I borrowed a solution from *Oracle*: I decided to give the family a dog.

I had not yet used the television stand which had featured in the earliest version of *Father*. I still wanted to use this object, and realised that this piece of furniture could stand in relation to the other members of the group as a dog might stand in relation to a human family. That is, as a part of the group, but also as something which is a little removed, or of a different (but still similar) order of complexity.

As all the other members of the group consisted of pairs of objects, I then wondered what I could add to it. I tried making a tail for it using a variety of items but decided against it in the end, as this overemphasised what I had found interestingly 'doggy' about the object in the first place: the red setter-

like skittishness of its legs, its strangely streamlined and paw-like castors and its seemingly enthusiastic readiness for motion. My perception of the aspect wherein the object has these qualities derived at least in part from the fact that I was considering its insertion of into the grammar of the group, so I was already seeing it as an entity of some kind, rather than simply as a TV stand. The simple, 'Readymade' quality of this component and its contrast with the other assemblages emphasised its role in the family as a pet of some kind. *Pet* was the obvious title as I wanted to allude to a particular *kind* of relationship.

A dialogic connection can be made from *Pet* to Jacob Epstein's original version of *Rock Drill* (1913) which incorporated a Readymade element (the rock drill of the title) juxtaposed with a robotic looking plaster figure which sits astride the drill (Figure 38, p.93). In both cases the Readymade element integrates within the larger composition because of stylistic affinities between it and the more constructed components of the work.

The next step was to arrange the sculptures coherently. I wanted the grouping to create a controlled and subtle relationship between artwork and viewer. They should all face the viewer, creating a form of compositional cohesion which would establish the frontality of each piece in relation to the other members of the group. This was intended to be reminiscent of a formal family portrait. Here there is a contrast with *Oracle* which, as Billy Klüver and Judith Martin suggest, 'has no fixed visual or aural shape. Any arrangement of the sculpture in the room leaves open the possibility of another arrangement' (1997, p.313). This is emphasised by the potential mobility of Rauschenberg's sculptures (they all have wheels). In the case of *The Visitors*, only *Pet* appears capable of this kind of movement, as it is of a different and yet related 'order' to the other members of the family.

By now I had come to think of the group as *The Visitors*. They looked friendly rather than threatening, even if they were 'space invaders' in a metaphorical

(and a literal) sense.<sup>32</sup> I was pleased with them: the experiment of working explicitly within the dialogic context had resulted in a strong group of sculptures.

### ***The Visitors at large***

Shortly after completing the group, I had the opportunity to discuss the work with the curator Stella Couloutbanis. Having told her that they were intended to be read as a family group I asked her if she could identify the family members for me. We agreed on three of their identities and disagreed on the remaining two: Stella identified *Mother* as *Father* and *vice versa*.

It became apparent that she was responding primarily to the associative qualities of the objects, *i.e.* the ladder which formed the bottom half of *Mother* seemed masculine to her because of its association with decorating; the kitchen shelves which make up the upper section of *Father* struck her as feminine. I then asked how this reversal of roles related to the identities of the *Brother* and *Daughter*, on which she was in agreement with me.

Stella explained that she saw them as being a 'mummy's boy' and a 'daddy's girl', which accounted for their formal references to the 'parent' of the 'opposite sex'. This emphasis on the associative qualities of these things came to a head in relation to the drawer which I had used as part of *Brother*. For Stella this was a resonant object which echoed Bachelard's description of drawers as 'unfathomable stores of daydreams of intimacy' (p.78).

My exchange with Stella confirmed a long held suspicion of mine, that objects of the kind that I employed could be used to 'bring to light' what the

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<sup>32</sup> Hall nods in the direction of this phrase when he characterises modern sculpture as having 'few qualms about invading the viewer's own space' (1999, p.1).

Greek anthropologist C. Nadia Seremetakis has termed '[the] hidden and now inadmissible counter-narratives of once valued lifeworlds' (1994, p.10). Horton (2003) notes a similar tendency in assemblage in relation to his own practice:

The response to or 'reading' of the work is determined in part by its mnemonic function - the memories that the work triggers in the person who views or 'reads' it and its constituent objects –and the interaction of these with the memories that are brought to the work by the viewer (p.46).

While it may seem self-evident that such objects can act as touchstones which facilitate the remembrance of personal and domestic narratives, the process of (re)discovery which I describe above provided a powerful reminder of this aspect of the functioning of these artworks.

In the summer of 2007 *The Visitors* was exhibited for a week in the atrium of Nottingham Trent University's Bonington building. At that time this was a recently remodelled part of the University. It consisted of a series of clean, well-ordered and polite spaces. There was very little there that was old or bore signs of wear. It existed (and still does, at the time of writing) in a kind of perpetual present.

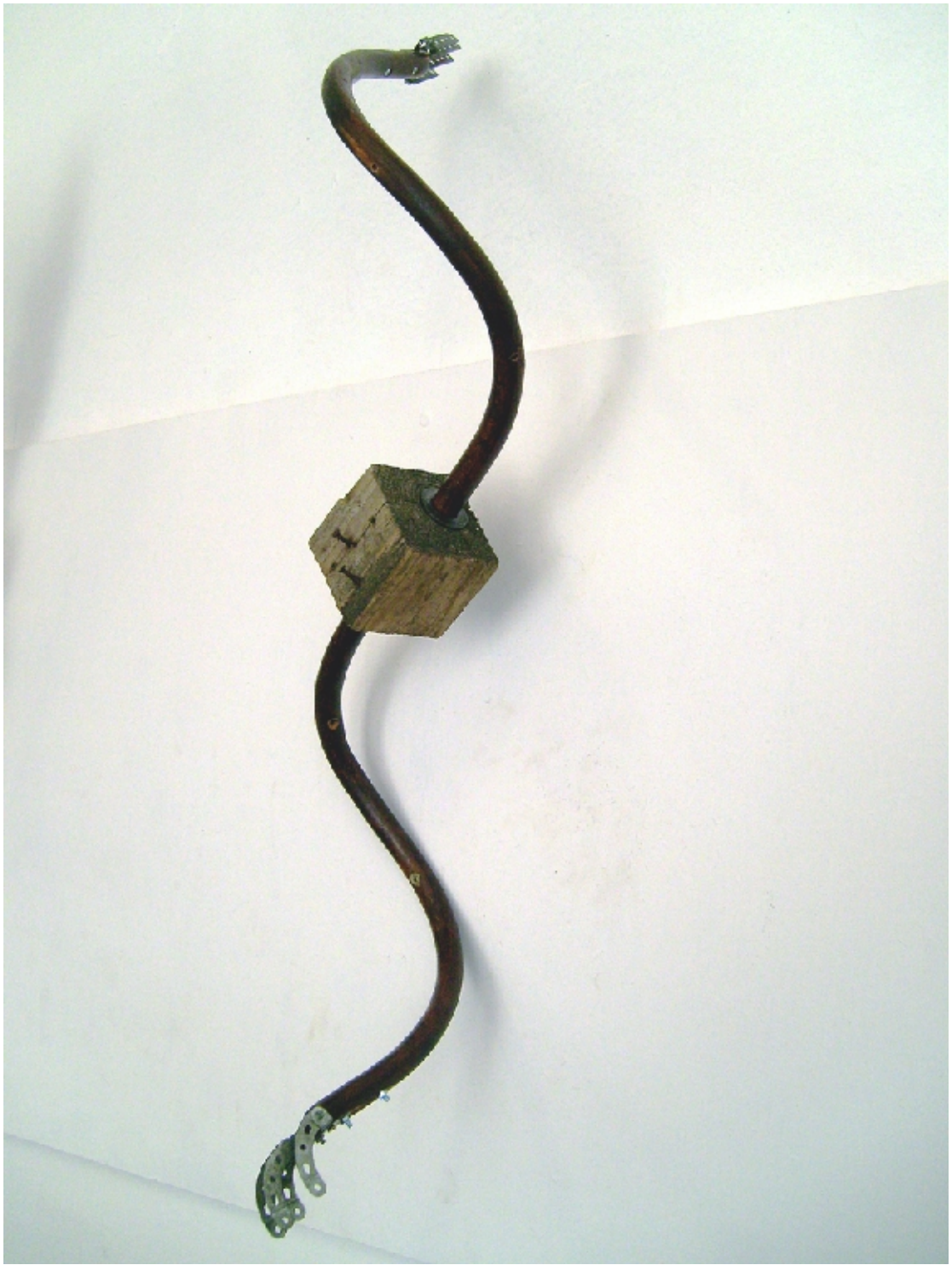
The installation of *The Visitors* here (Figure 37, p.93) led me to an awareness of another aspect of the 'temporal functioning' of my materials (alongside my conversations with Stella Couloutbanis). This was the recognition that the contrast between this environment and the somewhat older (and more 'worn-in') materiality of the sculptures evoked a temporal dislocation broadly analogous to the 'cultivation of the effects of a systematic putting out of place' described by Ernst (1948, p.21).

*The Visitors* are in a broad sense contemporary. The objects from which they are made are not new; they are still part of our social and cultural landscape, although such items are becoming less common with the passage of time. If this is the case it seems odd that these sculptures should appear to be so 'out of time' in the Bonington Building. I suspect that their 'out-of-timeness' was emphasised by their installation in a post-modern reworking of a modernist building; a function of their interaction with the architectural qualities of the exhibition space. Thus, their pastness is emphasised through their presentation in a building which does not appear to have a past.

This is analogous to the use that Wittgenstein makes of the Duck-Rabbit, as here another overlooked phenomenon is drawn to our attention through the presentation of an atypical example of that phenomenon. The dawning of an aspect and thus the notion of continuous-seeing-as are brought to light through the particular qualities of the Duck-Rabbit. Similarly, the breaking of the grammar of this space made something surveyable, although in this instance it was a quality of the artwork which was rendered visible.

## **Conclusion**

Through reflection on the function and significance of the representational aspects of some sculptural assemblages, I gained a deeper understanding of two distinct but linked issues in relation to temporality in my practice. The first of these is that objects which have a significant degree of pastness can function as conduits to remembrance. The second is a greater awareness of how these artworks (and the materials of which they are constructed) can appear to be displaced in time as well as in space, and the implications of this displacement. The next chapter will further explore these intertwined issues.



**Figure 39: Michael Bowdidge, *Flyer* (2009)**





**Figure 40: Michael Bowdidge, *Flyer* (detail, 2009)**



**Figure 41: Michael Bowdidge, *Walk Tall (for Joseph Clover)* (2010)**



**Figure 42: Michael Bowdidge, *Variable* (2009)**





**Figure 43: The box my father sent me**

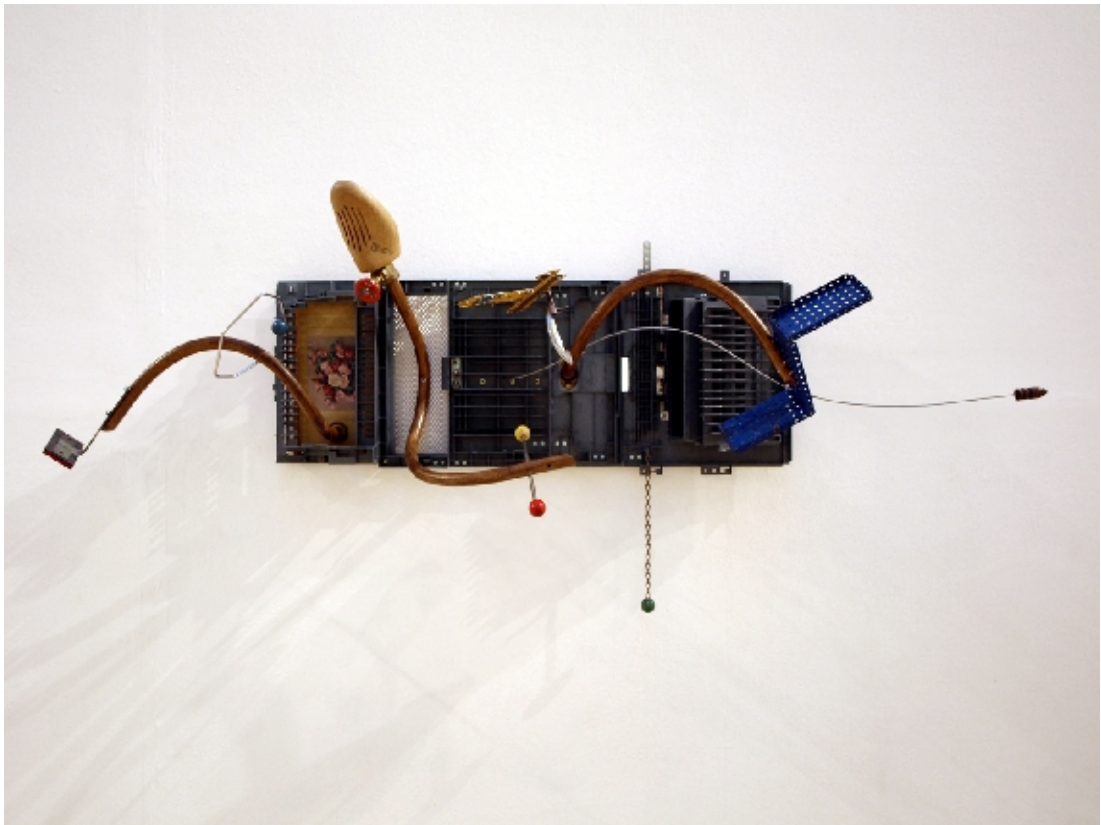


**Figure 44: Some of the materials my father sent me**

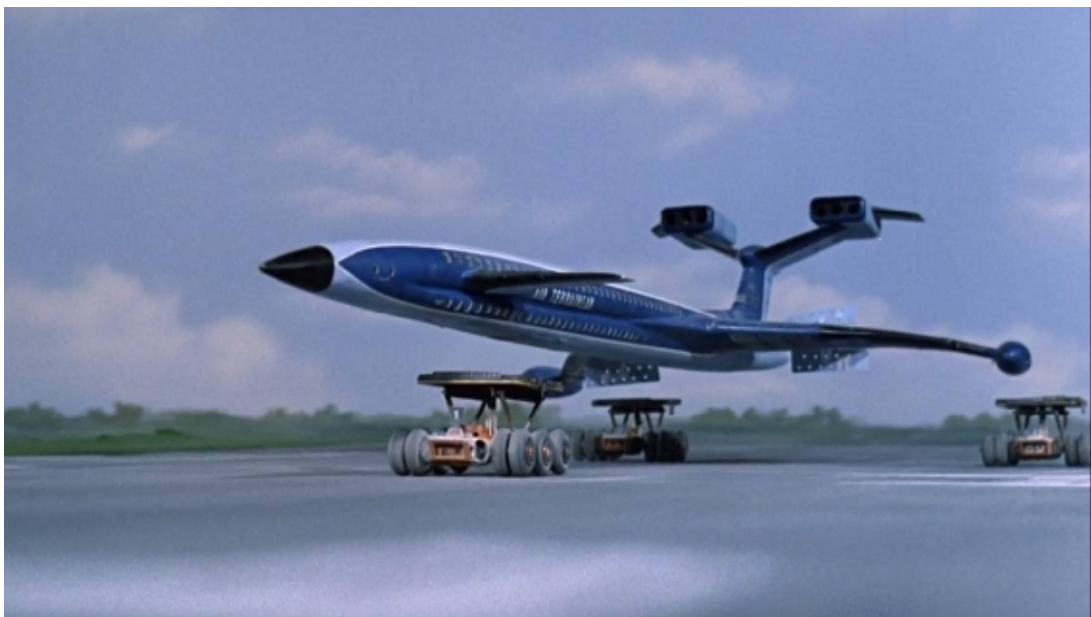


**Figure 45: Michael Bowdidge, *Finders Keepers* (2010)**

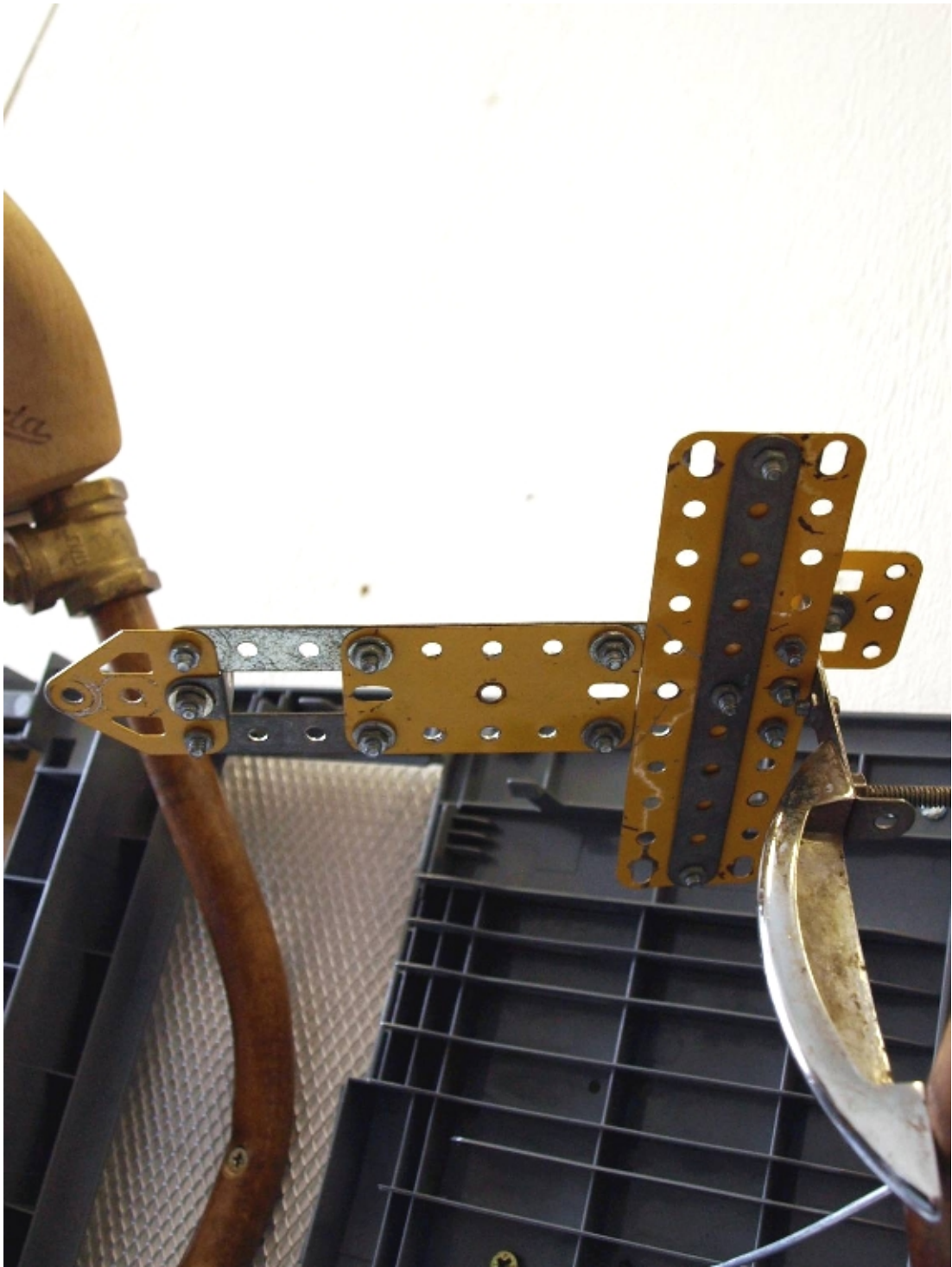




**Figure 46: Michael Bowdidge, *The Long Haul* (1977-2010)**



**Figure 47: The *Fireflash* makes an emergency landing in *Episode 1* of Gerry Anderson's *Thunderbirds* (*Trapped in the Sky*, first broadcast 30<sup>th</sup> September 1965)**



**Figure 48: Michael Bowdidge: *The Long Haul* (detail, 1977-2010)**

#### 4. The nuts and bolts of childhood

Before there was an aeroplane people dreamed about aeroplanes and what a world with them would look like. But, as the reality was nothing like this dream, so we have no reason to believe that reality will develop in the way we dream. For our dreams are full of tinsel, like paper hats and costumes (Wittgenstein, 1998, p.48).

So far, various aspects of the temporal functioning of sculptural assemblages have been examined. In Chapter 2, I positioned my own practice as a continuation of a way of working which has been in existence for around a century. To rethink the tradition of assembling objects in this way is to view the medium as redemptive (and capable of redemption) from exactly the proto-Augustinian viewpoint against which Danto (1981, p.vi) warns us.<sup>33</sup>

As stated previously, in seeking to assimilate the diverse iterations of this practice into a continuity, it is not my intention to eradicate their differences. Rather, it is the case that I want to bring them into dialogue with a view to understanding better my own production in this medium. This is a recuperative manoeuvre which extends my thinking about materials to encompass the medium in which I work. In short, I want to go backwards to bring something forward.

As discussed in the previous chapter, some of the objects that I use have the capacity to act as conduits to memory, allowing them to '[offer] up hidden and now inadmissible counter-narratives of once valued lifeworlds' (Seremetakis,

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<sup>33</sup> Danto suggests a possible (and his view mistaken) interpretation of the Readymade as '...a theory as old at least as Saint Augustine... the aesthetic transform of an essentially Christian teaching that the least of us – perhaps especially the least of us – is luminous in holy grace' (1981, p.vi). See also my previous discussion of this point on pp.64-65.



1994, p.10). While I am by no means the first artist to make this discovery, the exploitation of the mnemonic function of objects in relation to the specificities of my own practice has led me to fresh insights.

### **Positively nostalgic**

For two decades I have used whole and fragmented objects to make sculpture. Most of these things originate from the second half of the twentieth century. Such items are accessible to an artist of relatively limited financial means as they are literally 'found objects'; sometimes I buy things cheaply from junk shops and charity shops. While there is the occasional side trip to B & Q for new fixtures and fittings, most of my materials are recycled. I am attracted to domestic objects and bric-a-brac of the third quarter of the twentieth century. This is the everyday material culture of my childhood, and one which continues to hold a powerful attraction for me. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton (1981) posit that:

The home contains the most special objects: those that were selected by the person to attend to regularly or to have close at hand, that create permanence in the intimate life of a person, and are therefore that are most involved in making up his or her identity (p.17).

The notion of objects constituting identity extends beyond the things that we choose ourselves to encompass those chosen by the people into whose homes we were born; our parents and grandparents (and great grandparents). Like many other people, my affinity to these 'first things' is still very strong, to the extent that I sometimes wonder if I underwent a form of visual 'imprinting' as a child, like a young bird. This is the process through which goslings (and other young birds) come to identify their mothers. Arthur Koestler refers to Oskar Heinroth's description of imprinting as *Prägung*, which literally translates as 'stamping (a coin)' (1964, p.489). Being embossed strikes me as a good

metaphorical fit for the process of coming to identify visually with my early surroundings. In relation to a similar process, the sociologist Sherry Turkle quotes Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*: 'a child went forth everyday/and the first object he look'd upon/that object he became' (2007, p.10).

Bachelard suggests: 'our house is our corner of the world... it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the world' (1964, p.4). As a child I spent a great deal of time building dens under my bed, creating camps under sheets draped between chests of drawers and being fascinated by the contents of said drawers, tool cupboards and needlework boxes. The spaces where my parents stored things were ordinary, and yet also extraordinary to me, for these were the places that told me stories about my parents in a way that directly asking them about things never would.

In the introduction to *Evocative Objects*, Turkle (2007) describes searching for traces of her missing father when she was a child in the 'memory closet' in her grandparents' apartment. This was a kitchen cupboard which contained 'my aunt's and mother's books, trinkets, souvenirs and photographs' (p.3). While Turkle was permitted to examine and look at the contents of the closet, she understood the tacit prohibition against asking questions about her absent father. This was brought into stark relief when she found a photograph whose face had been cut out: 'the image had been attacked, but it contained so many missing puzzle pieces. What his hands looked like. That he wore lace up shoes. That his pants were tweed' (p.4).

While there were no family secrets of that calibre in our own cupboards, I was still not really supposed to go poking around in them. Inevitably they became forbidden fruits that were as difficult for me to resist as it was for Nicolas in Saki's short story *The Lumber Room*:

Often and often Nicolas had pictured to himself what the lumber-room might be like, that region that was so carefully sealed from youthful eyes and concerning which no questions were answered. It came up to his expectations (1980, p.374).

Nicolas finds a veritable cornucopia of forbidden objects in the room. I too sought out secret spaces in our flat, and created my own hiding places when I could, as our home was sadly lacking in cubbyholes and nooks. I secretly wished that we lived in a terraced house like my father's parents did. They had stairs, landings, a garden and it was rumoured, even a cellar, all of the attributes which Bachelard suggests create 'refuges for memories' (p.8).

Since childhood I have felt a particular affinity for the things that surrounded me then. As I have grown older I have become increasingly aware that this particular stuff is slowly disappearing from the world, as are many of the people who used to make use of it. Horton points out in his thesis on assemblage that 'in many circumstances things last longer than people' (2003, p.42). So in some ways the materials of assemblage practice serve as a *memento mori*. These objects remind us of disappearance and absence.

Horton (2003) identifies the potential hazards inherent in this form of object based sculptural practice. He thinks that:

A practice of retrieval, reclaiming and revaluing... needs also to be a practice that is very wary of the tendency to sentimentalise the ruined fragment and indulge in empty longing for the past, blind to its miseries. In other words it needs to beware of the dangers of nostalgia (p.42).

As a remedy Horton recommends what he terms 'a positive nostalgia' derived from the work of Walter Benjamin. Horton uses this to recover and recuperate a utopian optimism through the use of the detritus of modernity. He suggests that:

To claim a positive value for nostalgia in so far as it might recall and reclaim a past idealism, or at least a past in which idealism was still possible, borders on the kind of optimism that might be naively idealistic in itself. But rather this than... cynical pessimism in the face of late capitalism's global domination (p.53).

My interest in using such objects is not nostalgic, in the first sense of the word that Horton outlines above. I am not tempted to extrapolate a political stance from the use of these materials, largely because doing so could result in an instrumentalisation of my practice. That said, the notion of a positive nostalgia is an interesting one which connects with the work of Seremetakis (1994), who articulates a similar framework. She undertakes the following exploration of the etymology of the word:

In English the word nostalgia (in Greek *nostalghía*) implies trivializing romantic sentimentality. In Greek the verb *nostalghó* is a composite of *nostó* and *alghó*. *Nostó* means I return, I travel (back to the homeland); the noun *nostós* means the return, the journey, while *a-nostós* means without taste... The opposite of *ánostós* is *nóstimos* and characterizes someone or something that has journeyed or arrived, has matured, ripened and is thus tasty (and useful) (p.4).

Seremetakis develops this notion in a similar way to Horton, stating that 'the Greek etymology evokes the transformative impact of the past as unreconciled historical experience' (p.4). I want to focus on how this passage reveals something vital in these materials; the fact of their being *of* the past while being *in* the present. The journey through ripening to tastiness (and thus usefulness) is one which is undertaken by the materials themselves. It is their capacity to speak of 'else-when' that allows them to bring 'the now' into sharper focus.

Many of the male members of my family were tradesmen or makers of one kind or another: my paternal grandfather was a plumber, my father was a cabinet maker, and my maternal grandfather worked in the rubber trade. The things which they made are gone, broken or only now valued as

reminders of bygone times. Similarly, their working lives are either at an end or over. Though I too have worked in factories, there are both continuities and discontinuities between the ways in which my ancestors (and their peers) worked and my activities as an artist and researcher.

In his re-appraisal of the political significance of Duchamp's Readymades John Roberts (2007) suggests that the major difference between these activities may be between the 'autonomy of artistic subjectivity [and] the heteronomy of productive labour' (p.15). Working with the abandoned, broken fragments of the world that my forebears made and lived in facilitates the creative transformation/redemption of these materials through their re-inscription as artworks. Working with these things allows me to feel a sense of connection to the work of my ancestors. I work simply with hand tools in the studio, much as they did, but for very different reasons. These are methods that I have grown into, or perhaps unconsciously assimilated.

This sense of connecting in my practice to the work of my forebears echoes another argument put forward by Roberts (pp.49-81). He emphasises the social or political critique inherent in Duchamp's appropriation of everyday objects (by overtly enlisting and incorporating the productive labour of other workers in the making of art). My interest in these things has a different focus: I am interested in the way in which these things speak of, and to, the past. Not because I want to return there, but because I value my sense of connection to the time that I come from.

### **Undoing the nuts and bolts of childhood**

The insights that I had gained into how objects function in relation to memory (as a result of Stella Couloutbanis' interaction with *The Visitors*) were of great interest to me, but I did not want to investigate them explicitly

in my practice, as I felt that to do so would result in work which might prove illustrative and superficial. Concerns such as these surface in practice when they are ready to do so. I re-visited these issues in earnest in the spring of 2009. I found some new materials to work with and the impetus to begin a new assemblage: the process of making the work, rather than reflection upon the completed artwork (*Flyer*, 2009, Figure 39 and Figure 40, pp.116-117) led to new insights.

Walking in Duke Street in Leith (the former dock area in the north of Edinburgh) I came across half a dozen discarded bent wood dining chairs. At that point I had stopped working with complete items of furniture and was more interested in exploring the possibilities of components (or fragments) of objects. I liked the bent wood braces which supported the chair legs so I removed them with a screwdriver and took them back to my studio.

When I re-examined them a few days later the braces looked less exciting. I had initially been attracted by their curving, sinuous nature, and thought they might create significant movement in an artwork, but they now looked overly symmetrical. It then occurred to me that cutting one of the braces in half and rotating its sections would disrupt its symmetry. Some experimental twisting of the halved braces showed that this was the case.

Next I had to find a way to join the two rotated and somewhat limb-like halves of the brace back together. I needed a 'body' to which these limbs could be attached. After investigating several possibilities, I settled upon a cube of wood from a disassembled freight pallet. I was attracted to the heavy circular grain on two sides of the block, which suggested a mounting point for the limbs. I liked the idea of the grain spreading out from the limbs like ripples on a pond.

I drilled holes for the limbs, but the condition of the wood led to repeated cracking, until it eventually split in two. I was determined to make use of the block, as I had decided that the process of reinforcement could become a part of the work formally and poetically, so I strengthened it with screws and a hinge. The places where the limbs entered the block also needed strengthening, so I added a large, rusty washer to each of the limbs. These functioned as collars at the limbs' point of entry to the wooden cube.

In my mind this had become a wall-based piece, as I realised that it could be mounted quickly and simply by using one of the pre-existing holes in the lower limb and a large screw. This allowed it to be attached firmly and yet paradoxically still appear to be barely fixed to the wall at all (because of its small footprint). While the body and limbs of the assemblage looked complete, the ends of the limbs looked unfinished, so I decided to try to incorporate some Meccano into this assemblage. I felt strongly that the limbs needed to end in claws or feet of some kind, and this construction toy might prove to be a suitable material for this task.

A month or so previously I had asked my mother to send me my childhood Meccano set, with a view to using it in the studio. Over the course of the previous year I produced several larger works (including *Joker*, 2009, Figure 31, p.89) which used Dexion (a pre-fabricated perforated metal racking system) to connect disparate elements. For a while I had wanted to find a material which could function like Dexion, but at a smaller scale suitable for use in my wall-based pieces.<sup>34</sup>

This was the Meccano with which my brother and I had played as children; that was not at that point particularly important to me. The pastness of these things is in some sense a given for me: it is a constantly present aspect of all

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<sup>34</sup> The overtly connective nature of these materials is a subject to which I will return in greater detail in Chapter 5.

my materials. It just seemed wasteful to purchase used Meccano on eBay when there was a substantial amount of it lying unused at my parents' home.

In the weeks since the arrival of the box of toy parts, I had barely looked at it. There were a reasonable quantity of components, as well as the remains of several partly assembled models that I had built as a child. In order to construct the claws I was forced to take apart some of these leftover fragments of the models I had built years ago.

As I explained in relation to *Upwards and Onwards* (see Chapter 1, pp.29-30) disassembly is very much a part of my everyday studio practice, however what I want to focus on here is not the rationale for taking something apart, but the act of doing so in relation to a particular set of materials. As I dissembled these fragments of former playthings I realised that I was undoing bolts which I had done up over 30 years previously.

The strangeness of this feeling is very difficult to describe.<sup>35</sup> Suddenly it felt as if there was both an immense distance of time (and yet paradoxically almost none at all) between my (then) forty-two-year-old self and the child that I had once been. That such a realisation should come about through the manipulation of an overtly connective construction toy felt particularly appropriate. Seremetakis describes such a process:

Against the flow of the present, there is a stillness in the material culture of historicity; those things, spaces, gestures, and tales that signify the perceptual capacity for elemental historical creation. Stillness is the moment when the buried, the discarded and forgotten escape to the social surface of awareness like life supporting oxygen. It is the moment of exit from historical dust<sup>36</sup> (1994, p.12).

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<sup>35</sup> Wittgenstein asks in relation to a similarly unusual example (which I quote on p.72) whether this is 'only because it so seldom happens?' (1953, p.174). This may well be the case here.



Such occurrences parallel the functioning of the Duck-Rabbit (and the insights gained through the installation of *The Visitors* in the Bonington Building): that is to say, as an atypical event (or phenomenon) which renders visible something which has remained hitherto unnoticed, unthought, or taken for granted. When I undo a screw or bolt now, I frequently wonder who did it up, and when, in a way which I did not before.

To return to the production of the artwork: the claws (for this is what they resembled) proved simple to construct and fix to the limbs. Because I had limited quantities of components available each one was slightly different in appearance; one is outstretched, as if flung back by the momentum of the apparent gait or movement of the artwork, and the other is curved, as if seeking purchase on terrain, despite the seemingly aerial nature of the artwork. I liked this effect, as it suggested a biological flexibility which resonated with the form of the claws, and yet which was at odds with the overtly mechanical nature of the materials. The implied flexibility of the claws disrupted the normative grammar of the material. The assemblage was now complete and I mounted it upon the wall.

The experience of undoing these nuts and bolts of childhood led to further investigations of materials with a personal significance.

### ***Walk Tall***

The design historian Juliet Ash (1996) suggested that:

Memory objects can and do have powerful repercussions in terms of visual and emotional affectivity... memory sparked by an item of

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<sup>36</sup> For an account of Seremetakis' own similarly revelatory experiences in relation to the cutting of wild greens (*hórta*) to cook with see *The Senses Still* (1994, pp.16-17).

clothing has as its essence – mystery. It is a prompting to our conscious lives of inexplicable mysteries which exist both in present relations with living people and as reminders of people who are absent (pp.219-220).

This excerpt from my studio notebook in June 2009 relates to just such a process:

The other week I was thinking about working with Grandfather Joe's walking stick, which I had 'inherited' after he died in 2000 – I hadn't taken it with a view to making art with it – I wasn't making sculpture at that time - I had just thought it might be useful at some point... and somehow it seemed a shame to throw it away.

As part of the process of starting to think about incorporating it within an artwork I took the tip off of it to see what the end of it was like underneath, then replaced it, and then realised that the tip was worn on one side only, but it had not occurred to me to check or record the original placement of the tip, and now that information was lost forever. Was the worn part meant to go at the front, or the back, or to one side? I couldn't remember how it had been before I removed it or how he had used it.

So the walking stick started its life in the studio as something personally significant, but fundamentally unexamined, and then the act of turning it into something to work with (or investigating its assemblative potential - a wooden end looked more likely to be able to connect with something than the rubber tip did) turned it into just 'stuff' (and then made me realise that it had now lost part of its ability to talk to me about Joe). In combination the tip and the shaft could have told me something about his gait and the way he used the stick, but I sacrificed this unknowingly in order to try to make an artwork. Separately these things have a lot less to say than they did before I took them apart.

I felt a bit sad about this, but then the story itself becomes part of something, it gets re-used (and does something) by being incorporated into the writing here. But what does it do? It sheds some light on the questions I have about working with personally significant objects. Now I just have to do something artistic with the walking stick.

The walking stick was eventually incorporated into the assemblage *Walk Tall* (2010, Figure 41, p.118). It forms a non-representative portrait in objects of my grandfather, a working out in objects of what Ash terms 'the co-existence of reassurance and disquiet... sparked by an item of clothing' (1996, p.220). So while I have lost something, I have gained something, and maybe said something meaningful about him. So nothing is really lost, only transformed.

The construction of this piece was quite simple. Having removed the rubber tip of the walking stick, it struck me that extending the stick would allow me to create the impression that my grandfather was a much bigger man than he had been in reality, for this is how he had always struck me metaphorically.

I built the extension using a large hexagonal nut, two steel washers, an old coffee table leg, a section of crenulated brass tubing from an old standard lamp, and a large black plastic knob which served as a new tip for the now much longer stick. The overall length of the extension was around 80 cm, while the width of the new tip allowed the assemblage to become freestanding. This struck me as a successful arrangement, because the objects I had chosen were of a type and age which 'fitted' with the stick (and my grandfather). But it still felt like it needed some kind of framing device.

One of my clearest memories of my grandfather is regularly seeing him stripped to the waist on a Saturday afternoon in the kitchen of the flat in East Ham that he shared with my grandmother. When we arrived for our weekly visit, he would still be having what he called a 'strip wash' and a hurried shave, as a result of having spent the morning working in their garden. He was never ready when we arrived, and so we always caught him there. Why he didn't use their perfectly adequate bathroom remains a mystery to me.

To facilitate this ritual, a small circular shaving mirror lived on the window sill of their kitchen, seemingly out of place and yet, provided that one knew my grandfather, in reality exactly where it needed to be. Having a similar object in my studio, I decided to experiment with placing the extended walking stick onto the surface of the mirror, in order to see if it could function as a framing device. This worked well, particularly when I used the magnifying side of the mirror, as this created an air of unreality and distortion which seemed appropriate to the 'out-of-time-ness' of the artwork.

Now that the walking stick has been incorporated into an artwork it no longer viscerally reminds me of my grandfather in the same way that it used to, although conceptually (for want of a better word) I still know that it was his, and it allows the work to function as a portrait of sorts.

### **The box**

As a result of these events, I became increasingly interested in working with personal materials. I mentioned this one day to my father, George Bowdidge. He replied that if that was the case, he had a great deal of bric-a-brac in his shed and his tool cupboard that I could have. My father had also recently seen a work of mine in an exhibition in London. This work (*Variable*, 2009, Figure 42, p.119) incorporated four old coffee table legs, and my father had remarked at the time that he had a number of similar items that he did not need. He had also recently retired and wanted to have 'a bit of a clear out'. I accepted his offer enthusiastically, and we discussed other items that he might be able to send me (I was particularly interested in some pieces of Dexion racking which he had mentioned). We agreed that he would assemble a box of materials and post it to me.

A couple of weeks later the box arrived and I took it to my studio (Figure 43, p.120). It sat there unopened for several weeks, creating a feeling of pressure which was not entirely pleasant. Part of me did not want to open the box, for reasons I could not quite fathom. I even toyed with the idea of asking someone else to open it for me.

Eventually boredom and curiosity overcame my anxieties and I opened the box. Inside it, I found several coffee table legs, some Dexion strips, various nuts, bolts, screws, washers, door handles and other bits and pieces. There were also three plastic bags, which were labelled as follows: Brentwood Grandad (my mother's father's father), Grandad Joe (my mother's father) and Grandad Bowdidge (my father's father). Each bag contained, as my father had explained to me on the phone, items which had been passed down to him over the years.

There is a certain pragmatism at work here. Whiteley (2011) suggests (in relation to her own Northern English working class family's very similar attitude to material things) that it is 'a post-war make-do-and-mend' mentality... the legacy of... 1950s austerity' (p.x). Her own father had worked as a rag and bone man (a familiar sight from my own childhood) and Whiteley proudly makes a connection back from him to Benjamin and Baudelaire's ragpickers, who 'had a worthy occupation which epitomised urban modernity' (p.xi). She also details the treasure trove of things put by for re-use, reworking and recycling in their pantry (p.x).

I recognise this attitude to materials from my own slightly later working class upbringing in London (and from my own practice). Things are put to one side in case they should one day become useful again, but the passing of time, while these objects and fragments sit in dusty drawers, cupboards and sheds, gives them a deeper significance, as they slowly and imperceptibly

move from being part of a world that *is*, to becoming emissaries from a world that *was*. As Seremetakis puts it:

As a sensory form in itself, the artifact can provoke the emergence of, the awakening of the layered memories and thus the senses contained within it' (1994, p.10).

As stated previously, I see a continuity, and yet also a radical shift between the work that I make and the labour of my immediate ancestors: the same or similar tools and materials are used but the end results (of our labour and degree of autonomy) is very different. The collection, storage and re-use of surplus and left-over materials that they practised undergoes a parallel transformation in my own practice. I share their 'redemptive' attitude to materials, but I have amplified this into an active process of seeking these things out.

The transformation of the activities of my parents (and their parents) into my own can be seen as a move into reflexive visibility: through their transformation into the methods and materials of art they bring this 'form of life' to a greater degree of visibility, much as the methods of my practice have become increasingly visible to me through my research.

### ***Finders Keepers***

In the past I have found working with limits to be a positive experience, particularly in relation to the *Urban Journeys* project which I undertook for the Red Gallery in Hull with Chris Pickup in 2007. In that particular instance I set myself the task of only working with materials found on a given day in a particular part of the city. This proved to be a fruitful process, and as a result of that experience the placing of self-imposed limits on the materials I make use of has become a regular part of my toolbox of creative methods.

To return to the matter of the box: having finally opened it and inspected its contents, it was time to try to build something from these things. To make this task more manageable (and interesting) I decided to place some limits on the type of materials I would use.

Rather than attempt to produce something from the pool of all the items in the box, I decided to begin by working just with things which had belonged to my father, rather than using any of the things that he had acquired from my other relatives. I later discovered that the maintenance of this boundary would not be as straightforward as I had anticipated.

Further investigation of my chosen materials (Figure 44, p.120), led me to place another limitation on the items that I was going to use. There were a significant number of brass fittings in this package, and as I had never attempted to construct a piece solely from such materials, I thought it might be interesting to attempt to do so.

One of the first things to catch my eye was a pair of towel rail fittings, each of which consisted of a small, bowl-like hemisphere that was attached by a short shaft to a flat plate with two countersunk holes drilled in it, presumably to allow the fitting to be screwed to a wall. There was also a glass marble of the kind which was ubiquitous in my childhood. I have always been fond of marbles, although I have sadly lost most of mine over the years. I was still drawn to use it, even though it wasn't made of brass, so I was already considering making an exception to my rule. I tried placing the marble within the upturned 'bowl' of one of the fittings and was immediately struck by the way in which it nestled securely within it, and protruded sufficiently to remain visible.

The way in which the fitting held the marble (*i.e.* somewhat protectively, and yet at the same time almost as if it was being held out for inspection, or

even proffered as a gift) struck me as having something in common with the way in which my father had held onto these things. While my father does not know what a bricoleur is, he is an exemplary one. He saved these things, kept them and then eventually passed them on to me (when he judged that they might be of more use to me than to him, or that space in his shed was actually a more valuable commodity). Such items function as informal heirlooms.

Having screwed this fitting to the wall, I started to experiment with the addition of other items around it. My approach was one which might be classified as broadly improvisatory, although I was reasonably certain that the other components which I intended to add to the assemblage would not actually touch, but would still be placed sufficiently close to each other that they would form a coherent compositional structure<sup>37</sup> (*Finders Keepers*, 2010, Figure 45, p.121).

The two hooks beneath the fitting which contained the marble were added next, as I liked the way in which they appeared to connect with each other without really touching (much as my male relatives and I did and still do). It felt appropriate, given the materials from which it was being constructed, that this artwork was beginning to speak to me about the transmission of these things (and also the nature of the relationships between their keepers).

I started to think about extending the piece upwards from the original fitting and the marble which it contained. I wanted the space above the marble to feel protected in some way, and yet still feel open to inspection. The addition of a brass coat hook rotated into the horizontal plane achieved this effect, providing a sense of something which on one side opened outwards to

<sup>37</sup> This is a strategy which I have used on numerous occasions in wall based works. An earlier example of this way of working is provided by *Conditional* (2006, Figure 5, p.22).



reveal, while on the other side enfolded and protected the thing beneath it (almost like arms).

Adding the second towel rail fittings in an inverted position above the coat hook reinforced this notion of something protected, concealed and now 'open to view'. The paired fittings could now be read as two halves of a clam-like shell which had opened to reveal something precious and pearl like within. This effect was pleasing but there was still something missing.

There was something of the figure about the assemblage - it appeared to have legs (or a tail), a torso and a suggestion of arms. If I was to follow the logic of this grammar then something which might allude to a head was required. If this figure is a portrait of sorts in objects, the question arises as to who it represents. The obvious answer is my father, but on further reflection I suspect that it is more of an (un)monument to all of the bricoleurs of my family (and perhaps those of other families too).

I searched the available brass components again, but there did not seem to be anything suitable there. I was at a loss as to how I should proceed. It seemed to me that there were two options: Once again I could disregard the 'rule' which I had set in place to govern the making of this piece (*i.e.* that it should consist only of objects supplied to me by my father from his own stock of objects) and use any brass item from my wider studio stock to resolve the artwork, thus making formal resolution paramount. I was uncomfortable with this, as I wanted to maintain the integrity of the selection process as much as I could, given that I had already made an exception for the marble.

Alternatively, I could widen the range of things which I was prepared to include in the artwork but retain the limitation of only working with things my father had sent me. This too felt somewhat arbitrary. I felt strongly that the

final component(s) ought to be brass, as I liked the unifying effect that this restriction had created. Neither of these options felt right.

It then occurred to me that there was a third option – to widen my search to include any brass items in the other bags in the box which my father had sent me (*i.e.* amongst the things that he had harvested from our other relatives). This would have the advantage of preserving the material integrity of the work by extending the conceptual stance that I had taken. Anything I found in the bags which had come from my grandparents would still be involved in the processes of handing down and passing on which the artwork referenced. This seemed the most preferable option.

What happened next confirmed my decision was the correct one, as I immediately found what I was looking for. Searching in the bag of things which had belonged to my father's father (Ernest Bowdidge) I found another brass coat hook, of exactly the same kind that I had used to make the 'arms' of the figure. This item, placed this time in the vertical plane, completed the composition formally and rhythmically without disrupting its conceptual rigour.

These two hooks, both aged in a very similar way and identical in design, had in all probability once been part of a set, implying that my grandfather and my father had exchanged one of them at some point.<sup>38</sup> So what had come to view in the making of this artwork was not just the notion of my

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<sup>38</sup> I asked my father if he can recall how these hooks happened to be present in both of these sets of materials, having explained to him what had happened in the studio. He has said that he does not recall my grandfather giving a hook to him, but accepts that this is the most likely version of events. It is interesting to note that it did not occur to my father that he might have instead have given this hook to my grandfather (this is equally likely, given that they both had one each). I suspect that this may imply something about the general way in which these objects are transmitted, *i.e.* from older members of the family to younger ones, and our grammatical expectations of how we *expect* them to be transmitted.

family as finders and keepers of useful bits of bric-a-brac (hence the title of this work), but a specific example of the processes of sharing and passing on these objects which had occurred decades previously (my grandfather died in 1979). That this process is not explicitly visible in the artwork itself does not perturb me. It is through the process of research that this knowledge arises. The artwork is a vital part of that process, but reflection and contextualisation are also needed.

### ***The Long Haul***

Another related artwork (*The Long Haul*, 1977-2010, Figure 46, p.122) is relevant here because making it led to changes in the way that I think through and about objects. I explained earlier how, when I exhibited *The Visitors* in the Bonington Building at Nottingham Trent University in 2007, the relationship of the sculptures to their setting emphasised their apparent 'out-of-timeness'. The way in which they contrasted with their setting carried a certain critical and poetic charge, and it made me more aware of the potential temporal function in my materials.

Because I am attracted to working with things which are often of a certain age the assemblages I create from them can also seem as if they date from the same period as their materials. I had slowly come to realise that, although I wanted to retain this pastness, I also needed to incorporate a wider range of materials, if I wanted to make the 'out-of-timeness' of some of my components more visible.

In the studio I had several boxes of computer parts. The components which interested me the most were a number of flat, dark grey injection moulded plastic panels, parts of various printers. No two panels were identical, and yet there was a strong family resemblance between them. They had a grid-like

quality which I found appealing. This gave me the idea of assembling them into a flat, wall-based structure and allowing other, possibly contrasting, sculptural elements to break through their openings.

This artwork took about 3 months to complete. During that time several contrasting sub-assemblages which breached the plastic structure were built from older (looking) components, so a more contemporary materiality was formally disrupted by materials which had a greater degree of pastness. As the assemblage neared completion, I realised that the structure of the artwork was beginning to echo my desire to 'bring something forward', to make the out-of-timeness of the things that I used burst visibly into the present.

Choosing brightly coloured components of different colours offered a means of creating a contrast between the plastic panels and the 'older' materials. On first opening the parcel of Meccano I had been sent, I had noticed that it contained various fragments of childhood constructions. The most recognisable of these was an incomplete model aircraft, which was somewhat futuristic in appearance. The body was long and flat; it had wings at the rear end of the vehicle, and lacked a tail plane. The half-finished model plane was colourful, and I thought it would work well with the large blue Meccano shape at the right of the composition and the red tap on the left.

On seeing it again I remembered my childhood frustration while making it.<sup>39</sup> I had been attempting to build a model of the fictional atomic powered Fireflash jetliner which featured in Gerry Anderson's *Thunderbirds* (Figure 47, p.122). David Szondy (2011) says:

When *Thunderbirds* aired, the British & French governments were developing what would be the only supersonic passenger plane ever to

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<sup>39</sup> I recently discovered that my father's favourite things to build from Meccano as a child were also aeroplanes, or, as he put it, 'small plane shapes' (personal communication, telephone call, March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011).

enter service, the Concorde. At the time, such a technological feat was rated as being second only to the Moon landings in significance. Fireflash was the 21st century's answer to her 20th century sister (p.1).

As a child I was equally obsessed with Concorde and Fireflash, which had inspired my attempt at making such an aircraft using Meccano. Despite my best efforts, I had become disenchanted with the gap between the exciting futuristic image I had seen on screen and the clumsiness of my own construction. I had abandoned the project in disgust. I was 10 years old.

Suddenly I saw what I could not see then – it needed a tail piece, both to finish it off as an aircraft and to complete the formal reference to Fireflash. I set to work and added one using some of the remaining Meccano. I then realised that extending the vertical of the tail piece beneath the body of the plane would allow it to be attached to the rest of the assemblage (much as model aircraft often incorporate a similarly positioned transparent 'stand'). The aircraft successfully found its place in the assemblage (Figure 48, p.123). I felt a profound (and slightly ridiculous) sense of satisfaction at completing the model after so much time.

When I reflected upon what had taken place, a title immediately suggested itself – *The Long Haul*. The inclusion of my recently completed model plane and the thirty three years that it had taken to complete that particular component made it doubly fitting. I expanded the dates of its construction (1977-2010) to include my abortive childhood attempts at building the plane. I had no idea in 1977 that I would eventually complete the model thirty three years later on, and it might be seen as disingenuous to claim that year as the starting point of the piece. However, I argue that it is not, for exactly the same reasons that Jeff Koons does here:

When I was about four and a half, five years old, I would go after school to this little building, like a little shelter. In the afternoons we'd make things out of Popsicle sticks. We'd work with Play-Doh. And this experience gave me my foundation. That's what I hold onto in the world. And whatever I made at that time I know is equivalent to what I'm doing now. And that was, for me, really, art (quoted in Hall, 1999, p.278).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter shows how hitherto unsuspected processes of transmission and reinscription can facilitate the 'bringing forward' of materials, methods and forms of life, yet in all of these instances there is a transformative quality to the process. The final chapter reflects on my subsequent development of my practice in the light of these discoveries, on the connections which I have made and on the nature of connection itself.



**Figure 49: Michael Bowdidge, *The Lesson* (2007)**



**Figure 50: Michael Bowdidge, *The Lesson* (2007)**





**Figure 51: Michael Bowdidge, *Sweet Spot* (2007)**



**Figure 52: Michael Bowdidge, *Terminal* (2006)**

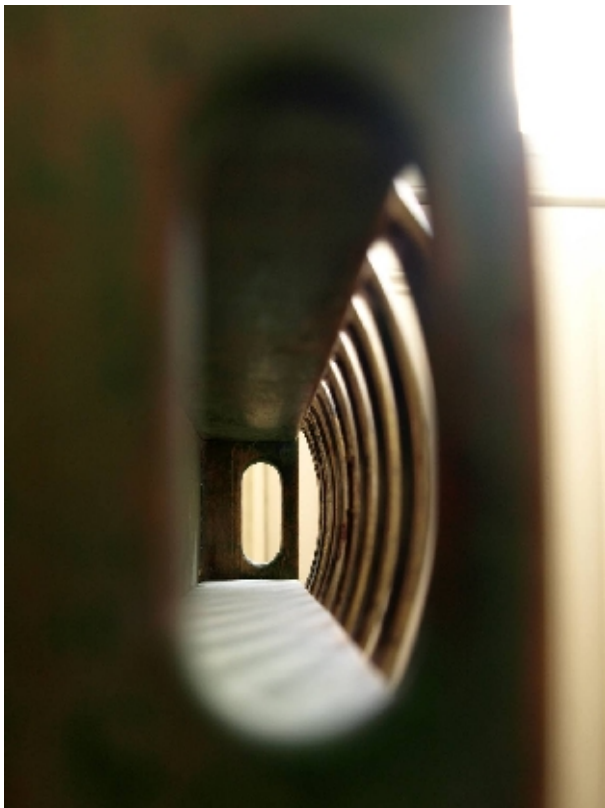




**Figure 53: Arman, *Infinity of Typewriters and Infinity of Monkeys and Infinity of Time = Hamlet* (1962)**



**Figure 54: Michael Bowdidge, *Passage* (2006-2009)**

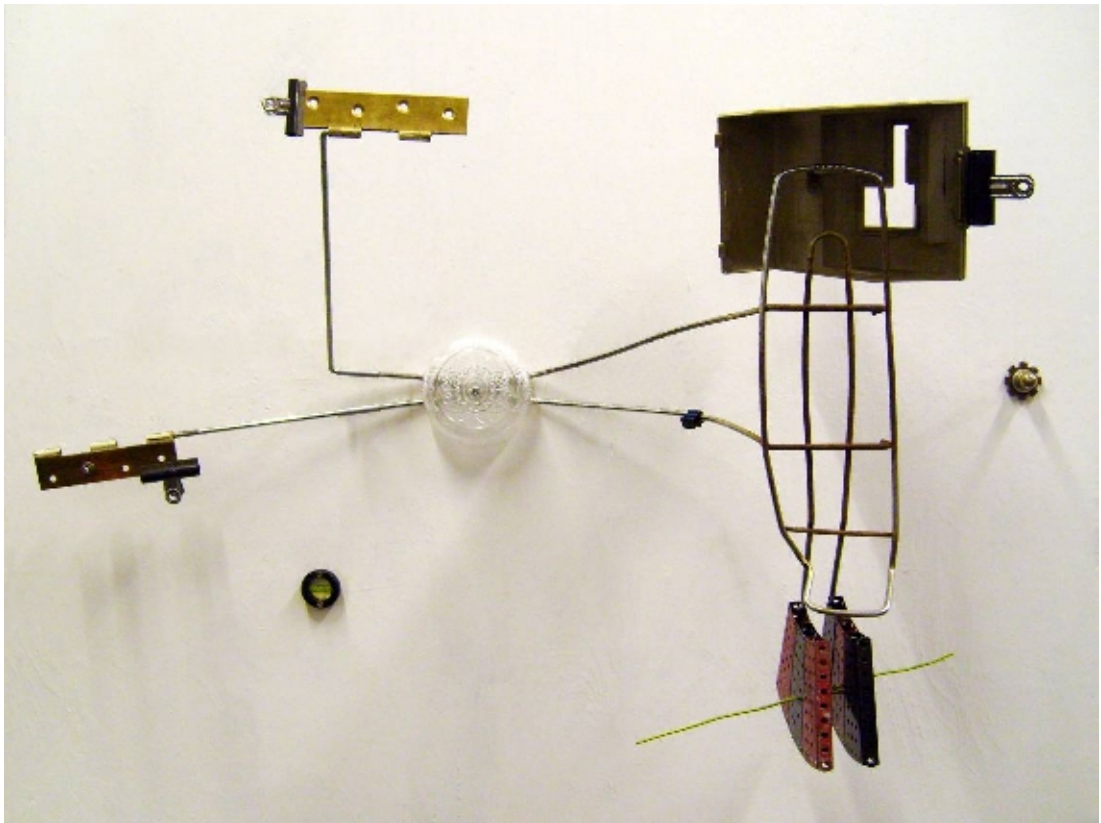


**Figure 55: Michael Bowdidge, *Passage* (detail, 2006-2009)**





**Figure 56: Tony Cragg, *Palette* (1985)**

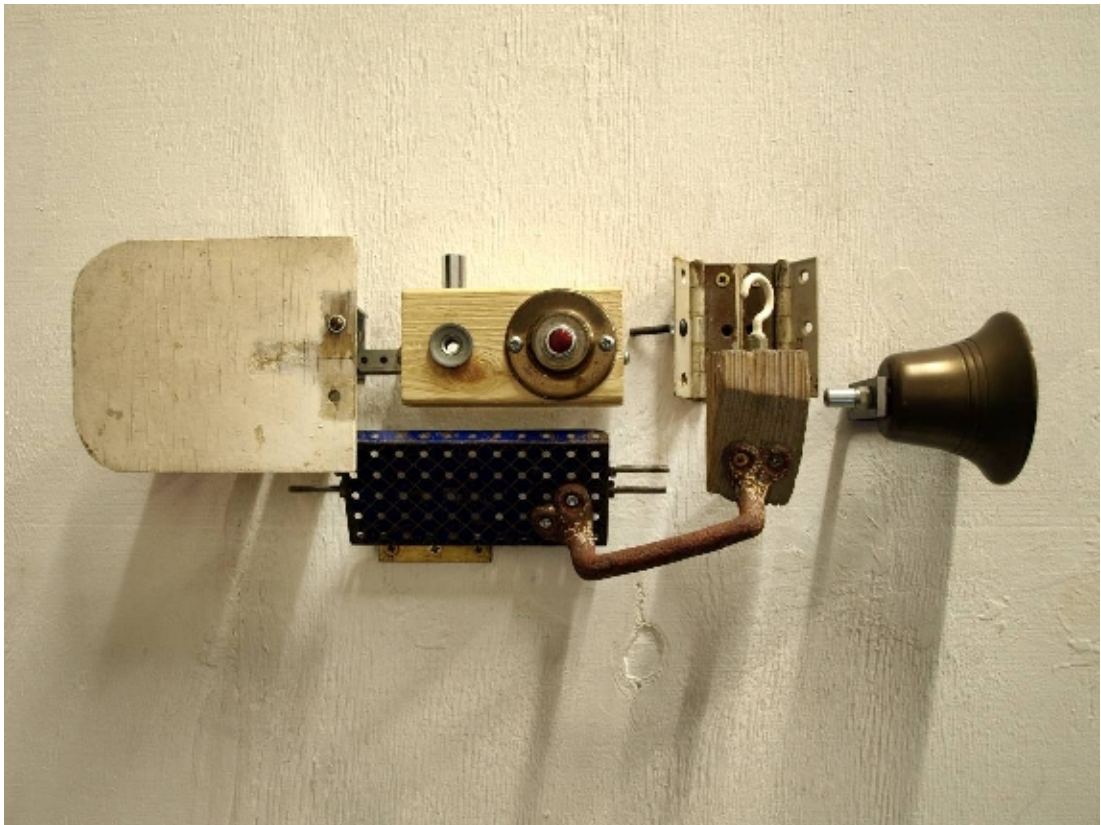


**Figure 57: Michael Bowdidge, *Clipper* (2010)**



**Figure 58: Michael Bowdidge, *Clipper* (details, 2010)**





**Figure 59: Michael Bowdidge, *Plunderbus* (2010-2011)**



**Figure 60: Michael Bowdidge, *Plunderbus* (detail, 2010-2011)**

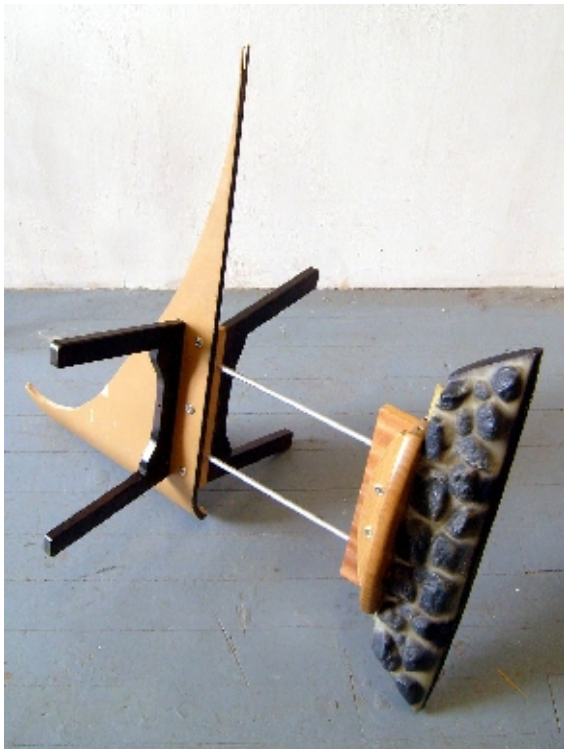


**Figure 61: Michael Bowdidge, *Plunderbus* (detail, 2010-2011)**





**Figure 62: Michael Bowdidge, *Collision Damage* (2010)**



**Figure 63: Michael Bowdidge, *Collision Damage* (unfinished, 2010)**



**Figure 64: Michael Bowdidge, *Full Tilt* (2010)**



**Figure 65: Michael Bowdidge, *Full Tilt* (2010)**



**Figure 66: Nathan Sawaya, *Yellow* (2006)**



**Figure 67: Harold Hoy, *Polar Bear* (1998)**

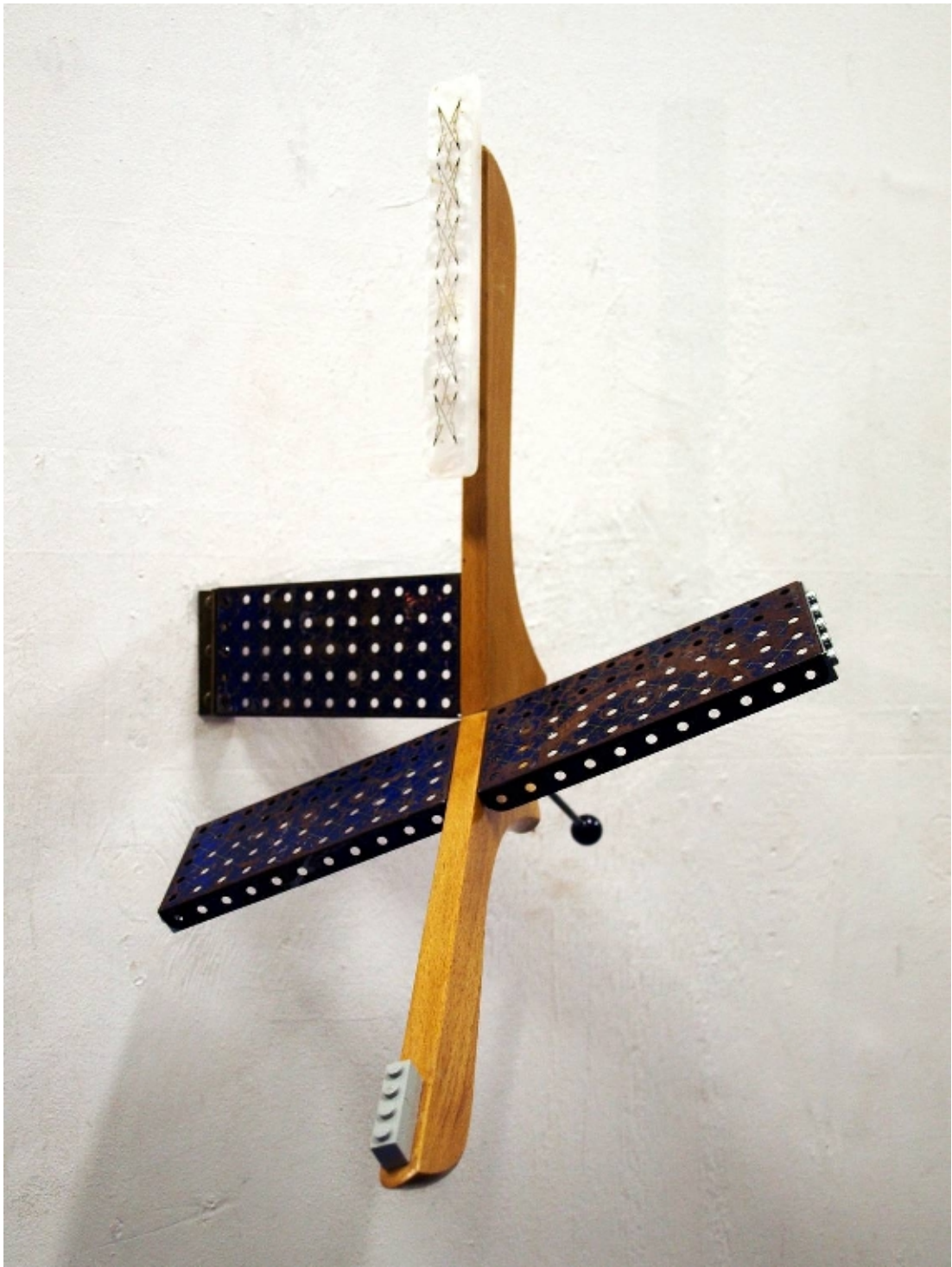




Figure 68: Dirk Polak, *Skeptomenos Manifeste Mecano* (n.d.)



Figure 69: Tomoko Takahashi, *My Playstation* (2005)



**Figure 70: Michael Bowdidge, *Offerer* (2011)**

## 5. Fitting it all together

We are again and again using this simile of something clicking or fitting, when there is really nothing that clicks or that fits anything (Wittgenstein, 1967, p.19)

I want to return now, with these insights in mind, to examine how objects were fitted together in two of my earlier larger scale works and compare those processes to those of my current work.

### Wittgenstein and the click

The quotation from Wittgenstein which opens this chapter is from *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* (edited by Cyril Barrett, 1967). This short book consists of notes taken by students from Wittgenstein's lectures, which he did not publish during his lifetime. I have extracted it from a longer discussion of how the simile – that something 'clicks' or 'fits'— is applied to aesthetic judgements. Wittgenstein says that 'it is as if you needed some criterion, namely the clicking, to know the right thing has happened' (p.19). He then moves from the notion of 'the click' to more general considerations of what he calls 'aesthetic impressions'.

The notion of the 'click' is worthy of further consideration because this simile articulates the *sensation* of something falling into place aesthetically. I recognise this from my experiences as a viewer of art, but it is in relation to my experiences as a maker that I feel the sense of this most strongly. The significance of the click is doubled there in a way which extends Wollheim's notion of the 'twofold' (which argues for a division of visual attention in

relation to *seeing-in*)<sup>40</sup> to encompass the aesthetic sensation of something 'clicking' being superimposed upon the actual physical fitting together of two components (which sometimes occurs with a quite literal audible click).

The practical and the aesthetic aspects of fitting things together are fundamentally intertwined here. In relation to assemblage, the aesthetic satisfaction derived from this process comes in part from how well the components fit each other physically. For me this is particularly true if the components in question were not designed to fit each other. Of course, it is also the case that an aesthetic 'click' might just as easily rest upon a 'bad fit', or upon 'no fit', but such instances would not have the 'twofoldness' described above. I now want to examine an example of this process.

### ***Caught***

I mentioned in passing in chapter 1 the artwork that I now want to describe: *Caught* (2006, Figure 4, p.21). This piece was constructed very simply: I removed the cushion from the seat of the large green chair and fitted the back of the smaller red chair in its place. These two items of furniture came together in a position of balance. To quote from my studio diary (written in August 2006 a couple of weeks after the construction of the piece):

Two chairs came together so quickly that I do not remember their moment of coming together. Both had been in the studio for a number of months and had both 'been in previous relationships' – the green one in an assemblage which would only have worked if I had been able to suspend the laws of physics, in that I had wanted an upturned wicker chair to 'hover' above the green armchair but I was not prepared to use wires/hooks/string to facilitate this, as I felt that these practical supports would have become a part of the piece in a way which was somehow 'at odds' with what I had wanted to happen,

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<sup>40</sup> See my previous discussion of this in Chapter 3 (p.100) and Wollheim (1980, pp.211-213).

perhaps because it would have been obvious how I had achieved this effect.

The red chair had been in a less 'well defined' relationship (but one, which seems, on reflection to have informed the final piece as much as that which the green chair had been involved in). It had been placed next to a similar chair (one which was slight smaller) and it had struck me that the two seem[ed] to share a degree of difference/similarity which references/resonates with the similarities/differences of two people who appear to have an affinity for each other/are in some kind of relationship.

The fitting together of two chairs becomes a metaphor for the 'fit' of a human couple. This occurs because furniture references the absent human form, allowing the viewer to make the linkage from objects to people.<sup>41</sup> The ambiguity inherent in this pairing was striking. This was a quality that I wanted to reflect in the title, which took much longer to create than the work itself. When spoken aloud the title multiplies the ambiguity, as 'caught' is (in some accents at least) a heterographic homophone for 'court'.

Although the interlocking, interdependent nature of this arrangement has certain obvious physical connotations, what is of greater interest is the imperfection of the fit between these things. While it is good enough to allow the artwork (and perhaps the human relationship to which it alludes) to function, the fit is imperfect. The back of the red chair tapers outwards, so that at its base it does not touch the arms of the green chair, but as it widens it distorts the fabric – causing bulges under the arms of the green chair and putting the material under tension. The imperfection of this fit deepens its potential to speak of the complexities of human relationships. So in an absolute sense (and very much inadvertently so) Wittgenstein is right: 'there is really nothing that clicks or that fits anything' (1967, p.19).

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<sup>41</sup> In some ways this parallels the American installation artist Ann Hamilton's use of tables. To quote Nancy Princenthal (2000): 'Hamilton... has often made tables perform in installations as both working surface and human surrogate, finding in them a form that – to cite an essay by philosopher Phillip Fisher much admired by Hamilton – is 'uniquely adjusted to the radius of the human will' (p.87).



This sculpture provides a good example of the twofoldness of the 'click' (even if chairs like this do not make such sounds when brought together). It can be said that these things appear to fit each other, yet it may be worth digging a little deeper into what is meant by that.

From a human perspective (I use that term deliberately) it is clear that these things appear to fit each other *well enough*. When viewed from a customary height and distance (*e.g.* in a gallery or a studio) the success (and simultaneous failure) of their coming together is eminently visible, but from a hundred miles away this artwork would be invisible. From a mile away it might just register as a hazy green and red dot, if at all. Closer examination still (under a microscope) would reveal that what appeared to be a good fit was either perfect (as red molecules pushed up against green molecules, or microscopic fibres of fabric entangled) or nothing of the sort (when the space between them became a gulf). All of this depends on the particular juncture between the chairs that is examined. Again Wittgenstein would be (albeit somewhat nonsensically) proved right. Nothing fits anything, and yet at the same time it does not really matter that this is the case. It works well enough from where we stand.

### ***The Lesson***

I would now like to discuss the way that objects can 'fit' themselves.<sup>42</sup> The artwork I want to examine in relation to this matter is *The Lesson* (2007, Figures 49 and 50, pp.147-148), which I created in the summer of 2007.

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<sup>42</sup> By this I mean (for example) items of furniture which were made by the same manufacturer to the same pattern, which could be said to be loosely the same, but might exhibit different patterns of wear and tear, or vary slightly in their dimensions.

In this sculpture I continued to explore the effects of self-imposed limitations which had driven the creation of my previous four and three chair pieces (*Sweet Spot*, 2007, Figure 51, p.149 and *Terminal*, 2006, Figure 52, p.150). Each of these assemblages was an attempt to create an artwork which found a new way of fitting similar things together (or around themselves) that was compositionally coherent and yet still resulted in the disruption of the normal grammar of these objects. I was now determined to see what could be done with a simple pair of matching chairs.

The French Armenian artist Arman often used multiples of similar objects to make assemblages. I sometimes share with Arman the desire to see what such things can do (or say) when they are brought together. My work tends to engage with the physical fitting together of things, and the physical disruption of their normative grammar which ensues, rather than simply presenting their multiplicity (as in the example of Arman's work shown here, Figure 53, p.151).

To return to the making of *The Lesson*, on closer inspection it became apparent that the seats of these chairs were not fixed in place, as they had a tendency to fall out when turned upside down. Removing the seats resolved this issue and allowed me to focus on arranging the chair frames. I decided not to disassemble them further, as I wanted to produce something quickly and simply. I wanted the new relationship between these things to be non-normative, stable and strong enough for the 'chair-ness' of the components to be apparent, without becoming overwhelmingly so.

As a result of these criteria, I suspected that the arrangement would probably be symmetrical in some way, because of the small number of elements in play. These were non-stacking chairs, so any fit which might come to exist between them would probably come about as a result of a mirroring of connective forms (fitting *ax* into *by* and *bx* into *ay*).

Such was the form that the eventual resolution took: I upturned one of the chairs and placed it, with the top of its backrest in the space where the seat panel had been, on the other chair (and *vice versa*). This arrangement fulfilled my criteria and also created an intriguing negative space in the centre of the assemblage. As I had hoped, the two chairs became a coherent structure and simultaneously remained visibly themselves as components within it.

I was satisfied with this arrangement but now I wanted to counterpoint the symmetry of the chairs. I wondered if this could be achieved by reintroducing the seating panels. On examining them more closely I noticed that the wooden undersides of the panels bore pencilled inscriptions. One of these consisted of the numbers '501-14'. It occurred to me that the leather effect of the seat covers and these snippets of text might well allude to the form of a book if they were hinged together. The asymmetry that I sought might well come about through the way in which the seating panels were to be joined. It had already occurred to me that placing the 'book' on top of the chair structure might lead to interesting associations. The question which remained was how to retain the allusion to the (symmetrical) notion of an open book and create some asymmetry in the assemblage.

I solved this by placing the panels so that the hinged fold of the 'book' ran along the tapered sides of the panels (so that the widest and shortest sides of the panels were juxtaposed at either end). This allowed the tops and bottoms of the panels to remain parallel, but angled the fold of the 'book', creating the desired degree of asymmetry (Figure 50, p.148).

*The Lesson* formally references a lectern, bearing an open (but unreadable) text. Such an item of furniture may be equally at home in an academic context or a religious one. My choice of this form is explained by the fact that

I constructed it while I was planning the large church-based installation *Process(ion)* (Chapter 2, pp.80-85, Figures 16-24, pp.49-53). It may also relate to my desire to find an authoritative voice (and the desire to be heard) as a researcher.

In both of the instances described here (and in much of my large scale and temporary assemblages) I worked (mostly) without tools and focused primarily on the simple arrangement of objects. Such sculptures are held together by the way in which the components fit each other, or by gravity, or by a combination of both. When physical or aesthetic balance plays a part in this process, in either case the end result is an act of positioning something very precisely in relation to the rest of the world.

Contrasting processes are at play in my recent smaller scale assemblages, but before I discuss them, I want to summarise the developments which led to them, with a view to understanding how my previous work has shaped my current production.

### **A bigger picture**

Much of the work that I undertook circa 2007 was large scale and temporary in nature. I focused on this type of making partly due to pragmatic considerations (see Chapter 2, pp.77-80). These pieces were also a development of the large scale furniture-based assemblages that I had been producing since 2005. The beginning of that body of work coincided broadly with the start of the research project. I also produced some smaller scale pieces during that period, but the majority of the assemblages made in 2005-2007 consisted of items of furniture and other large scale components.

Many of those works disrupted normative grammars in simple but effective ways. The inversions of chairs which featured in *Elephant* (2005, Figure 2, p.20) and *Huey, Dewey & Louie* (2005, Figure 3, p.21) provide good examples of this. More complex disruptions of grammar came about as a result of the large scale, site-specific pieces which I discussed in Chapter 2. Similar temporal effects in relation to a large non-site-specific work (*The Visitors*) were detailed in Chapter 3.<sup>43</sup> *The Visitors'* apparent 'out-of-time-ness' and the potential of its components to reveal personal narrative led to important expansions in the range of my materials.

These changes crystallised most visibly in *The Long Haul* (1977-2010) as detailed in Chapter 4. I had wanted to use a broader temporal range of materials in my practice, reflecting those available to the contemporary bricoleur. This involved a literal breaking through of the past to connect with the present, intertwining personal, aesthetic and formal concerns into a single physical and conceptual assemblage.

Other changes in my practice have come about as a reaction to the size and nature of the objects that I was using in the large scale pieces. I often tended to use whole items of furniture; these are best suited either for the grammatical disruption of a space, or for the exploration of how objects can fit around each other. Having spent a significant amount of time investigating these matters I am now drawn to creating assemblages of things which were originally designed as components.

This pertains largely to my interest in the different kinds of grammatical disruption possible with these materials. The works produced from them are

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<sup>43</sup> The out-of time-ness made visible in *The Visitors* was, in turn, dependent on the initial exploration of the dialogic context which took place in relation to the events detailed in Chapter 1. Had those connections not been made then I doubt I would have attempted the further explorations of such a relationship which led to the creation of *The Visitors*.

fragmentary and complex constructions which participate in a large number of grammars almost simultaneously. The viewer's flickering recognition of (and movement between) the schema alluded to, disrupts each one's grammar in turn.<sup>44</sup> I will discuss examples of this process in depth before I draw my conclusions.

I have also started making a much higher proportion of wall-based work - I have moved away from floor based work largely as a result of the processes of my research. This change has allowed one of my major concerns – the articulation of what it means for work to be *sculptural* – to become visible through its displacement into a different context. The assemblages which I have produced since *The Long Haul* form the final stage of creative production in relation to this project.

### **The sculptural aspect**

My move towards a predominantly wall-based sculptural practice is something of a return. Many of my early assemblages took this form. Though I have narrated my doctoral work as a movement from large scale sculpture, through site-specific temporary works to smaller scale wall-based works, there have been exceptions to the rules at every point. These were often the harbingers of change in my practice.

I now want briefly to consider two such artworks. The first of these is *Passage* (2006-2009, Figure 54, p.152). At first glance this is a reasonably

<sup>44</sup> Perloff (1996) provides an almost perfect analogy for this process when she describes Gertrude Stein's fragmentation of language circa 1913-15 as '[providing] many pleasing semantic possibilities... 'Roast potatoes for' [a line from *Tender Buttons*, 1913] is being used not in the cooking game but in the [seemingly Wittgensteinian] game of testing the limits of language' (p.85). In short, the ambiguity inherent in the fragment opens up the possibility of associative and auditory linkages, games and puns. The same is broadly true of my recent assemblages.

simple work, but there is a complex underlying tension here between the pictorial frontality of its rectilinear form (which also functions as a kind of frame) and its sculptural aspect.

By this I do not mean the three-dimensionality of its projection from the wall. I refer instead to a quality of the work: a possibility of being seen other than frontally. This renders the constraint placed on 'all-round-ness' through its being mounted on a wall more noticeable. The quality of 'all-round-ness' that is resisted here is the possibility of circumnavigating sculpture, which Hall (1999) suggests that we now take 'for granted' (p.2).<sup>45</sup>

That is not to say that this artwork and the others which followed it would fare better elsewhere. They were all constructed with this mode of display in mind. They are sculptural objects which seek to disrupt the grammar of a nominally pictorial context in order to reveal aspects of themselves and their (dis)placement anew.

The sculptural aspect<sup>46</sup> to which I refer in this work is the 'passage' alluded to in the title of this work. I use the term 'aspect' here in the Wittgensteinian sense of 'noticing an aspect', (see Chapter 3, pp.97-100). On either side of the wooden drawer is an oval hole, cut to enable the drawer or box to be easily picked up. Looking closely into the hole reveals a pseudo-architectural space: a narrow ledge partly enclosed by the drawer handles which line the front of the piece (Figure 55, p.152). As was the case with *Mother* from *The Visitors*, this is a space which can be inhabited in imagination, or as Bachelard puts it, 'the miniscule, a narrow gate, opens up an entire world'

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<sup>45</sup> Hall makes it clear that the desire to do so arises very much as a condition of modernity. Previous to that sculpture which was made specifically to be viewed in the round was often seen as either unseemly or disconcerting (1999, pp. 53-80).

<sup>46</sup> The sense of the sculptural referred to relates to the work of Koed (2006) previously referenced in Chapter 1, p.37.



(1964, p.155). Wollheim's *seeing-in* might be usefully supplemented here by *seeing-into*.

Investigations of the notion of sculptural aspect which came to light in *Passage* inform much of my recent work; before I detail these developments, I want to return briefly to *Conditional* (2006, Figure 5, p.22). This was the first of my wall-based pieces to explore the tensions generated among a group of individual objects, the spaces between them and an overall compositional structure which makes them appear as if they are a single object.

This way of working has something in common with Tony Cragg's wall-based collages of the mid-1980s, which also consisted of isolated fragments combined into a larger whole (*e.g. Palette*, 1985, Figure 56, p.153). One difference between his method of production and mine (apart from the materials) is that Cragg's works are often pictorial, whereas my wall-based assemblages are less representational. My works often include constructed elements as well as the individual items that Cragg used and I organise my works spatially in a much less attenuated way than Cragg.

The two notions detailed here (the sculptural aspect and the pseudo-object made of non-touching parts) come together in my recent assemblage *Clipper* (2010, Figure 57, p.154). The dispersal of the components across the wall in this piece is the most widespread in my later work and yet the composition remains coherent. Arnheim (1974) sheds light on how this happens:

Good fragments are neither surprisingly complete nor distressingly incomplete; they have the particular charm of revealing unexpected merits of parts while at the same time pointing... beyond themselves... Similarity acts as a structural principal only in conjunction with separation, namely, as a force of attraction among segregated things... Any aspect of percepts – shape, brightness, colour, spatial location... – can cause grouping by similarity... all

things are different in some respects and similar in others (pp.78-79).

*Clipper* orients itself pictorially to the viewer (*i.e.* it can be read with a degree of frontality) yet as the viewer moves around the piece, elements of the composition shift subtly as a result of their projection away from the wall. This visual play is explicit in relation to the green and yellow wire which passes through the red and black Meccano pieces at the base of the largest element. Figure 58 (p.154) is a composite image which shows three views of the wire passing through the Meccano. In the left and right hand views, the wire appears to be one continuous strand; in the central, frontal view it can be seen clearly that there are, in fact, two strands, which never actually meet.

The wall-based works discussed in this section destabilise notions of juxtaposition by exploiting the tension inherent in bringing objects together without letting them come into contact, but the extent to which things do (or do not) touch is always apparent in those assemblages. The same is true of *Clipper*, but the process is undermined and extended by the ambiguity inherent in the visual play of these wires.

The duality of 'touching/not touching' is modified by the sculptural aspect<sup>47</sup> of the work made visible by these wires, and now oscillates between 'appearing to touch' and 'not touching'. This change only occurs after the viewer has realised that the wires do not meet – up until that point the original duality ('touch/not touching') appears to remain intact.

In relation to this I want to turn again to the transcript of the 1961 *Art of Assemblage* symposium and quote at length from Roger Shattuck:

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<sup>47</sup> By sculptural aspect I mean the circumvented 'all-roundness' which the play of the wires in *Clipper* draws attention to, which originates in *Passage* (2006-2009, see Figures 54 and 55, p.152).

The fur-lined tea cup, or the lumps of marble sugar, or the corpse in the baby stroller... illustrate the association of two elements that cancel each other out and return us – spiritually and aesthetically – to zero. The process is essentially self consuming, a reversion to dead level after an initial shock... A second form of juxtaposition... brings together two components whose conflict does *not* cancel out but *persists*... in the first category, the event can happen only once per customer. As in a short circuit, the desired effect blows the fuse: scandal is unique. The second form of juxtaposition, on the other hand, brings as close together as possible, without ignition, elements that create a large difference in potential. We react not to a brief, bright spark that jumps the gap and destroys the whole rig, but to a field of forces sustained by the association (1992, p.128).

While Shattuck is evidently arguing for a particular formulation of assemblage, the game of 'touching-and-not-touching' enacted by the play of the wires in *Clipper* and the movement of the viewer does echo Shattuck's first definition of juxtaposition: there is no 'scandal', but once the viewer has 'short circuited' the game by discovering its duplicitous dual aspect, there is almost always no way back. Shattuck's second classification, with its reference to '[a] conflict [that] does *not* cancel out but *persists*' is an apt description of the overall function of *Clipper* (and many of my other recent wall-based assemblages).

*Clipper* can be read as an active (re)enactment of these multiple modes of juxtaposition, containing the first, unrepeatable kind within a larger manifestation of the second type, which acts much like a containment device for a very small aesthetic bomb. Once the 'rig has blown', the whole work persists, subtly altered, but altered nonetheless. Ironically, the cut wires which seem to suggest defusal are actually the source of the explosion.

Context is integral to the function of these works, though they are not site-specific in any strict sense. The walls upon which they are mounted circumvent the sculptural 'all-round-ness' of these works. Their importance

within these compositional schema warrants a more detailed discussion of their function within it.

Brian O'Doherty (1986) tackles the role of the wall in some depth, with a view to uncovering the social and political context of the 'white cube'. Writing in the 1970s, he performed an, at the time, vital unmasking of the assumptions which underlie such spaces, and the way in which they reinforce the values and dominance of cultural and financial elites. Tracing the historical development of the conventions of the white space, he argued that 'the white wall's apparent neutrality is an illusion' (p.79), while simultaneously allowing that 'the gallery space is all we've got, and most art needs it' (p.81). Site-specific projects command as much respect on the Biennale circuit as the spaces which O'Doherty described 30 years ago, yet his recognition of the ubiquity and utility of the white wall has further resonance today, considered as an analysis of how walls work as sites.

The white wall allows for a degree of transferability and reliability in relation to the artwork. Setting aside the socio-political and economic aspects of O'Doherty's discussion, artists and gallerists at all levels continue to make use of this convention. While it is by no means critically neutral, the white wall remains easy to work upon and relatively simple to install.

Talking of the white wall in this way (as if there was only one) risks slipping into the same variety of essentialism into which O'Doherty falls. His essays are as thought-provoking, lively and mercurial today as when they were published, but he remains something of a neo-Platonist. O'Doherty engages enthusiastically with the exhibitions and projects which have shaped the development of such spaces; he very rarely mentions (or describes) the specific spaces themselves, other than in terms of prescriptions and essences. The white cube is always presented in the singular. It is the idea of the space which is central to his discourse.

The walls with which I work are many and varied. The ones in my studio are cheap wooden partitions, which have been drilled, filled and repainted many times. A determined art historian could probably ascertain exactly which of my works came into existence on each panel, just by examining the scars and pits left there. Installing work elsewhere (particularly on masonry walls) is always slightly nerve-wracking, as many of my pieces (*e.g.* those that consist of multiple components affixed separately) often require pinpoint drilling and mounting.

Working on a wall makes the physical context of sculptural activity become visible to me in a way which working on floor based pieces does not. I bore into it, not only to mount objects, but sometimes to create literal voids behind the work (as is the case with *Plunderbus* (2010-2011, Figure 59, p.155). Here I drilled behind the pair of opened hinges which frame the inverted hook, to create a dark void behind the unfilled central screw holes of the hinges. The wall (or its removal) became a part of the compositional structure, and plays an active role in the formal resolution of the piece (Figure 60, p.155).

*Plunderbus* has a dialogic relationship with both *Conditional* and *Clipper*. All three have explored and exploited the compositional possibilities inherent in the game of 'touching-and-not-touching'. While *Clipper* emphasises the effects of separation, *Plunderbus* investigates the extent to which constructed elements can come together and intertwine around one another, yet remain disjunct. Its parts create the superficial impression of a coherent object, which on closer inspection reveals itself as fragmented and fractured.

The way these artworks disrupt grammar differs from the way it was disrupted in many of my earlier, larger works. The smaller, more complex pieces make multiple grammatical allusions, which shift and disrupt

constantly. In the case of *Plunderbus*, there are references to the practice of mounting weapons on a wall for display, to a certain kind of rather bulky old video camera and to the tail light of a motorcycle (when viewed from the extreme left, Figure 61, p.156), amongst other things. The object disrupts its own fragmentary grammar by including what appears to be a wooden camera, which literally returns our gaze, via the device of a small piece of mirror.

Both *Plunderbus* and *Clipper* incorporate pieces of Meccano. This is an attribute they share with almost all of my recent production. I now understand my reasons for using this material and other similar materials, such as Dexion and LEGO, more clearly.

### **Construction time again**

As I stated earlier, my interest in working with Meccano came about as a result of using a similar but larger scale material in several sculptures. This was Dexion<sup>48</sup>, a ubiquitous steel modular shelving system invented in 1947 by businessman Demetrius Comino. The assemblage through which I became fully conscious of its connective potential was *Joker* (p.102 and Figure 31, p.89). In this artwork I used a piece of Dexion to link the objects which form the extremities of the sculpture. Its regular holes and slots, originally intended to enable customisable shelving to be built, were now employed to join two table legs together.

The fact that Dexion is configured to enable a large number of different possible connections brought to my attention the overt connective potential of things, *i.e.* the way in which almost anything can be seen as having some way to join it to something else. I had always been aware of this quality of

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<sup>48</sup> The word Dexion means 'right' in Ancient Greek.

the things with which I work (in much the same way that I know that a teapot is a teapot), but the Dexion brought to light the 'continuous-connective-potential' of everything, much as the Duck-Rabbit exposed 'continuous-seeing-as'. We could call this quality of things a 'connective aspect'.

*Joker* also reveals another feature of my sculptural practice. Like the earlier *Upwards and Onwards* (Figure 1, p.19), this assemblage differs from many of my earlier large scale and/or temporary works in that it is fixed together semi-permanently with screws and bolts, rather than simply being arranged (as is the case with *Elephant*, Figure 2, p.20 and *Huey, Dewey & Louie*, Figure 3, p.21). This more intensive way of working, with its emphasis on semi-permanence and stability, also predominates amongst my smaller recent works. Because of this I sometimes think of *Joker* as being 'a very big small piece', as its fragmented and linear nature seems to have more in common with that side of my practice.

*Collision Damage* (2010, Figure 62, p.157) is one of only two floor based pieces I built during the most recent phase of this project. This too crosses the (notional) boundary between these two modes of practice (large and small, simple and complex) but does so in a different way to *Joker* (which really belongs to an earlier, transitional phase of work).

During the initial construction of *Collision Damage* I had thought it would be a wall based piece, as I had found myself holding it up to the partition and wondering how it might be attached there. Having started by building outwards from the plastic moulded 'coal' from an old electric fire, I added first one (Figure 63, p.157) and then two pieces of roughly cut-out bed headboard (leftovers from a public art commission I had undertaken). This seemed to preclude any further additions, and the assemblage appeared



complete, but the question of how it might relate to wall or floor was not resolved.

It seemed to want to 'fly' in some way, but I was loath to hang it from the ceiling on fishing wire – such solutions often strike me as a compromise, unless the wire (or other hanging device) is formally integrated into the piece. The logic of flight eventually led in my mind to the possibility of a collision. Noticing a broken shoe rack which had been in the studio for a few weeks, it occurred to me that the way in which it slanted read almost as if it had sustained an impact with something. The addition of the completed assembled section (shown under construction in Figure 62, p.157) provided a ready(made) explanation for such destruction.

Of course, what had actually taken place was a collision between my object-based and constructed tendencies (much as Epstein collides a plaster figure with a digging tool in *Rock Drill*, 1913-14, Figure 38, p.93). My *post hoc* attempt at a rudimentary grammar of these slippery things was fractured before I had even thought to attempt it.

I now want to return briefly to the notion of 'un-monumentality' formulated by Gioni (and developed by Hoptman) as discussed in chapter 2 of this thesis. The *ad hoc* contingency of my larger, older assemblages is broadly in line with the 'piecemeal, jury-rigged or put-together state' of un-monumental sculpture, which Hoptman suggests reflects the 'fractured culture' in which we now live (2007, p.138). My smaller, more overtly constructed works, at a superficial level at least, do not fit such a category.

In these smaller works the traces of use, decay and entropy which my materials bear are counterpointed by my quixotic attempts to fix them together and render them stable. In the long term such a quest is futile, and yet it strikes me that to persist anyway in the face of inevitable decrepitude

(and by allusion mortality) is to 'rage against the dying of the light' in some small way (Dylan Thomas, 1951, p.3), or at the very least, kick up a bit of a fuss.

My desire to halt the fragmentation of my materials has at times become almost pathological. The repeated bracings and mendings that the central cube of *Flyer* underwent during its production testify to this (p.130 and Figure 39, p.116). This metaphorical tendency to charge at windmills is given literal form in the second of the two floor based works which were produced during the final stage of the project: *Full Tilt* (2010, Figure 64, p.158).

To me, this feels like another 'large small piece', but its sculptural aspect is unrestricted as a result of its being on the floor – the artwork's circumference is fully available to the viewer (and to my mind becomes less visible as a result). The inclusion of a large mirror in this artwork allows for the artwork's surroundings to flow into the sculpture, further destabilising the boundary between assemblage and its context (Figure 65, p.158).

### **'Engineering in miniature'**

In order to understand my recent use of Meccano, and similar materials, I now want to consider the historic origins of these toys. The economist and social historian Kenneth Brown (2007) suggests that Meccano was first introduced in 1901 under the brand name 'Mechanics Made Easy'. It was invented in Liverpool by Frank Hornby and was originally improvised by him to amuse his children. Kenneth and Marguerite Fawdry, writing in *Pollock's History of English Toys and Dolls* describe Hornby as something of a bricoleur with a fondness for self-improvement, suggesting that:

His paradise was his workshop, where he was forever tinkering... he delighted in inventing and making new toys for his children. But there was a continual demand for new ones, and for each new toy new parts had to be made. He needed parts that could be applied in different ways to different models, and some standard way of fitting part to part... gradually the idea came to him of parts all perforated with a series of holes the same size and same distance apart (1979, p.59).

Meccano was thus born. The earliest version consisted of an old biscuit tin which had been cut up into strips, drilled and fastened together with screws.

As Brown explains:

By January 1901 Hornby had so elaborated his ideas – making simple parts himself and adding wheels and cogs made up by local watch makers and foundries – that he borrowed £5 from his employer and took out a provisional patent (pp.27-31).

Brown notes that Meccano's only serious direct competitor (the American 'Erector' system) was conceived by the American Albert Carlton Gilbert in 1911 (p.29). LEGO, the system of Danish plastic bricks which broadly parallels Meccano and Erector was invented a little later (in 1949) by Godtfred Kirk Christiansen. His son, Kjeld Kirk Christiansen (the current owner of the LEGO group) writes:

It was my grandfather, Ole Kirk Christiansen, [Godtfred's father] who originally came up with the idea for the LEGO name back in 1934. He combined the first two letters from two Danish words: LEg GOdt (play well), completely unaware of the fact that in Latin, the word 'lego' means 'I assemble' (Humberg, 2008, p.5).

The Oxford Latin Dictionary states that 'lego' (from 'legere') means 'to gather... collect... to remove by picking... to take away, steal... to choose, select' or 'to traverse... to read, peruse...' (p.1014). According to Patrick O'Shea (2006, online), 'the word 'Meccano' is said to derive from the phrase 'Make and Know'. That both of these names refer to the assemblative nature of these toys (in the case of LEGO albeit half unknowing) strikes me as apt.

Hall (1999) suggests that the move towards construction toys at this time was prefigured by changes in nineteenth century educational thinking, citing Froebel, Montessori and Pestalozzi's contemporaneous promotion of more child centred and exploratory ways of learning (pp.253-259). Brown notes that, despite a growing tendency towards smaller families, declining child mortality rates in the late nineteenth century led to a substantial net increase in the number of British children. These factors, combined with compulsory schooling and higher levels of household income led to what he terms 'a significant re-evaluation of the nature of childhood' during the late Victorian era (pp.16-17).

Perhaps as a result of the shifts in pedagogical theory noted by Hall above, Brown describes, as part of this re-assessment, 'an extended discussion about the relationships between toys, children, education and adulthood' (p.17). Accordingly, the idea of the educationally 'improving' toy was often reflected in the marketing and packaging of Meccano (along with the gender biases of the day). A 1911 advertisement for the toy in *The Youth's Companion* suggests that:

Meccano is more than a toy... it develops your mechanical skill and teaches you concentration of thought and creativeness... Fathers should provide their sons with this instructive toy (Brown, p.38).<sup>49</sup>

These sentiments are echoed in a more nuanced form by Kjeld Kirk Christiansen:

The LEGO philosophy is that 'good play' enriches the life of the child – and the subsequent adult life of that same child. All LEGO products

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<sup>49</sup> Conversely, Brown also notes the use of Meccano as a means of exploring 'real-life' engineering problems, referring to its use in the construction of prototypes of egg grading machines and the transmission of the original Mini car (2007, p.3).

are based on the same philosophy of development through play (2008, p.5).

While these products undoubtedly provide 'good play', it was also the case that they prepared their users for the adult rigours of assembly line jobs. While my father (George Bowdidge) worked as a carpenter rather than in a factory, when questioned he attested to the value of his own childhood experiments with Meccano: 'it was a good influence, making shapes [with Meccano] was an influence. My hands became my trade' (personal communication, telephone call, 1<sup>st</sup> March 2011).

Both Meccano and Erector enjoyed great commercial success around the same time that assemblage and collage developed out of Cubism.<sup>50</sup> These events informed each other: both sprung from a more general 'assemblative turn' in society at that time, paralleled by a desire to recreate in miniature the engineering triumphs of the day, while simultaneously and unconsciously reflecting the analytical empiricism of philosophers like Bertrand Russell and Gottlob Frege (who greatly influenced the Wittgenstein's early work on logic).

Writing in 1979, Fawdry and Fawdry capture the spirit of this age (somewhat dubiously) when they suggest that 'Meccano lives and thrives still—solid and muscular amid its flabbier rivals—as the Forth Rail Bridge' (p.59).

Unfortunately the original Meccano company went into receivership that year. In relation to the downfall of the 'original' Meccano empire (it has since been re-invented as a more technologically literate brand) design historian Nicholas Oddy suggests that:

Meccano, like the real engineering it modelled, was to have difficulty in accepting change and taking on board technological advances. Thus during the 1950's, 1960's and 1970's it became progressively

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<sup>50</sup> The LEGO brick's later arrival on the market in 1949 came about as a result of the adoption of injection moulded plastic technologies. See Humbert (2008, pp.11).

more archaic, dying the death of the railway, ship and other heavy engineering industries it had represented so well (1988, p.26).

The connections made by Oddy (and Fawdry and Fawdry) between large scale engineering and its recreation in miniature is one which Frank Hornby recognised when he claimed that Meccano was 'engineering in miniature' (Brown, p.2).

All of these construction toys have a shared fundamental purpose: to build model, recreate and represent the larger structures and elements of the industrialised world. Such a correspondence is the culmination of a way of thinking about machines that originates several centuries earlier. As the play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith suggests:

The development of the modern concept of the toy seems to have occurred first between... 1550 and 1750 when the new idea of the industrial machine began to change the nature of the world...The modern toy may be seen in part as a symbolic legatee of this first optimistic scientific view of the planned universe (1986, pp.58-59).

I do not use Meccano to model other objects in my own practice. The elements of it that I incorporate in my sculptures remain themselves. In this they are akin to Masheck's notion of the Readymade as 'an amusingly self representational sculpture' (2002, p.11). Meccano is also, quite simply, very good for fixing things to. Like its larger scale relative Dexion, it is optimised for connectivity. Its modularity and structural flexibility epitomises the connective quality that I search for in all of the objects I use – the 'how-can-I-fit-this-to-something-else-ness' of things.

In relation to the wider use of such materials for artistic purposes, it is rarely the case that they are used as a means of connecting to anything other than other pieces of LEGO or Meccano. The use of construction toys in this way

(*i.e.* as a closed system for making art) is epitomised by the American artist Nathan Sawaya (described by Humbert, 2008, p.44).

Sawaya is one of six Certified LEGO Professionals who are licensed to make art using the toy, and currently makes boldly coloured figures and portraits using the bricks (Figure 66, p.159). These works sometimes play with notions of fragmentation and assembly, but on the whole remain within the realm of what Licht termed (in relation to an earlier era of sculpture) the 'pompiers'<sup>51</sup> (1967, p.20).

Of more substance are the Erector set animal sculptures of Chinese American artist Harold Hoy (Figure 67, p.159). According to Gallery IMA, who represent him:

He uses the child's toy... to work around larger issues of man's predilection for claiming ownership of the natural world and our desire to manipulate and re-form it (2009, online).<sup>52</sup>

Dirk Polak, artist and lead singer of Dutch New Wave band *Mecano* (sic) has been using Meccano to construct simple figures arranged in tableaux and butterflies mounted in wooden boxes since 1977. Polak also creates paintings from the figures (Figure 68, p.160) which have been used in publicity materials for his band. According to Radar Gallery in Amsterdam, for Polak:

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<sup>51</sup> According to Licht, 'the *pompier*... was usually an adequate craftsman who met his public halfway by ministering to their wishes' (1967, p.20).

<sup>52</sup> While my focus here is on artists who make use of construction toys in their practice on a regular basis, I want to mention in passing the *Art of Lego* project set up by Steve Brake, Clwyd County Council's former Arts and Exhibitions Officer. Starting out in 1982 from the thesis that LEGO had exerted a measurable influence on creative practice since its inception in 1949, Brake commissioned a large number of artists, designers, architects and scientists to produce artworks in LEGO (having obtained sponsorship from the British subsidiary of the parent company). This resulted in an exhibition and an accompanying catalogue, which featured a contribution from Nicholas Oddy (which I cite in this chapter in relation to Meccano) as well as an essay by noted educationalist Edward de Bono.

The toy intended for 'engineers of tomorrow' becomes a form of art of visionary and evocative characteristics. The dichotomy of a child destined to lose its innocence and become a cold and pragmatic constructor is inverted: the artist looking at the world through the eyes of a child uses the mechanical toy to create poetic symbols whose sole purpose is to nourish the intellect and spirit (online).

There is some truth in this, and the notion of 'the cold and pragmatic constructor' is one which provides an uneasy counterpoint to Hornby and Christiansen's proselytizing statements in relation to their products.

None of the artists detailed above uses Meccano, LEGO or Erector in combination with other objects. Tomoko Takahashi has incorporated LEGO bricks (and other construction toys) in her sprawling installations of found objects, but she does not make use of the connective potential of the bricks – they are scattered across the floor among her other materials (Figure 69, p.160). The decision to leave these components unassembled within the larger compositional structure of her work can be seen as alluding to a sculptural narrative around the completion of work. Licht notes in relation to Auguste Rodin and Michelangelo:

Michelangelo, either through circumstance or personal inclination, left many statues incomplete. The implication of each one, however, was that it *could* be completed. The very essence of Rodin's work... is that it can not be completed in the traditional way, but exists only by reason of its fluctuating struggle in which the ultimate decision must remain ambiguous (1967, p.25).

That said, I find it surprising that none of the artists referred to above explores the possibility of physically attaching these toys to other objects. It strikes me that working with such materials would extend naturally into wondering what else it might connect with. As these products are marketed as complete construction systems, the predominantly closed nature of connective thought in relation to their use is perhaps to be expected. In



relation to the complexity of these matters, I now want to summarise and articulate the connections that I have made to (and through) these materials, with a view to drawing this thesis to a close.

### ***Offerer***

I can now see clearly that the bringing together of childhood LEGO blocks was an apprenticeship of sorts for what I do, much as Jeff Koons' trips to the little shelter after school (Hall, 1999, p.278) were instrumental in establishing his artistic identity. All those little plastic clicks and collisions that took place on my parents' living room carpet led, in the long term, to a far longer sequence of clicks and crashes (and revelations): one which still continues today, and one which I hope will continue for some time to come.

Put simply, putting LEGO together as a child (and now is the time for honesty – I much preferred LEGO to Meccano when I was young) led to me wanting to put *everything* together as a young adult at art school. Over the years that desire spread to encompass ideas, philosophies, histories and texts as well as things. With that came the recognition that I was a bricoleur with a fondness for broken grammar (who then found himself starting a PhD), and that (like Gillian Whiteley and many others) I come from a long line of bricoleurs. And, like her, I am proud of that.

Understanding all of this led me, through a circuitous and occasionally slightly scary route, to another realisation. Much as Meccano taught my father to work with his hands, the toys which showed me how to put stuff together as a child eventually became part of the huge construction kit that already contained everything else that had 'scratched on my imagination' (to borrow a phrase

from Beuys).<sup>53</sup> By including these toys I realised that I could bring to light the inherent connectivity of everything else I used to make art.

Essentially, that is the story. It is the story of *The Long Haul*, the story of the story of putting it all together. It is the story of a hunch and a nose followed. The hunch was that, in so many ways, there always was (and always is) something worth going back for, and bringing forward. It is a story that ends (for now) with something made from a coat hanger, a handle from my parents' old wardrobe, some Meccano, a few other bits and pieces, and a piece of LEGO, proffered like a gift at the end of something that feels a bit like an arm... (see Figure 70, p.161).

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<sup>53</sup> See Sacks in Harlan (ed., 2004, p.x).

## Conclusion - a Duck-Rabbit made from Meccano

For the place I really have to get to is a place I must already be at now (Wittgenstein, 1984, p.7).

The Wittgensteinian notion of 'noticing an aspect' (1953, p.193), as brought to light by his consideration of the Duck-Rabbit is of dual importance in this thesis. Its primary importance occurs in relation to the functioning of representation in assemblage sculptures, but it can also function as a device which re-frames the intertwined themes of my research.

Thought of in this way, the consideration of an atypical example of a phenomenon brings to light a hitherto un-noticed aspect of the research, much as the Duck-Rabbit renders visible 'continuous seeing-as' by drawing attention to our tendency to see something *as* something. Accordingly, this project can be thought of as an interlinked series of 'aspect-dawnings', each of which reveals a crucial aspect of the thesis.

The first of these occurs in Chapter 2, wherein the initial connection is made between the nature of my temporary sculptural installations (such as *Process(ion)* and *Pseudorchard*) and Wittgenstein's strategy of making language 'surveyable by a re-arrangement' (1951, p.43). He achieved this by exploiting the gaps between linguistic grammar and the 'deep grammar' of the world through acts of displacement. Making the connection between Wittgenstein's way of working and the displacements which are inherent in sculptural assemblage provides a framework which allows several aspects of their functioning to come to visibility.

The examination of the Duck-Rabbit itself in relation to sculptural assemblages yields two important insights. Firstly, it becomes clear that the model of perceptual oscillation which this ambiguous figure embodies does not provide a particularly good description of how representation functions in my more figurative sculptures. Close scrutiny of the way in which the components of these works can allude to other forms while remaining themselves suggests that the tendency of philosophy to gloss over such distinctions on occasion is one which is perhaps best avoided (see pp.98-99). Wollheim's (1980) notion of 'seeing-in' provides a more accurate description of the processes which are at play in such artworks.

Secondly, the animal nature of the Duck-Rabbit is itself of significance. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein frequently brings to our attention aspects of our forms of life by juxtaposing them with other kinds of living beings and inanimate objects. Constructing creatures from furniture superimposes two of the forms of otherness upon which Wittgenstein draws to illuminate the condition of language. By comparing the manner in which we interact with these proximal forms of otherness with the way we engage with each other we can glimpse the dawning of another aspect: the capacity for language is brought to our attention as the extraordinary capability that it is.

Also of importance is the means by which the specific materiality of my assemblages brought to light the temporal aspects of the objects from which they were constructed (as detailed in relation to *The Visitors*). This arose partly as a result of the consideration of the personal narratives that things which have a certain 'pastness' can evince, and also through the recognition (gained through the exhibition of *The Visitors* in the Bonington Building) that my sculptures could appear 'out of time' as well as 'out of place'.

The development of this temporal aspect of my practice in relation to the use of more personal materials (as detailed in Chapter 4 in relation to artworks

such as *Flyer*, *Walk Tall* and *The Long Haul*) centres to a large extent on the incorporation of my childhood Meccano in these assemblages. It is through the nature and use of these materials that a more explicit sense of connection to the past comes to visibility. This occurs at least in part as a result of the way in which this toy (and other similar materials such as Lego and Dexion) are optimised for connectivity. This quality of these things also brings to light the 'connective aspect' of the broader range of materials that I make use of, much as the Duck-Rabbit brings continuous-seeing-as to visibility.

Thinking of the development of my practice in terms of aspect-dawning yields one final insight into the nature of sculpture itself. The shift from predominantly freestanding production to wall-based assemblages serves to bring to light what I have termed the 'sculptural aspect', as the latter works circumvent the 'all-roundness' of floor-based sculpture through their resistance to its circumvention on a wall.

Considering these insights, it now strikes me that a Duck-Rabbit built from vintage Meccano would perhaps provide a perfect sculptural summary of the concerns of this project, though whether this object needs to exist as anything other than a *Gedankenexperiment* is a matter for another day.

My sincere thanks go out to my supervisory teams, past and present, family, friends and colleagues, and everyone else who has helped to make this project possible. This thesis is respectfully dedicated to the memory of Jules de Goede (1937-2007).

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