



SCULPTURAL SITUATIONS

GAIL HASTINGS

7 FEBRUARY - 30 MARCH 2008

Gail Hastings: Sculptural Situations

The Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts is delighted to present *Sculptural Situations: Gail Hastings* an exhibition which continues PICA's commitment to highlight the work of significant mid-career and senior artists.

This exhibition expands upon '*I lost my balance yesterday, my mind is really beginning to slip*' (*overheard conversation, wharf 2 Circular Quay, Sydney, 06.07.1999*): *Sculptural Situations* by Gail Hastings an exhibition presented as part of the Art Gallery of New South Wales' Level 2 contemporary project space program in 2007.

Alongside the work from the AGNSW show sit three new works titled; *no answer: black*, *ABC art: blue cube* and *ABC art: red cube* that have been especially occasioned for PICA.

Perth born Hastings is a singular artist distinguished by the extraordinary focus of her practice. Her sculptural situations intrigue and perplex. Viewers experience and interact with the works by moving through them, actively looking and reading. Conceived as invitations to engage each viewer, Hastings' works operate like spatial-temporal conundrums that stimulate and tease the imagination. Consistently describing her work as 'a space made for others' Hastings creates what she calls 'invisible architectures' that invite the viewer to enter a dialogue with what they observe.

Recalling scenes from film noir or detective novels, each sculptural situation is comprised of a range of 'signs'; seemingly randomly placed ambiguous yet suggestive objects such as maps, plans, furniture, fictional encyclopedia entries and abstract geometrical forms. In temporal and spatial succession these elements variously combine, intersect and overlap, inviting speculation, and at times appearing to conclusively 'fit together' or 'make sense'. Collectively they generate a diversity of possible explanations and tempting interpretations that may nonetheless elude resolution.

As 'the artist' Hastings eschews a central position in her work in order to vacate this space for the viewer. In this instance she has invited PICA's Director Amy Barrett-Lennard and Curator Melissa Keys to contribute a collection of novels to this iteration of her work, further disorienting and de-stabilising the impulse to search for authorial essential meaning.

PICA commends Andrew McNamara's insightful essay *Making Space for the Invisible Architecture of the Social*, reproduced here with the generous permission of the author and the AGNSW, for his eloquent and sensitive exploration of Gail Hastings' practice.

PICA is grateful to the AGNSW for lending *So she said* from their collection for this exhibition and we gratefully acknowledge the support from our colleagues at that institution including: Wayne Tunnicliffe and Emma Smith in making this possible; and Natasha Bullock the managing curator of Hastings' AGNSW project. We extend our thanks to Curtin University of Technology and Julian Goddard who have provided Gail Hastings with crucial support and access to the University's wood working facilities so she could make new work for this exhibition.

Finally we acknowledge the unflagging generosity and professionalism of Gail Hastings that has made this exhibition possible.

Melissa Keys
Curator
Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts



ABC art: blue cube 2008 (detail)



Missing walls: bureaucracy at work 2007

MAKING SPACE FOR THE INVISIBLE ARCHITECTURE OF THE SOCIAL

Gail Hastings professes to be a sculptor, but she is an unusual one. Her works often consist of such unfamiliar sculptural media as watercolours or pencil drawings. Her subject matter is equally unusual. It often features pages that look as if they have been transplanted from some esoteric encyclopaedia or otherwise may contain snippets of an overheard conversation. These tantalising elements are in turn 'housed' within Hastings' finely constructed abstract, geometric spaces.

The effect is like walking into an abstract painting, except to say that one may also encounter text, specially devised furniture or intricate floor plans that actively shape the space of the work. Hastings regards her works as 'sculptural situations' rather than as paintings or installations, or even sculptures. Rather than adhering to a pre-existing location, Hastings seeks to craft space – in particular, she seeks to craft an intersubjective space, a social space of conversation and communication. This is at once a remarkably fraught, ambitious and fascinating enterprise. It is also one reason why the experience of Hastings' evocative situations is like confronting something vaguely familiar, yet weirdly opaque.

Hastings thinks of our intersubjective space as a kind of invisible architecture comprised of both intersecting and dissecting personal and public-social trajectories. Think of how conversations in cafés are usually private, sometimes intimate, although they are conducted in a highly public forum and thus

often easily overheard. Or think of how mobile phone conversations connect two people in quite separate places, while at one end a participant may carry on the conversation quite audibly and unselfconsciously as if ensconced in some imaginary private booth. Once the speakers hang up, it is as though they have been transported back to the formal composure of public space.

We are constantly reminded that we are social beings, but our shared space is often the arena of our greatest anxieties as much as of our greatest joys and satisfactions. The ideal of public space and of conversation is the perfect accord: every voice heard equally and the coming together of contrasting elements in the golden glow of harmonisation. Our anxieties intrude when we feel that this ideal evades us or when we are left to negotiate less than satisfactory social transactions. The ideals of art were once very similar – the perfect accord, the ideal narrative – yet today contemporary art addresses different ambitions by focusing upon the peculiar in the familiar and giving the readily familiar a peculiar outlook.

Hastings is very contemporary in this sense. She professes her frustration at the struggle 'to make actual space perceivable in a work of contemporary art' even though it is the great ambition of her work. This is perhaps why the superbly crafted spaces of Hastings' work convey an air of serenity or of determined order, while at the same time leave the lasting impression of some kind of riddle or mystery. The visual-textual cues invariably deposited around her elegant, abstract spaces hint at some undisclosed plot. These cues actually constitute a set of disparate spatial-temporal markers delineating the seemingly tangible, but elusive 'architecture' of inter-subjective space. The works thereby hinge upon an ambiguous aspiration: they strive to present the most composed and tightly unified work possible, while devising a space sufficiently evocative that it is open to vivid and at times unaccountable inter-subjective projections.

Hastings' sculptural situations often interweave disparate clues suggesting a transit in time and space. The employment of spatial and temporal cues is one of the distinctive features of Hastings' art. In an earlier work, *Encyclopaedia of a moment's evidence* 1993, each fastidiously designed and hand-rendered page – purportedly from this cryptic encyclopaedia – looks like some arcane activity sheet recording a mysterious quest for knowledge. The passage of time is surreptitiously inscribed in Times font, yet the page numbers do not reveal a sequence at all but simply repeat page five each time. They appear like pages from an unfathomably stalled text because the sequence goes nowhere, except spatially from room to room. We encounter a busy, episodic circuit signalling a pursuit or a quest, as if striving to render significance, although barely registering in time.

Plate 3: Moment 12.00pm

At 12.01, she hurriedly enters room A in urgent search for the evidence of moment 12.00pm. She finds it. [5]

Plate 4: Moment 12.00pm

At 12.01, assured that the evidence of moment 12.00pm was in room B, she entered, but too late. The evidence had been wiped away. [5]

Plate 5: Moment 12.00pm

If evidence of the moment 12.00pm existed, it would be found in room C. She enters room C at 12.01 and she finds no evidence of moment 12.00pm. [5]

The clipped syntax mimics the text inscribed by an old typewriter, which harshly 'justifies' the lines by abruptly breaking words in two (even though every line of the work is carefully delineated by hand). Breaks too occur in the flow of 'evidence'. Is a case building, or evaporating?

A different example of such temporal-spatial puzzles is found in *Room for love* 1990, which contains a conversational or 'tête-à-tête' chair, an S-shaped two-seater sofa, sometimes called a 'love chair'. In such a chair, two people sit in close proximity facing in opposite directions, although they can also converse face-to-face. For Hastings, the analogy alludes to the often-fraught dynamics of social interaction as well as to the reception of art: 'the chair was intended as a conversation with oneself when one looks at a work of art – where two opposing views are struck – literally – while there is also this third, reconciliatory view of turning halfway toward the opposite view'.¹

The analogy is highly suggestive. For instance, this piece of writing aims to explicate the work for a reader who may have already experienced it, but like the 'tête-à-tête' chair it aims to turn the viewer around again to face the work, although differently. It may even extend the understanding of the work beyond conceptions ordinarily entertained by the artist. The analogy also recalls the puzzled status of art in the wake of post-minimalist art, which prompts questions such as: what is the ordinary, quotidian object and what is the artwork? What does it do? As the art historian Thierry de Duve notes of the minimalists, 'far from freeing themselves "from the increasing ascetic geometry of pure painting"', the minimalists claimed it and projected it into real space'.² This is what Hastings does, except that she stage-manages this extended state of puzzlement over the status of art.

With her latest work, referencing Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahoney Griffin's partially realised plan for Canberra, Hastings shifts attention from puzzlement over the confounding qualities of post-minimalist art to the earlier aspirations of such abstract, geometric visual languages associated with the urge to forge a common, equitable social space. This ideal was typified by the Griffins' thwarted plan to place a library at the apex of Capitol Hill just above Parliament House. Hence, the aim was to erect a space for knowledge and reflection at the apex of its social-symbolic space, a place devoted not only to historical memory but to the on-going articulation and re-articulation of the shared space of a nation. The Griffins are perfect for Hastings' purposes because they intertwine the aspirations of an abstract visual language with a similar concern for social space – and this has tempted some to interpret secret or esoteric meanings behind their elaborate designs.³

Hastings perhaps recalls an ideal space for art, but one that has escaped it throughout modernity. Her persistent and distinct art practice attempts to yield an inter-subjective space, which defies her as well as art in general, but which also eludes each and every one of us daily. Yet such an irrevocably intangible space is regularly experienced in keenly felt ways and this is what Hastings magically aims to manifest. The Griffins once aimed to make the 'invisible architecture' of a nation explicit whereas today (ironically) it lies buried within the confines of parliament. In striving to make that invisible architecture of intersubjective space perceivable, Hastings' art rearticulates that vision for a contemporary audience. Hers is an art, however, that evokes the formal composure of the original Griffin plan – with its ideal apex now buried and remote – and we soon realise that it is attuned to what may just as readily escape us in conjuring this formal composure.

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¹ Gail Hastings, private communication with author

² Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1996, p 218

³ James Weirick, 'Spirituality and symbolism in the work of the Griffins' in Anne Watson (ed), *Beyond architecture: Marion Mahony and Walter Burley Griffin in America, Australia and India*, Powerhouse Publishing, Sydney 1998, pp 56–85

List of Works

- 1 *no answer: black* 2008
plywood, oil paint, acrylic, framed watercolour and lead pencil on paper
170h x 500w x 500d cm overall
- 2 *ABC art: blue cube* 2008
plywood, oil paint, framed water colour and lead pencil on paper, books (a collection of favoured novels and poetry belonging to PICA Curator Melissa Keys which she brought with her when she moved from Melbourne to Perth)
- 3 *ABC art: red cube* 2008
plywood, oil paint, framed water colour and lead pencil on paper, books (a collection of favoured novels not yet given away, lost or placed in storage belonging to PICA Director Amy Barrett Lennard)
- 4 *behind you: blue* 2007
acrylic and lead pencil on plywood; framed watercolour and lead pencil on paper
185h x 120w x 300d cm overall
- 5 *difficult art decisions: wall seven* 2007
acrylic and vinyl fabric on plywood; acrylic on linen; framed watercolour and lead pencil and pencil and blue biro on paper, date and time signed by Nik Rieth
150h x 100w x 250d cm overall
- 6 *Missing walls: bureaucracy at work* 2007
oil paint on plywood; watercolour on silk;
framed watercolour and lead pencil on paper
210h x 350w x 350d cm overall
- 7 *So she said* 2007
enamel on plywood; acrylic on linen and canvas; framed watercolour and lead pencil on paper
180w x 220w x 220d cm overall

All works courtesy and copyright of the artist, except *So She Said* 2007 which is courtesy of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. All photographs by Diana Panuccio, except for *ABC art: blue cube* 2008 (detail) by Tony Nathan.

Gail Hastings was born in Perth Western Australia in 1965 and graduated from the Victorian College of the Arts Melbourne, in 1988. She is currently undertaking a PhD through Sydney College of the Arts at the University of Sydney and has been based in Sydney since 1999. For more than two decades, Hastings has exhibited nationally and internationally across America and Europe. Her solo exhibitions include: *'I lost my balance yesterday, my mind is really beginning to slip'* (overheard conversation, Wharf 2, Circular Quay, Sydney, 6 June 1999); *Sculptural Situations by Gail Hastings*, Art Gallery of New South Wales (2007); *plans: sculptural situations by gail hastings*, Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne (2003); *mission: untitled (blue)*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne (2001); *apparently not*, David Pestorius Gallery, Berlin (1999); and *art idea no. 8,582,048*, Kunstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin (1999).



Above: *behind you: blue* 2007 (detail)
Cover: *Missing walls: bureaucracy at work* 2007 (detail)

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