



WALL STORIES: TAKING CARE

Leoni Schmidt

In *Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture* (2000), Irit Rogoff writes about space and how our involvement with space can construct our psychic subjectivities. She discusses arts practices that work with space as a way of knowing; as a mode of location; as a site for collective national, cultural, linguistic or topographical histories; and as a way of ordering our knowledge.¹ She also reminds us of the groundbreaking work of Henri Lefebvre whose *The Production of Space* (1974/1991) posed spatialisation as a critical concept. She summarises his notion of the “antechamber” as a space which can be utilised to critique power as it is a space of negotiation between power and those who are petitioning it.² This notion of the antechamber came to mind when I recently became involved with Ana Terry's work for an installation entitled *Wall Stories*.

The artist occupied a particular space at The Forrester Gallery in Oamaru. This former bedroom was used over a period of a hundred years by successive managers of the bank located in the building before it became a gallery in the late 1980s. The space is now soon to be refurbished to become a more conventional exhibition site. Between the previous uses of the room and its future deployment, Terry has seized the opportunity to work in and with the space. It is as if the space has been suspended in a liminal temporality during which the artist could lift its skin of jute covering on the walls and insert objects behind it before re-covering them with the jute, almost as one would wrap a valuable parcel or tenderly clothe a beloved body. Parts of walls and a mirror, furniture, fireplace surround, light fittings and windows have been re-covered but not obliterated as they are still visible underneath their re-grafted skin. Through the covered windows one can see to the outside where columns throw shadows on the jute, while reflections of the interior overlay the Victorian botanical patterns created on the glass.

Outside and inside talk to each other; the interior of the body and its epidermis are mutually productive; and history breathes through the very space where one layer is lifted and re-placed and another layer of value is added through the painstaking embroidery of 19th-century patterns onto and into the jute. Through the transformation of the space, we are made acutely aware of the act of seeing; of architecture as a critical body; of histories narrated through form; of the particularities of jute – also called hessian and burlap – as a material redolent with associations of the trade connections of the late 19th century; and of Terry's 're-gendering' of gallery critiques.

In an essay entitled “The Nobility of Sight”, Hans Jonas discusses the implications of a visual

bias in Western art and philosophy. He argues that sight is preeminently the sense of simultaneity, capable of surveying a wide visual field at one moment. "Intrinsically less temporal than other senses such as hearing or touch, it thus tends to elevate static Being over dynamic Becoming, fixed essences over ephemeral appearances."³

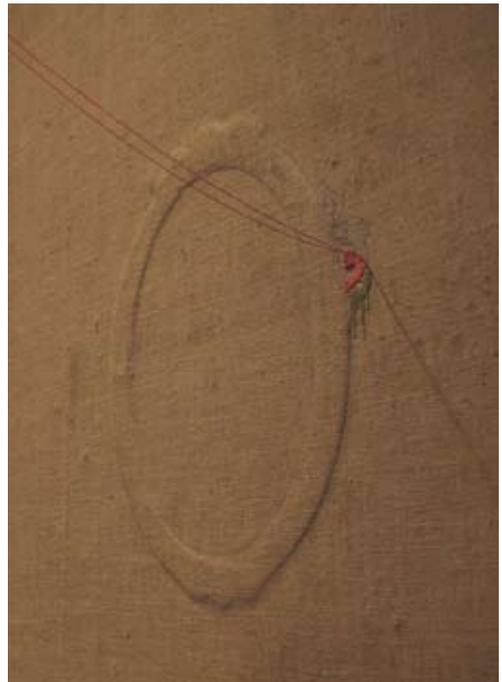
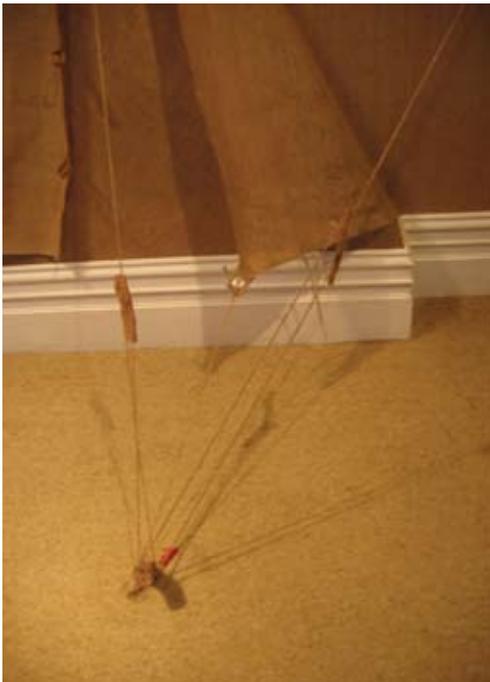
Terry's activities in Oamaru work to thwart this project of sight and to problematise its inattention to detail, to the small and the easily overlooked. Our sweeping view of the room is constantly interrupted as our attention is held by each particular form, outline and detail which contributes to the tension between the body and skin of the space. Terry also makes sure that we cannot create a new overview from the detail. For example, embroidered pattern is fragmentary within the space and thus in line with the partial insertions of colonising activities that retain their incomplete and parasitical character:

In focusing on these fragments and details we are also made aware of the time the artist – and her assistants, Don Hunter, Tracey Shepherd and Patricia Tough – have spent in clothing and decorating the space. This work and the time it took are almost palpable, especially where cut-off remnants of red embroidery thread have been left *in situ*. The importance of touch in our knowing of the world is emphasised in every careful act of covering and stitching and patterning of which we see *and* feel the evidence.

Tracing the outline of a mirror hidden behind its covering, one can become acutely aware of its particular presence; and hearing the sound of cicadas⁴ and seeing a tent with its pegs staked into the urban base of a building in Oamaru, one is transported to the rural context of the town and its farming hinterland so well-served by the Oamaru Harbour in the late 19th century. And, smelling the covering on the walls, one feels privy to the air infused with molecules of sacking so specific to warehouses where tea was stored at that time, tea from India, then another outpost of the British Empire.

Oamaru town lies in the heart of the Waitaki district in the South Island of New Zealand and is well-known for its impressive Victorian buildings created from locally quarried whistone. Architect Robert Lawson designed the elaborate Bank of New South Wales in 1883 and dressed its façade with six Corinthian columns finely fluted and elaborately carved. But, it is on the inside that Terry has focused her critical attention. In a chapter called "The Mutant Body of Architecture", Georges Teyssot points out that it is "precisely because architecture has the very concrete and useful vocation of building shelters for dwelling that it also has the duty and the right to reexamine itself incessantly". Teyssot also writes about how structures are built down to the finest details: "*dé-tailler*=to cut, in French...[and how criticality can operate through] cutting and carving into the very flesh of architecture, revealing the many incarnations and incorporations that have constituted its matter and spirit over the centuries."⁵

Terry engages with the building in Oamaru in the manner of a surgeon. She breaches the intact body of the room and we become aware of its bones, organs and muscles underneath the skin. She sutures the operated body and we become aware of its skin and its scars. One could argue that the exterior of the building remains complicit with the world of trade and business for which it was



erected; while Terry's interior assumes the role of interrogator. Teyssot continues: "Architecture can be used as a kind of surgical instrument to operate on itself (in small increments)."⁶

Historical narratives and their implications are revealed through Terry's incisions. Groined pilasters elaborate a fireplace; the carved cabriole legs of a Queen Anne chair juts out from a wall to suggest a pompous inhabitant; a Rococo-style mirror provides evidence of the Victorian love affair with the ornamental and the superfluous; ornate wallpaper behind the jute is too heavy and comes loose from its support; and William Morris and associates in the Arts and Crafts Movement make their appearance through Terry's choice of patterning. We remember that they, themselves, had much to criticise in late 19th-century architecture and the applied arts, especially where these practices had become unmoored from their function to merely prop up an indulgent middle class lavishing decoration on itself. In Oamaru, Morris and associates speak alongside the critical voice of the artist; while conversely their patterns are also complicit in the colonial domestication of the New Zealand life-scape and its introduction of foreign flora to the land.

In revealing such histories, Terry assumes the role of antiquarian. John H Arnold tells us how "it was antiquarians who...developed the tools for dealing with the past via its documentary and material remains...the 'mouldy and worme-eatern';"⁷ that can speak of attitudes and deeds that shaped the lives of people. In Oamaru, Terry is not telling us what these attitudes and deeds were, but she carefully leaves clues in the space for us to translate. This process of translation is not merely an intellectual game as we become affectively responsive to the space, forms and materials.

Upon becoming The Forrester Gallery, the interior of the building was covered in jute, a base material ironically in contrast with the social aspirations of its former occupants. This material was popular in the 1970s and 80s for hanging art and the gallery in the McCoy and Wixon's Hocken Building in Dunedin was another example. Many artists – Allen Maddox, Philip Clairmont and even Colin McCahon – used it as it was so inexpensive. Jute as a material brings these and other connotations to Terry's project. The fibre it is obtained from has been grown in Bengal since remote times. It is strong and resistant to stretching and has thus been used wherever packaging of agricultural and industrial commodities had to be transported. Its presence around the world in the late 19th century – for example in New Zealand – bore witness to the global trade connections made possible by imperialist manoeuvres. The commercial benefits of this trade often disguised its effects on the colonised, a strategy obliquely revealed through Terry's covering activities in Oamaru.

Mia Campioni writes about installation practice that works "by altering our focus, undoing our visual expectations, recognising the multiplicity involved in our composition of reality...[leading to] an understanding of how apparently distinct things (a wall, a floor; a ceiling) bear their being 'other' within them."⁸ Terry provides us with a glimpse, a whiff and a trace of the ghostly lives of those 'others' implicated in her scenario. The contestatory multiplicity of presences breathing the same air in her interior is spatially present through a tension of pulling and pushing between walls and space; between the smooth skin of the walls and the objects trying to emerge from the walls, struggling to escape from being suffocated or buried behind its covering.

Claire Bishop discusses the heightened perception of the participant in a spatial environment in

her *Installation Art: A Critical History* (2005) and she quotes the artist Robert Morris as follows with regard to best practice in this genre of work: “[It] takes relationships out of the work and makes them a function of space, light, and the viewer’s field of vision. The object is but one of the terms in the newer aesthetic. It is in some way more reflexive, because of one’s awareness of oneself existing in the same space as the work. ... One is more aware that [oneself] is establishing relationships as [one] apprehends the object from various positions and under varying conditions of light and spatial context!”⁹ Ana Terry’s work invites this kind of participation, while providing rich clues to various registers through which one could read the space in which she has been active.

Her “antechamber” exists between the masculine columns seen partially on the outside and the business world historically active within the interior. This chamber has, however, also been a bedroom and thus a feminine, domestic register is brought to the space. Embroidery as associated with ‘women’s work’ since Victorian times¹⁰ and the use of red as a signifier for the female body add to the gendering of the space. On one level, one can interpret the work as a ‘re-gendering’ when reading it alongside the activities of Billy Apple in the 1970s in New Zealand, where he also ‘operated’ on gallery spaces. In 1975, Apple

embarked on a series of works that subtracted volume from gallery spaces [e.g. at the Auckland City Art Gallery] – reducing the length of walls and removing wax from floor tiles... Apple’s *Alterations* [at the Barry Lett Galleries in Auckland and]... *The Given as an Art-Political Statement* [at the Bosshard Galleries in Dunedin] followed in 1979, in which he negotiated ‘significant changes for the better’ in galleries across the country. These ‘alterations’ were architectural investigations of ‘the white cube’, treating exhibition space as an object of art and culture. In analysing gallery premises, Apple collaborated with architects and curators, variously highlighting features on walls, ceilings, floors and doors with red paint or reshaping exhibition rooms. The ‘givens’ – the art work, the artist, art goer and art space – therefore became one. Apple’s investigations brought the art gallery’s function into question, challenging the administrators’, and the public’s relationship to the artist and works of art.¹¹

Apple’s use of red paint and his reshaping of gallery spaces can be read as aggressive provocations by a pop conceptualist¹² bent on exposing and challenging the hidden motivations and power relationships played out in the gallery space. In comparison, Terry’s postconceptual interventions in her antechamber seem less overt and confrontational; more feminine and ameliorative in its petitioning of power. She seems to be critiquing national, cultural, linguistic and topographical histories in *Wall Stories*, while also taking care of them.

With regard to Terry’s ‘re-gendering’ activities, it is, however, also important for a reading of her work to locate these within an early 21st-century discourse – not only in contrast with Apple’s work in the 1970s, but also in contrast with, for example, the feminising archaeologies of New Zealand artist Juliet Batten in the 1990s.¹³ Terry’s project does not essentialise in terms of gender. Her antechamber petitions a world of male power; but it also utilises a ‘workmanlike’ material – jute – and creates a space for female and male collaborators (for example, co-embroiderer Don Hunter, project mentor Clive Humphreys, and historical antecedents William Morris and co.). Her use of red

is not only gendered, but also a signifier for life's energy in all its potential guises because she uses it so judiciously as 'fragment' rather than as an aggressive or all-encompassing trope. The process of embroidery within the Oamaru space – as involving men and women – also reminds us of the older (pre-19th-century) histories of this activity as one with which both genders were engaged. As Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock point out: "The history of English embroidery shows how a medieval art became a feminine craft"¹⁴ in the 19th century.

The *Wall Stories* project narrates histories relevant to the area around Oamaru on the eastern coast of the South Island of New Zealand. Working in its located antechamber, it also critiques these histories through a covert petitioning of residual power. In terms of artistic discourse, it refers to previous – historic endeavours – while subtly shifting the parameters of those debates into the present. Thus it performs within the New Zealand 'art world' the same manoeuvres it engages with in relation to a local 'commercial world'. It is in the intersection between these two contexts where Terry's project finds its critical eloquence.¹⁵

- 1 Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture* (London & New York, 2000), 21.
- 2 Ibid., 23, referring to Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1974/1991).
- 3 Hans Jonas, "The Nobility of Sight: A Study in the Phenomenology of the Senses", in *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982), 145.
- 4 The sound track for *Wall Stories* was inspired by a film called *Illustrious Energy* by Leon Narby (1988). The film tells the story of the son of a Chinese Gold miner in Central Otago in the late 19th century who captures a cricket and keeps it as a lucky charm. The sound also carries distinct memories for the artist of the dry, arid interior of that part of the country in mid-summer.
- 5 Georges Teyssot, "The Mutant Body of Architecture", in Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio, *Flesh: Architectural Probes* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1994), 8.
- 6 Ibid., 9.
- 7 John H Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction* (London: Oxford University Press, 2000), 39 & 42.
- 8 Mia Campioni, *Plane Thinking: Drawing Installations by Margaret Roberts* (Sydney: Benevision, 1998), 4.
- 9 Robert Morris quoted in Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 56.
- 10 See endnote 14.
- 11 Quoted from a statement issued by Te Puna Ō Waiwhetu/Christchurch Art Gallery, at [http://chirstchurchgallery.org.nz/Exhibitions/2002/Billy Apple](http://chirstchurchgallery.org.nz/Exhibitions/2002/Billy%20Apple) as last visited on 16 August, 2006.
- 12 See Wystan Curnow, "Good as Gold", in *As Good as Gold: Billy Apple: Art Transactions, 1981-1991* (Wellington: Wellington City Art Gallery), 25.
- 13 For information about Juliet Batten's projects, see <http://www.pagan.net.nz/nz/html> and <http://www.wisdomseekers.org.nz/JulietBattenJuly05.html> as last visited on 8 October 2006.
- 14 See Roszika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (New York: Women's Press, 1984); and for the specific reference Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock, "Crafty Women and the Hierarchy of the Arts", in *Old Mistresses: Women and Ideology* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), 59.
- 15 All images courtesy of the artist.

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