technics



Technics is an interrogation of contemporary visual practices through the work of Helen Britton, Barbara Bolt and Lucas Ihlein.

This CRAFTWEST exhibition for the 1998 Festival of Perth will include a forum to be held on Saturday 21 February at 2.00 pm with papers presented by the artists and guest speaker Nikki Miller.

A Festival of Perth Exhibition
Craftwest Centre for Contemporary Craft, Perth
18 February 1998 - 22 March 1998
Exhibition Co-ordinator: Janis Nedela
Curator: Dr Estelle Barrett

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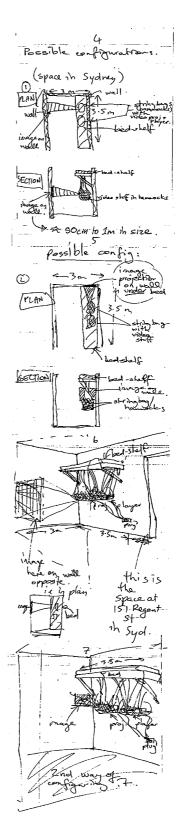
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Cover

Barbara Bolt Sensation and Helen Britton Feral Reassortment

Diagrams this page: Lucas Ihlein

Work in progress



Foreword

This year marks the 30th anniversary of CRAFTWEST Centre for Contemporary Craft which follows our recent move into the King Street Arts Centre. 1998 will be a landmark year for the organisation as it is the beginning of a new chapter in the history of craft in Western Australia. It seemed appropriate to celebrate two significant events in the history of the organisation by concentrating on emerging practice and emerging ideas. No one (especially the artist), is really able to pinpoint the exact moment of "having emerged".

All three artists in this exhibition are exploring ways of communicating through the objects/works they create within the context of the late 20th century. This exhibition looks at the future of art/craft practice. It is an intriguing, colourful and vibrant exhibition and brings together three seemingly disparate practices which examine pre-conceived notions of craft and visual art.

Linda Browne

Executive Director Craftwest Centre for Contemporary Craft

Time and place are crucial influences on the nature of artistic production and this is no less true of the particular constellation that has brought together the diverse practices of Barbara Bolt, Helen Britton and Lucas Ihlein.

Technics comes at a time when all three artists are extending their experiences beyond Western Australia. Barbara Bolt has recently presented a conference paper and series of lectures on her work at Warwick University.

Helen Britton is currently completing her Master of Arts at Curtin University of Technology and at present is working at the Munich Academy as part of her studies. Her stay in Munich will be followed by a residency in San Diego. Following the completion of a Bachelor of Fine Arts at The University of Western Australia, Lucas Ihlein was awarded an Honours degree in Fine Arts at the University of Western Sydney (Nepean) in 1996 and has since been exhibiting in Sydney.

This exhibition is the culmination of a dialogue between the artists and myself inspired by an article by Peter Morse published in *Craftwest* in 1992. We were delighted that Peter, who is on a short stay in Perth from Berlin, was able to add to our discussions through his essay in this catalogue; and also that Nikki Miller has agreed to take part in the forum "Craft as Art: Theory and Practice" which is to be part of the exhibition.

We were grateful to receive assistance from the Australia Council and through State Exhibition Development Funds from Art On The Move and help with audio-visual equipment from RENTLO. I should also like to thank Linda Browne and Janis Nedela for their encouragement and advice. Special thanks goes to Barbara Bolt for help with this catalogue.

It has been a privilege to explore the notion of 'technics' with the three artists in this 1998 Festival of Perth exhibition.

Estelle Barrett

Curator of Technics



Why Technics?

The title of this exhibition has aroused some curiosity perhaps because the word itself carries associations that belong to the world of industrial machinery, mass technology, and the scientific technologies rather than those which (conventionally) belong to the arts and crafts. However, it is an apt title because the term has a very particular set of meanings that are related to sensory experience and aesthetics. The notion of "technics" permits an exploration of some commonly held preconceptions about the nature of contemporary art and craft and hence provides a starting point for a discussion of the diverse practices of the three artists that have been brought together in this exhibition. "Technics", according to Don Ihde, refers to human action or embodied relations involving the manipulation of artefacts to produce effects within the environment.1 Human activity has always been characterised by the use of "technology". This word refers as much to simple tools such as a sharpened stick or a hammer as it does to sophisticated instruments of modern culture such as a dentist's probe or complex computer software. The effective use of tools (technology) requires skill or what may be described as "bodily knowledge". Anyone who has tried to teach a child to ride a bicycle knows that skill involves more than what we can say. Following on from this, it can be said that artistic practices have the capacity to realise meanings and knowledges not accessible in words, but made available through specific effects produced by the skilful use of tools and by the created objects themselves. In summary "Technics" refers to skilful

embodied practices which mediate and produce meanings and knowledges.

The philosopher Martin Heidegger developed a theory of what he called "praxical knowledge" in his assertion of the material pasis of knowledge. This implies that ultimately, ideas and theory are the result of practice rather than vice versa. It is a perspective that problematises the mind/body split which continues to be fundamental to Western thought.2 This split or binary manifests itself in art discourses that elevate the idea above all else, and its influence has resulted in a diminution of craft and of craft objects in the emergent hierarchies that constitute the broader field of art theory and practice. Consequently, the imperative to create objects has been challenged (the readymade such as Duchamp's bicycle wheel exemplifies this). For some, it is even questionable whether art requires an object at all. Technics explores the potential of crafted objects to operate as critical responses to these perspectives.

The exhibition brings together three artists who take a passionate pride in the skilful making of art objects and who value the interplay between material practices and theory. The dialogue that occurs between the works on show parallels, and is a continuation of conversations and debates that have passed between the artists for many years. All three view the relationship between maker, tools used and the environment as one of co-emergence rather than of mastery. The materials and conditions under which the

artist is working is apprehended as a backdrop of possibilities from which the work will emerge. Barbara Bolt, for example, investigates the way in which painting dissolves the boundaries between self and object, the organic and the inorganic, paint and the environment. The oscillation of colours in the works, Pulsate and Form/less fragments vision, and prolonged viewing results in a seeming collapse of the body into the canvas. Through these paintings Bolt attempts to simulate the dissolution of self that occurs in the sensory overload environment of a crowded nightclub. The intensity and luminosity of the colours in Bolt's works articulate with those produced in Helen Britton's Hybrid Cuttings. These colours are a direct reference to neon lighting, the intensity of colour produced on the computer screen (which can generate over 6,000 hues), as well as those 'toxic' colours that are produced by chemical processes in the manufacture of plastics and other goods. The realisation of such colours in the works of these two artists is a comment on the way in which our aesthetics and sensory responses are influenced by technology. Bolt uses the term "techno-sublime" to refer to the infinite backdrop and flux of possible effects produced by technology. These effects exert a

Bolt employs traditional staining and throwing techniques that have antecedents in the work of painters such as Helen Frankenthaler and Kenneth Noland. However, her practice is firmly situated in an Australian context.

The bleeding, merging and furrowing effects in

latent influence on the way humans inhabit

and perceive the world.

works such as *Neon* are results of exposure to the intense heat and rapid drying produced by the sun. These fractal effects have an interesting resemblance to the parched Goldfields landscape that has had a strong influence on Bolt's development as an artist. The two studies, *Variegation 1* and *Variegation 2* with sections of paint cut out to expose bare canvas or underpainting reveal the processes of labour and investigation out of which the final effects are produced. Through these studies Bolt reminds us that painting, like other crafts, involves the manipulation of knowledge embedded in materials and practices.

Helen Britton's works also reveal the way in which crafted objects can operate on multiple levels - aesthetic, conceptual and critical. The delicate beauty of Britton's small works, Hybrid Cuttings is all the more fascinating for the violence suggested by their resemblance to piercing implements or stinging sea-life. Her Giant Hybrids embody a viscous vulnerability of living matter with the brute lifelessness of heavy metal. These mutant objects speak of Britton's engagement with eco-feminist thought and her critique of the excesses of an industrialised world. There is also an optimism in the artist's reconsumption of commercial and domestic rubbish to produce objects which delight even as they upbraid the viewer.

Britton's risky combination of Sterling silver and pearls with plastics, discarded cigarette lighters, toothbrushes and other debris serves a critical function by unsettling conventional logic and jolting our senses. Her "impure combinations" challenge common-sense understandings of the so-called 'natural world' by questioning the hierarchies and binaries through which we create seemingly incompatible categories.

Britton describes her practices as 'nomadio'.

She embraces both traditional craft materials and techniques as well as digital design methods. The latter allow rapid, continuous and inexpensive transformation of forms.

The work Feral Reassortment with its sense of massive weight and nimbleness is an outcome of digital manipulation and metal casting. Its manifestation illustrates the permeability that exists between the virtual realm and a world of concrete objects. As a visual poetics, Britton's work has an economy and eloquence that stretches beyond the limits of words.

Like Britton, Lucas Ihlein views the process of craft-making as a source of knowledge and the crafted object as a vehicle for conveying critical concepts and ideas. His installation which juxtaposes a mounted bed with a continuous video image of an aeroplane in flight, captures the tension that exists between concrete, sensual experience and the human drive towards abstract and conceptual knowledge.

Ihlein's crafted objects are often made in response to practical needs, but later become the 'readymades' of his critical and artistic practices. For the artist, the making of a piece of furniture is subversive since it is a means of establishing a more personalised

relationship with everyday objects, one that is not readily found in the alienating commodities of mass production.

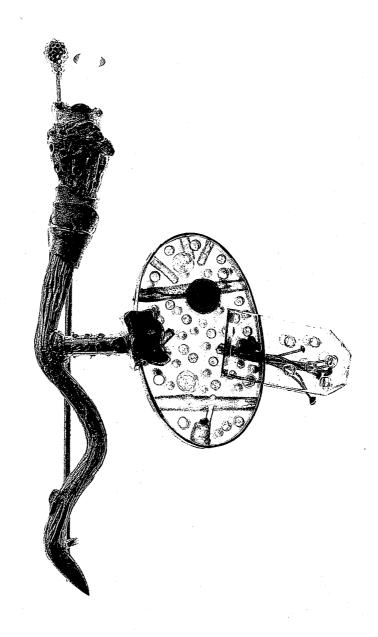
Ihlein is also interested in spatial relationships and the way in which the objects we encounter constrain and shape not only our movements and actions, but also our social relationships. His construction of the double bed sawn in half and mounted end-to-end on the gallery wall invites a contemplation on the way in which we construct and are constructed by the world of objects. This work is an extension of an earlier shelf project that was recently exhibited in Sydney.

Ihlein puts forward the notion of a "handyman's aesthetic" which is concerned not only with pride taken in craftmaking and the decorative value of objects, but also with how objects affect our being-in-the-world. In this sense his craft, like that of Bolt and Britton is both material and aesthetic, conceptual and critical.

Dr Estelle Barrett

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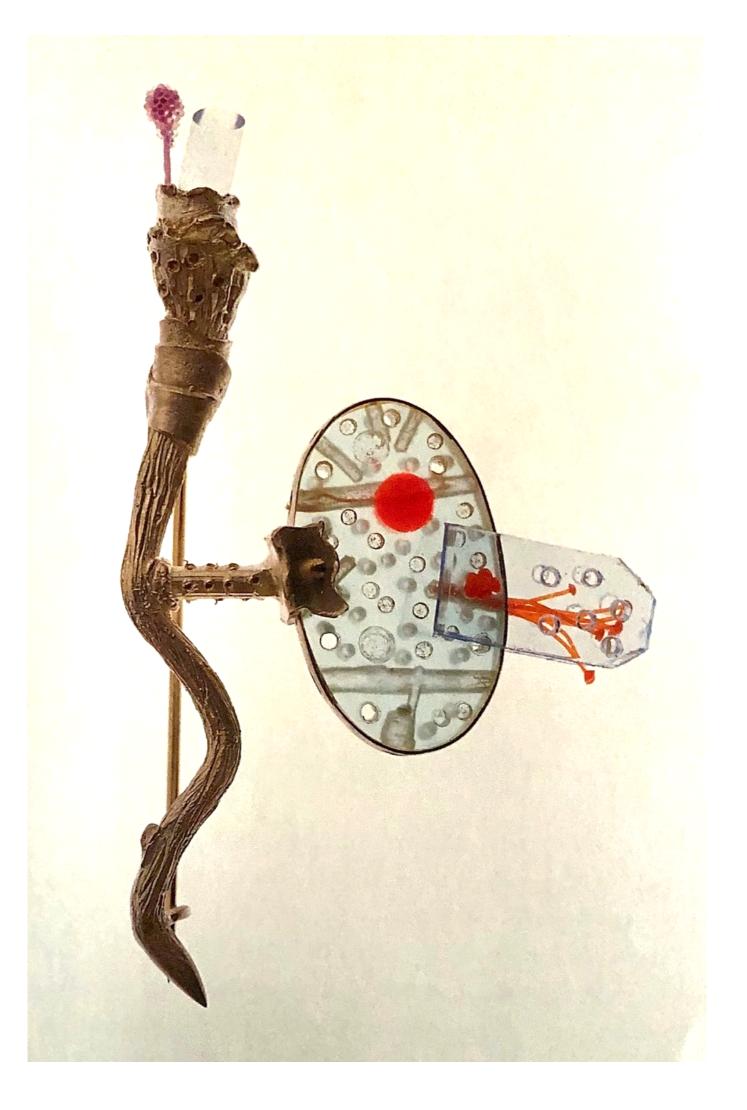


Helen Britton

Hybrid Cutting 1 (1997-8)

plastics, Sterling silver

6.5cm x 4cm x 1cm



Barbara Bolt

Why is it that a stained canvas appears more luminous than a brushed surface? It is a question to which I do not have an answer, yet it is this observation that has led me to work exclusively with oil stains and washes to effect the brilliance and luminosity of 'neon'. Staining was a technique more associated with textile dying than painting until painters such as Helen Frankenthaler, Kenneth Noland and

Morris Louis began working with stained canvases in the fifties. The nature of the stained surface and the interaction of juxtaposed saturated colour, creates an optical pulsation which evokes the technoexperience of neon. The process of making these paintings takes considerable time and proceeds through a number of stages. In its initial phases, the process is a bit

like cooking. I mix paint with pure linseed oil and low odour turps (I have developed an allergic reaction to turpentine) and strain the mixture through a stocking into jars. For my purposes, the paint should acquire the consistency of whipping cream, sometimes a little thinker. It all depends.

I work on stretched canvases. The first stain is fairly straightforward: an even wash across the canvas. From here-on-in, the process takes on a much more chaotic nature as I work with the elements and the effects of the flow of the paint. Wet into wet produces quite different possibilities than wet into dry. Painting is a series of questions often without answers. Why does the paint, oil and turps begin to

separate out in the drying process? What produces the 'halo' effect when paint is dropped into wet paint? How do I control the loss of surface tension as the intense summer sun passes across a drying canvas? How do I control the pooling caused by the weight of liquid paint in the middle of a canvas? Can I repair the damage when insects dive-bomb the 'perfect'

transparent stain? Why does oil paint sweat and weep as it goes through the drying process?

The process of painting is a response to what happens in the interaction between paint, oil, turps, canvas, gravity, sun, heat, the occasional live beast and my body. It is where my knowledge of the craft of painting comes into play with that which is beyond my control. It is working in the heat of the moment.



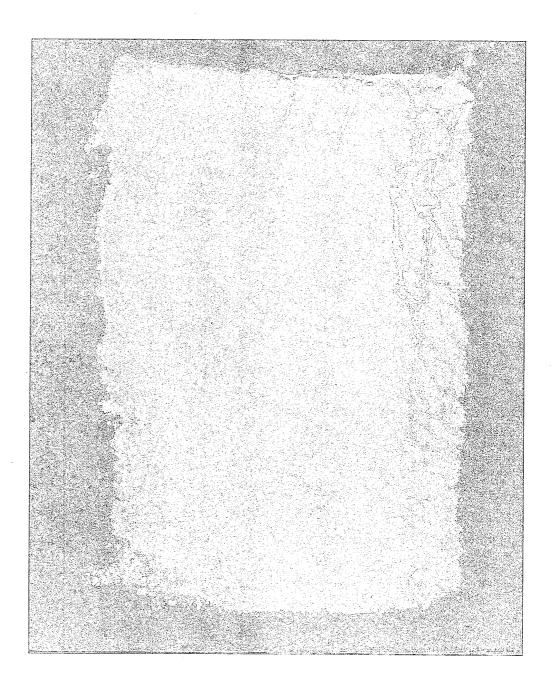
FIGURE 2

Barbara Bolt

Body Without Organs (1998)

oil stain on canvas

1.8m x 1.2cm



Barbara Bolt

Lightness (1997-8)

oil stain on canvas

58cm x 48cm



Helen Britton

Bricollage, excess, desire, celebration, assemblage and despair are words I immediately associate with my practice. I am involved in impure combinations of materials that celebrate the potential of the industrialised, technological world in which I am situated, but also mourn the wasteful excesses of this world. Material combinations are used to challenge systems of value, and in so doing question the exploitation and waste of resources that are a result of everyday consumption. My practice as a jeweller re-consumes industrial and domestic refuse, revalues and represents, resulting in iconic warnings, ironic amulets and savage little machines.

I am possessed by making, and inhabit a practice in the very human world of irrational desire, excess and play. The processes include three dimensional collage, spontaneous wax manipulation for lost wax casting and most recently digital design. Process can determine the way a work progresses, and I interpret process as a dialogue with materials, tools and machines. This strongly situates the focus of my practice in process the verb rather than product the noun.

I ask questions of my materials:
How do you function? Where do you connect?
Where are your intensities and how are these
played out? How are you involved in
transforming and asserting knowledge?
I am interested in the history and politics of
my materials: pearls, opals, fine metals,
plastics, and respect materials as active
agents, working upon me as I work upon them.

Contemporary cultural theory is also a useful too, alongside my pliers and hard drives and I enjoy the intersection of practices in which to exercise theory and experience.

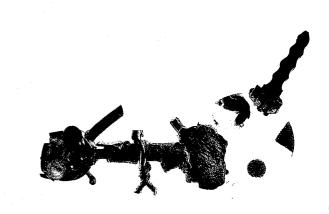


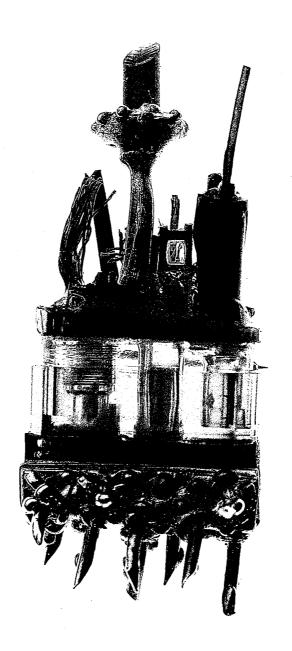
FIGURE 4

Helen Britton

Hybrid Cutting 4 (1997-8)

plastics, Sterling silver

6cm x 2.5cm x 3cm



Helen Britton

Hybrid Cutting 6 (1997-8)

plastics, Sterling silver

6cm x 2.5cm x 1cm



1.

I went to do the grocery shopping. I took the blue vinyl shopping cart, like the one my nana used to have, with me. I filled it with all heavy things: pumpkin, potatoes, pineapple, and a big tub of yoghurt. The cart made it easier to bring all this heavy stuff home from the fruit market. Halfway home I discovered a bookshop I had never seen before, but which was closing down soon. On the corner, at the traffic lights, two men were posting something into one of those charity clothing bins. They were having some difficulties. Both the men had beards. One was dark, the other ginger. I smiled at them as I wheeled my blue cart full of fruit across the road: each of the bearded men carried in his arms, curled up in his strong hands, a white rabbit.

2.

Take a four-litre-tin of neutral white paint, a roller and tray, some spackle, a trowel (small). Remove any signs that you ever inhabited your room.

(Also available: vacuum cleaner).



3.

There were particularly beautiful skies that summer, and he spent more time looking at them than at his sweaty boots slapping the pavement. Either way, he couldn't have seen his boots - he remembered that he was always carrying boxes, fruit boxes full of things he was shifting from one house to another, boxes that could only be transported one at a time on the train. The clouds piled high on one another and it was always threatening to thunderstorm. The pollution was bad in the heat. It was a good time to look at skies.

4.

It's a constant clearing of everything to one side before I can even sit down and look at you. (So much distraction). It takes seven or eight or nine ripe oranges with the pithy peel sliced neatly off in tangents, then cut into chunks small enough to feed into the kidney shaped opening in the electric juicer to made enough for each of us to have just one small glass.

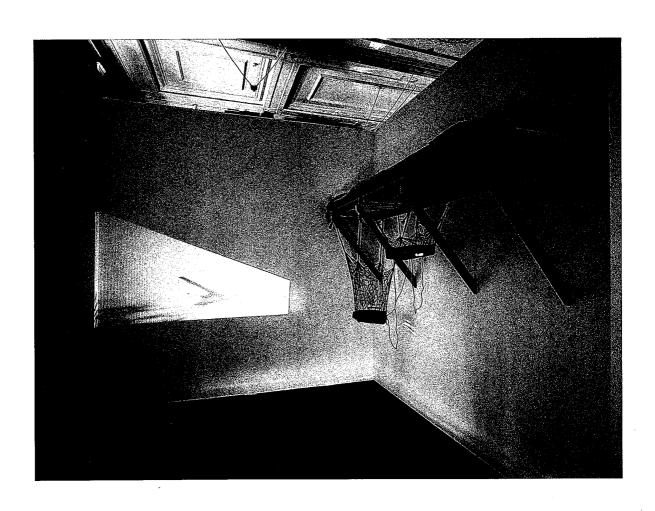
FIGURE 6

Lucas Ihlein

I was out there in the back yard when the first plane
of the morning went over. (1998)

Performance documentation

(photograph by Chris Cruickshank)



Lucas Ihlein

Saw your double bed in two,

lengthwise.

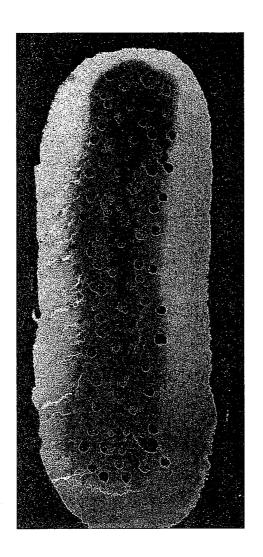
Fix it to the wall,

high up, end to end.

Sleep with your lover,

toes touching in the night. (1998) wood, mattress, string, video projection (photograph by Chris Fortescue)





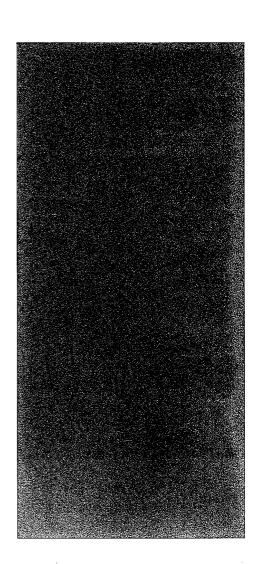


FIGURE 8

Barbara Boit

Form/less (1997-8)

oil stain on canvas

diptych each panel 60cm x 28cm

Technics Agonistes

One widespread folk-tale is cast as a riddle:

a woodcarver carves the doll,

a tailor makes her clothes,

and a gardener gives her speech,

to whom does she belong?

The riddle above presents an interesting set of conflicts about objects, embodiment and possession, or self-possession. Through the brief course of the lines several details emerge: a doll is carved, it assumes gender (as 'she') and clothing, then is granted speech (strangely enough by a gardener) and finally poses the question of ownership. Implicit in the riddle is the possibility that the doll, finally as an animated entity capable of speech, might in fact own herself, or at least exhibit self-possession in the sense that she exhibits consciousness. In this way the riddle enters into the historical body of literature and thought that concerns itself with the manufacture of a human identity: works that range from the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea, through Frankenstein's Monster, to the contemporary ethical and scientific debates about the possibility of human cloning. In this domain we witness a constant interplay between conceptions of the Natural and the Cultural - that artificially created persons are generally outrages against natural conception, manifestations of desire that await the breath of a god to become flesh, victims of the technocratic apparatus that can commodify humanity and so forth. But implicit in all, despite the various ethical and ideological interpretations that surround these real or imagined events, is a fundamental technical procedure - that the body of the

antagonist was somehow manufactured from stone and brought to life, carved from wood and animated, assembled from corpses and electrified, replicated from extant DNA. In all these instances the manufactured object, the body, questions a fundamental distinction that runs through the history of Humanism and Enlightenment Rationalism: the Cartesian notion of the mind-body split, with its concomitant that the self is separate from the world and the objects within it. For, after all, manufactured selves are obviously the result of material and technical processes that have been intentionally directed towards the production of an individual - yet one which, the literature suggests, maintains the intellectual and psychological independence and free-will of its erstwhile creators. This is somewhat of a philosophical impasse, depending upon how you look at it, and it is always the peripatetic moment of selfawareness that forms the moral substrate to the tales that concern themselves with such issues.

"Technics" is a loose term for a set of phenomenological approaches to this set of problematic interactions: between self, language and the world; between body and thing; between humanity and its tools:

Merleau-Ponty² recalls us to the fleshly self, to the situated, somatic, incarnate nature of being. His colleague Sartre has a somewhat less upbeat narrative to tell of the body as that 'outside' of ourselves we can never quite get a fix on, that otherness which threatens to deliver us to the petrifying gaze of the observer. Sartre is anti-Cartesian enough in

his notion of consciousness as mere hankering after vacancy, but sufficiently Cartesian in his sense of the nameless gap that separates mind from members. The truth does not, as the liberals say, lie somewhere in between, but in the impossible tension between these two versions of bodiliness, both of which are phenomenologically just. It is not quite true that I have a body, and it is not quite true that I am one either. This deadlock runs all the way through psychoanalysis, which recognises that the body is constructed in language, and knows too that it will never be entirely at home there.³

perceived as 'a making sentient of the external world'." Such sentience is achieved by any man-made object as a projection of the human body. Scarry reformulates the phenomenon of projection in three different ways, each progressively more interior than the previous one. We move from bodily projections that are formally mimetic (lens, pumps), to the projection of bodily attributes (seeing, desiring), to the projection of an animistic sense of aliveness. Of animistic projection, she writes, 'Aliveness' or 'awareness of aliveness' is in some very qualified sense projected out onto the object world."⁵

Briefly put, the upshot of this argument is that the body can be conceived as a form of situated knowledge about the world - but one that is intimately interconnected with the world of instrumental-things that surround it. Indeed, technology precedes the body, for all bodies are borne into a world of language, tools, clothing, cutlery, vehicles, computers and so forth. The conception of the body innocent of its relations to instrumental-things is an Arcadian fantasy. In this light the notion of embodiment must be seen to be an articulation of bodiliness always in relation to the complexes of instruments that surround it: to know thyself is to know the osmotic relationships of knowledge one has with tools and instruments, for they are part of the technical apparatus of human culture that participate in the formation of self identity:

In these senses artefacts of human culture, whether they be technical, linguistic, aesthetic or, more broadly speaking, discursive (as in the history of food, or art/craft history and so forth) are both epistemological documents and arguments about being and being-in-the-world. One might argue that there is a being-written but still-to-be-written-about 'cultural psychology of technics,' a kind of history that approaches these artefacts from a radically different angle to conventional aesthetic criticisms, yet which can maintain the artefacts of artistic and craft practice within its purview. This is not in any way to dismiss the value of aesthetic judgement, but a perspective in which artistic work can be seen as a critical operation upon knowledge, just as scientific knowledge is deemed to be material and verifiable. This seems particularly pertinent given the development of information technologies and the way it impinges so broadly upon our perception of the world: a set of tools and technical procedures

Sounding a note that has familiar overtones, Scarry⁴ argues that, "...artefacts are (in spite of their inertness) perhaps most accurately increasingly used by artists in ways that significantly modify the way work is produced and, fundamentally, what it can be thought to be about:

The seguel is familiar. After hundreds of thousands of centuries we are trying to give the Earth its former natural appearance, we are reconstructing the primitive terrestrial crust of plastic and cement and metal and glass and enamel and imitation leather. But what a long way we have to go! For a still incalculable amount of time we will be condemned to sink into lunar discharge, rotten with chlorophyll and gastric juices and dew and nitrogenous gases and cream and tears. We still have much to do, soldering the shiny and precise plates of the primordial terrestrial sheath until we have erased - or at least concealed - the alien and hostile additions. And with today's materials, too, concocted haphazardly, products of a corrupt Earth, trying in vain to imitate the prime substances, which cannot be equalled.6

Dr Peter Morse

Peter Morse is a New media artist, currently working on a CD-ROM project funded by the Australian Film Commission. He has a Ph.D. in semiotics from Murdoch University and thinks he lives in Berlin.

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CATALOGUE

Barbara Bolt

1.	Body Without Organs	oil stain on canvas	1.8 m x 1.2 m
2.	Neon	oil stain on canvas	1.8 m x 1.6 m
3.	Sensation	oil stain on canvas	1.8 m x 1.2 m
4.	Lightness	oil stain on canvas	1.8 m x 1.2 m
5.	Lightness (study)	oil stain on canvas	58 cm x 48 cm
6.	Pulsation	oil stain on canvas	1.8 m x 0.9 m
7.	Hyperspace	oil stain on canvas	1.8 m x 1.2 m
8.	Suicide Pink (1)	oil stain on canvas	1.8 m x 1.6 m
9.	Suicide Pink (2)	oil stain on canvas	1.8 m x 0.9 m
10.	Form/less (diptych)	oil stain on canvas	60 cm x 56 cm
11.	Burn	oil stain on canvas	76 cm x 61 cm
12.	Strobe 1	oil stain on canvas	58 cm x 48 cm
13.	Strobe 2	oil stain on canvas	58 cm x 48 cm
14.	Variegation 1	oil stain on canvas	58 cm x 48 cm
15.	Variegation 2	oil stain on canvas	58 cm x 48 cm

Lucas Ihlein

Saw your double bed in two,

lengthwise.

Fix it to the wall,

high up, end to end.

Sleep with your lover,

toes touching in the night.

wood, mattress, string,

video projection

dimensions variable

CATALOGUE

Helen Britton

1.	Hybrid Cutting 1	Sterling silver, plastics, pearls, glass
2.	Hybrid Cutting 2	Sterling silver, plastics, pearls, glass
3.	Hybrid Cutting 3	Sterling silver, plastics, pearls, glass
4.	Hybrid Cutting 4	Sterling silver, plastics, pearls, glass
5.	Hybrid Cutting 5	Sterling silver, plastics, pearls, glass
6.	Hybrid Cutting 6	Sterling silver, plastics, pearls, glass
7.	Hybrid Cutting 7	Sterling silver, plastics, pearls, glass
8.	Hybrid Cutting 8	Sterling silver, plastics, pearls, glass
9.	Hybrid Cutting 9	Sterling silver, plastics, pearls, glass
10.	Hybrid Cutting 10	Sterling silver, plastics, pearls, glass
11-15.	Conference of	
11-15.	Conference of The Mutant Assemblages	chromed copper, plastics, glass, sugar, resin
11-15.16.		chromed copper, plastics, glass, sugar, resin plastics, glass, opal
	The Mutant Assemblages	
16.	The Mutant Assemblages Poison Ring 1	plastics, glass, opal
16. 17.	The Mutant Assemblages Poison Ring 1 Poison Ring 2	plastics, glass, opal plastics, glass, opal
16. 17. 18.	The Mutant Assemblages Poison Ring 1 Poison Ring 2 Ice Ring	plastics, glass, opal plastics, glass, opal acrylic, resin, plastics
16. 17. 18.	The Mutant Assemblages Poison Ring 1 Poison Ring 2 Ice Ring Poison Ice Bracelet	plastics, glass, opal plastics, glass, opal acrylic, resin, plastics Hostaglass, plastics, resin
16. 17. 18. 19. 20.	The Mutant Assemblages Poison Ring 1 Poison Ring 2 Ice Ring Poison Ice Bracelet Feral Reassortment	plastics, glass, opal plastics, glass, opal acrylic, resin, plastics Hostaglass, plastics, resin MDF, paint, pewter
16. 17. 18. 19. 20. 21.	The Mutant Assemblages Poison Ring 1 Poison Ring 2 Ice Ring Poison Ice Bracelet Feral Reassortment Giant Hybrid 1	plastics, glass, opal plastics, glass, opal acrylic, resin, plastics Hostaglass, plastics, resin MDF, paint, pewter Aluminium, plastics, resin

The works exhibited in **Technics** will be selected from this list.