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PERFORMING THE QUILT: FROM THE BLOCK TO THE BLOG AND BACK AGAIN

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Finally he found it where he should have looked first, on the Internet, which is a net indeed, one that can be cast farther than the eye can see and be retrieved no matter how heavy the haul, its magical mesh never breaking under the strain but always bringing in the most amazing catch...and there, in four tenths of a second, he had his answer.

Yann Mantel

Making connections is the impulse of all art, I think. The artist's job is to try to keep the connections from being made completely. So the synapses can be made to snap and spark. That is where the real connections are, in the electricity and energy that goes back and forth between the parts.

Charles Wright

PROLOGUE

This project began in response to a call for papers for the 12th Biennial Symposium of the Textile Society of America to take place in October 2010. Entitled *Textiles and Settlement: From Plains Space to Cyberspace*, it was an opportunity to design a project to explore the work of three contemporary Australian quiltmakers in terms of a Deleuzian 'smooth space'—a theoretical structure of space that uses the patchwork quilt to represent a physical manifestation of a concept that marks out networked, relational and transversal thought. A weblog (<http://quilted-out-of-space.blogspot.com/>) documented the process and was analysed to explore what parallels there were between the process of writing a blog and the making of a quilt.

In previous research I have used psychoanalytical concepts that draw on the haunting of visual arts by memory. These ideas were developed from a reading of Sigmund Freud whose theories, while fascinating, resulted in the seemingly unavoidable analysis of the quilt as a symptom—the sign of an underlying pathology. By turning to the theories of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari I hoped to find an alternative way of analysing quilts that might open up other ways of perceiving them and the processes of quiltmaking.

In this paper I will explore three specific quilts by three Australian quiltmakers: *Love Will Nail You to the Cross* (1995-97) by Judy McDermott, the *Lost birds* series (2006-7) by Pamela Fitzsimons and, *Reconfiguring the Wall* (2006) by Emma Rowden.

ON SPACE

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari proposed an alternative theory of space in their major collaborative work, *A Thousand Plateaus* published in 1980. The structure of space, they argued, can be either *striated* or *smooth*, and to illustrate this they proposed various models—the first of which focussed on the construction of textiles.

For Deleuze and Guattari, a striated space: "...is constituted by two types of parallel elements; in the simplest case, there are vertical and horizontal, and the two intertwine, intersect perpendicularly".¹ This is

¹ Deleuze and Guattari (1980) 524

a space of the urban dweller and it is hierarchical and tree-like in structure. They used the process of the weaving to explain a striated space, stating it:

“...is necessarily delimited, closed on at least one side: the fabric can be infinite in length but not in width, which is limited by the frame of the warp; the necessity of a back and forth motion implies a closed space”.²

In contrast, their smooth space: “...is in principle infinite, open, and unlimited in every direction; it has neither top nor bottom nor center...(it)...distributes a continuous variation”.³ A smooth space is the space of the nomad; it is rhizomatic in structure. They proposed the patchwork quilt as an example of a smooth space, describing it as: “...an amorphous collection of juxtaposed pieces that can be joined together in an infinite number of ways”.⁴

Moreover, the two types of space exist in a mixture which, in terms of the quilt:

“It is as if a smooth space emanated, sprang from a striated space, but not without a correlation between the two, a recapitulation of one in the other, a furtherance of one through the other. Yet the complex difference persists”.⁵

So I undertook this project not to question *if* the structure of the quilt resembled a smooth space—Deleuze and Guattari said that it did—but to explore *how* their ideas could be used to open up other ways to conceive the quilt and, in particular, the processes of quilting. Deleuze and Guattari’s ideas of the structure of a smooth space may have pre-dated the Internet but they effectively prefigured its structure and, it was for this reason I chose to record the project in the form of a weblog/blog (<http://quilted-out-of-space.blogspot.com/>).⁶

A JOURNEY IN A SMOOTH SPACE

Certain quilts by Judy McDermott, Pamela Fitzsimons and Emma Rowden interrogate specific places within New South Wales—a prison for men (Long Bay), a place of natural but now endangered beauty (Bow Wow Gorge), and the site of a former mental asylum and now college of the arts and writers’ centre (Callan Park). They expose many and varied voices: those of the ‘bad’ and the ‘mad’, the institution, alternative notions of home, and concepts of time. Each artist also taps into a subtext of the personal and the private, producing work that subverts the comforting notion of the quilt, thereby shattering prior expectations of the form.

I decided to choose one quilt made by each artist for the initial phase of this research. I selected each quilt because of its inherent differences in design and aesthetic to the other quilts—since a ‘smooth’ space theoretically connects both the similar *and* the disparate.

Love Will Nail You To The Cross (1995-97) is by Judy McDermott (Fig 1). It is part of her *Big House: Go to Gaol* series that explored her personal experience of travelling from her home to her work at Long Bay, a journey from her house to the *Big House*, and home—as she pointed out—for many of the inmates.⁷

² Deleuze and Guattari (1980) 524

³ Deleuze & Guattari (1980) 525

⁴ Deleuze & Guattari (1980) 526

⁵ Deleuze & Guattari (1980) 526

⁶ *A Thousand Plateaus* was published in French in 1980 and translated by Brian Massumi in 1988; the Internet was developed 1990-1995

⁷ Images of other quilts from the *Big House* series can be viewed at < <http://quilted-out-of-space.blogspot.com/p/love-will-nail-you-to-cross.html> >

Judy taught pottery at Long Bay prison from 1982-2002. First a potter, she took up quilting in 1989; her approach was innovative and experimental, her quilts developed without pre-planning as the cloth took over.⁸ Her method may have been intuitive but her quilts engaged in real life issues: the dislocation of the family unit and relationships. The titles of Judy's works are important, even if it is now up to us to decode them the best way we can. She loved language—puns, double meanings and, to cross-reference her quilts to poetry and literature.



Figure 1, left. Judy McDermott, *Love Will Nail You To The Cross* (1995-97) 200 x 140cm. Cotton, silk and linen. Cotton, silk and metallic threads, cotton batting. Machine pieced, machine and hand quilted
Photography: A Payne

Figure 2, top right. Judy McDermott, *Love Will Nail You To The Cross* (detail)

Figure 3, bottom right. Judy McDermott, *Love Will Nail You To The Cross* (detail)

Judy's daughter explained that *Love Will Nail You to the Cross* was probably named after a song: 'Nail You to the Cross'. The words and music of which are powerful—the message hard-hitting:

"Love's going to nail you to the cross/Love's going to nail you to the cross/It'll go right through you/It'll flatter and fool you/It'll do you good and nail you to the cross".⁹

And the quilt itself takes that message even further: it is the private made public—the quilt both reveals *and* conceals, it is reversible (the narratives to be understood from both sides), it enfolds but speaks of love but also the inevitability of loss and betrayal.

To work with Judy's quilts is to continually uncover alternative meaning, reveal new stories. *Love Will Nail You to the Cross* is a quilt that explores the themes of dislocation and imprisonment. The fractured and splintered frames suggest all is not as it should be (Fig. 2). The hand-stitched central panels are framed by and, within the realities of physical union and the possibilities of betrayal and abandonment (Fig. 3). The outer frames form boundaries between inside and outside, keeping those on the outside safe

⁸ McDermott, Judy (1995)

⁹ Ewbank, John (1988) <<http://www.verticalsongs.com/Lyrics/nailyoutothecross.php>>

from those who have committed crimes against society. Firmly stitched and joined, the stitched motifs and words consolidate the position held by those who sit in judgement.

The second quilt, or more accurately, series of small quilts chosen for this project, was the *Lost birds* (2006/7) by Pamela Fitzsimons (Fig. 4). Pamela explains:

“Living in a landscape strewn with fossils from the Permian period has given me an awareness of the concept of time; watching seasons change, the migratory birds come and go; recording the passing of time. The medium of textiles—fragile, sensuous, tactile—is what I have chosen to interpret these ideas. Cloth as a metaphor for the fragility of the land. Silk and wool are marked and coloured with plant dyes using shibori techniques, then layered and hand stitched to imprint the passing of time”.¹⁰



Figure 4, left. Pamela Fitzsimons, *Lost birds* series (2006-7) 8 panels, each approximately 20x20cm. Machine and hand stitched plant-dyed silk, ink
Photography: David Barnes

Figure 5, top right. Pamela Fitzsimons, *Lost birds* series (detail)

Figure 6, bottom right. Pamela Fitzsimons, *Lost birds* series (detail)

Pamela’s work is connected to the place she now lives and loves—her ‘home place’—here you find the Bow Wow Creek gorge, a number of rare and plants and endangered animal species and, fossil beds within the walls of the cliffs which rise hundreds of feet above the creek bed.¹¹ Her work has a rich surface texture, light reflects off the plant-dyed silk, wool and linens; the intensity of hand-stitching gives the quilts a profoundly emotional edge...it speaks to an *excess* of time, *extends* time, *defies* time (Fig. 5).

The *Lost birds* are relatively small quilts—each approximately 20cm square—of plant-dyed and commercial silk, hand and machine stitched and backed with silk (Fig.6).¹² Her work does not allow time to disappear or pass by unnoticed, we have ‘markers’ in the traces left of that past time becoming the present and—as an environmentalist—she asks questions of the future with the *Lost birds*. The quilts in

¹⁰ Fitzsimons, Pamela (2007)

¹¹ The term, ‘home place’, is used by Mark Tredinnick to describe the place that nurtures and sustains us, where: “...human beings live best when they remember that they live within a natural order” (2003, 27)

¹² More examples of her quilted and stitched textiles can be viewed at <<http://quilted-out-of-space.blogspot.com/p/lost-birds-series.html>>

the *Lost birds* series incorporate—if that is the correct term for images that are missing—an image of the Glossy Black Cockatoo from a watercolour by the Australian colonial artist, George Raper.¹³ 'Glossy' is a misnomer—it is a dull-black cockatoo with a massive bulbous beak and a red panel in its tail. Pamela speaks of seeing this cockatoo in the Watagans National Park, close to where she lives. They have a specific diet—the seeds of the Casuarina tree.¹⁴ As their numbers are declining we have to confront the possibility of very real loss, that of a bird species.

Reconfiguring the Wall (2006), the third quilt in this project, is by Emma Rowden (Fig. 7). Emma made *Reconfiguring the Wall* as part of her final year honours architecture presentation. Emma explains she chose the site of the former mental asylum of Callan Park in order to explore: "...the social ethics and politics of architecture".¹⁵



Figure 7. Emma Rowden, *Reconfiguring the wall* (2006) 176 x 254 cm; linen bed sheet printed with architectural plans for the site (1:200), sectional perspective (1:50), longitudinal section (1:100); text; map of former asylum sites of Sydney; stitched title of project (*reconfiguring the wall*) in stranded cotton thread
Photography: Emma Rowden

When I asked Emma why she makes quilts, she replied:

"I like the idea of making something useful—something that I could use on a daily basis. I like the fact that it's something close to my skin that is warming and comforting...I know every stitch. I have ended up giving away every one I've made, so I think I also like the fact that I'm making that object for someone else. I like the bigness of the gesture when it is made as a gift—it takes a long time and there's a lot of me invested in it."¹⁶

But as I look at *Reconfiguring the Wall* and read Emma's words, I sense a dislocation. I believe her reasons for making quilts are those shared by many quiltmakers. This quilt is, however, something different and what drove her project was: "The notion of the other dissolves when we see the other as no different from ourselves".¹⁷ ...And how to break down the walls of prejudice that come between us as individuals.

¹³ George Raper (1769-1797) was 18 when he arrived in Port Jackson (later called Sydney), he was neither professional artist nor scientist but recorded the fauna and flora of a new land in a remarkable series of paintings (Olsen, Penny 2008)

¹⁴ Fitzsimons, Pamela personal communication, 2010

¹⁵ Rowden, Emma (2006)

¹⁶ Rowden, Emma personal communication (email September 14, 2010)

¹⁷ Rowden, Emma (2006)

On further thought, however, *Reconfiguring the Wall* is something ‘useful’, a ‘gift’ to others struggling with their mental illnesses, those striving to be accepted. *Reconfiguring the wall* is positioned somewhere between a wall hanging and what Emma intends it to be—a quilt documenting and representing her architectural thesis. It certainly has two-sides: on one were the final plans for re-development of the Callan Park site printed on an old linen bed sheet, while the other consists of ‘pieced’ research material (on cloth) that documents the history of the site...old photographs, street plans, fliers and newspaper articles from the Mitchell Library (Sydney), as well as stitched and embroidered fragments dyed with plant material collected from the location (Fig. 8).¹⁸ The two sides, however, are not connected in the physical sense by stitching.¹⁹ Yet by utilizing this process of bringing together, Emma allows the multiple voices—and the stories they tell of the site—to be heard. The dominant narrative—that contained in the official records of the colony—is placed alongside the hidden narratives. As such they combine to tell a multiplicity of tales, contradictory at times and, a truth that shifts and transforms in the telling.



Figure 8. Emma Rowden, *Reconfiguring the wall (pieced side)* 108 x 248 cm; cotton, linen, silk, wool, plant-dyed with material from site; machine pieced, hand appliquéd; printed, hand and machine stitched silk and cotton threads, paint.

And the two sides are most definitely *connected* in terms of subject matter—the documentary/pieced side was fundamental to the process of developing the final plans for the site—you *do* need to see both sides. It is thus a quilt that must hang freely in space—an aspect that connects Emma's work to Judy's, who regularly pieced both sides of her quilts.

¹⁸ In patchwork quilting terms *piecing* is the process of stitching/joining together fragments of cloth to make the quilt surface

¹⁹ Usually considered fundamental to a quilt—and one of the entry conditions of many quilt exhibitions

A quote from Marilynne Robinson's novel, *Housekeeping* became the mantra for the project and is to be found hand- and machine-stitched, as well as printed on the pieced side of the quilt: "And below is always the accumulated past, which vanishes but does not vanish, which persists and remains" (Fig. 9).²⁰



Figure 9. Emma Rowden, *Reconfiguring the wall*, detail with Marilynne Robinson quote.

It was here my narrative took an unexpected turn: I had grown up listening to family stories about a grand house on the banks of a river—the story also claimed that this house and its substantial grounds were lost in a card game by a certain 'wicked Uncle Jo'. When Emma invited me to help her with the making of this quilt, I told her this story and much to my surprise Emma replied 'yes'—her research in the Mitchell Library confirmed that the property that was now known as Callan Park was originally developed by my grandmother's family. Moreover, the *NSW Writers' Centre*—also located in the grounds of Callan Park—was 'Garryowen' the very house John Ryan Brenan, my great-great-grandfather built in 1839. Furthermore, 'Uncle Jo' had also existed; he was Joseph Justin—John Ryan's third son, a gambler and eccentric born in 1823.²¹ But the story of the loss of the family property turned out to be more complex and I found 'Uncle Jo' unfairly blamed for the family's loss in fortune some one hundred and fifty years ago.²²

It was with this connection in mind that Emma printed her architectural plans for the site on a linen bed sheet that had belonged to my grandmother Ivo, John Ryan's great granddaughter. The smaller panel was originally a bed sheet belonging to my eldest son, Ivo's great grandson. This was an unexpected example of what *Reconfiguring the Wall* was about—these connections were not only in the distant past but reached forward to connect to Emma and I as we worked together in the piecing of her quilt—this had happened by chance but the connections were indisputable and unbreakable.

In his introduction to Deleuze's *Essays Critical and Clinical*, Daniel Smith quotes Deleuze on the writing process:

"We have to see creation (for writers) as tracing a path between impossibilities...A creator who isn't grabbed by the throat by a set of impossibilities is no creator. A creator is someone who creates their own possibilities, and thereby creates impossibilities...Without impossibilities you won't have a line of flight, the exit that is creation, the power of falsity that is truth".²³

²⁰ Robinson, Marilynne (1981), 172

²¹ Brenan, Margaret Hunter (2004), 18

²² There are more details of this story and images on <<http://quilted-out-of-space.blogspot.com/p/reconfiguring-wall.html>>

²³ Deleuze quoted by Daniel W. Smith in the introduction to Deleuze (1993) *Essays Critical and Clinical*, xlviii

It is in our use of language that we can explore where form, function and everyday experience converge. The use of a word in one context sets up resonances within the language centres of the brain—where one meaning melds into another, with the potential of becoming something altogether more complex. Thus the word *block* can be defined alternatively as: a solid hewn piece of hard material, a compact mass of buildings bounded by streets, an obstruction, a set of sheets of paper used for writing—or—in quiltmaking terms, the subdivision of quilt into large squares ('blocks') containing a pieced pattern, often repeated and classified by grid on which block is based.²⁴ The *Posts* that make up the weblog are also effectively *blocks* of writing, thus linking the *sites* and buildings (a prison, a home and a mental hospital) with the basic units that make up a patchwork quilt in the physical world with the blog, also a site but one found in cyberspace.

The blog, *Quilted out of Space* was—and continues to be—intentionally open and interactive.²⁵ I soon realised I was not the objective observer I set out to be, but a participant who actively selected and explored a broad range of material as the blog evolved. It was for this reason I framed the project in terms of a performance: a frame that was not fixed but shifted—more conversation than statement—just as the blog sought to open up multiple and alternative connections, rather than to arrive at a definitive answer.²⁶ Each Post was triggered by an idea, comment or image from which associations emerged that I documented via links (hyper-links) as I went—a process I found to be an effective means of collecting and collating information. It was the ability to illustrate and cross-reference subject matter using links from the blog to other Internet sites that proved to be a particularly effective tool for myself as researcher and writer.

To perform is to inhabit an alternative reality and in this project I found I was effectively creating a quilt in an alternative space to the physical one—that of cyberspace. My subtext continued to be one of alternative narratives within the domestic—the house, the home and the 'woman as artist'—the act of reclaiming that space, rather than seeking a *reductive* definition of homogeneity.²⁷ And I was searching for—and believe I found—alternative and heterogeneous spaces with the ability to make connections between artists who worked in seemingly unrelated media to the quilt form as well as with writers of prose and poetry.²⁸

As I developed the blog, connections between the three quilts began to emerge despite their obvious differences in construction and the individual artist's approach to design. If you take the two quilts *Love Will Nail You to the Cross* and the *Lost birds* series, they both reference ideas of the house and the home; the vernacular (*jail birds* is one term for prisoners); loss—of personal freedom or the extinction of a bird species; a particular location or site—Long Bay prison and the Watagans National Park; as well as the making, passing or doing of time.²⁹

²⁴ See <<http://quilted-out-of-space.blogspot.com/p/word-play.html>> for a more detailed discussion of terms and their uses

²⁵ I used Blogger as a platform for the blog—it is free, simple to use and on a public server—anyone can visit and leave comments

²⁶ I consider each Post to be akin to a postcard written to the reader of the blog—I do not consider it to be a polished/finished piece of writing although it, along perhaps with other Posts, may lead to a more formal and longer piece of writing in the future

²⁷ See Meskimmon, Marsha (2003), 2 for a discussion of this point

²⁸ Artists—Anne Ferran, Ruth Hadlow, Anish Kapoor, Janet Laurence, Anthony Mannix, Anna Munster and Hossein Valamanesh and, writers—Yann Mantel, Greg Orr, Dorothy Porter, Mark Tredinnick and Charles Wright to name but a few, as well as details from an ordinary life

²⁹ To 'do time' is the vernacular for serving one's sentence in prison for breaking the law

The two quilts *Love will Nail You to the Cross* and *Reconfiguring the Wall* are connected by notions of containment and confinement—being held somewhere by society; to alternative concepts of home and the home as an asylum, or place of relative safety; to the institution—the prison, the mental hospital; to justice—the treatment of the criminal and those mentally ill is inscribed in the law; both quilts contain written text, as well as narratives that are hidden, fragmented, and are examples of heteroglossia³⁰; they refer to particular sites in Sydney—Long Bay and Callan Park; they confront perceptions of social (non)conformity; both the payment of one's dues to society for a crime committed and the treatment of illness infer a passing of time; both quilts are two-sided.

Finally, the *Lost birds* series and *Reconfiguring the Wall* incorporate cloth that is linked to site by the use of plant-dyes; as well as a layering of time in the historical record or personal memory; to notions of home; to a particular sites in New South Wales—the lower Hunter Valley and a suburb (Rozelle) in Sydney where Callan Park is situated.

As I write this, I realise the obvious—it is not only the works themselves that are making the connections—it is the process of collecting and collating ideas that creates a sense of awe within the mind of the writer, a sense of wonder as it is described by Trihn T Min-Hah:

“Wonder never seizes, never possesses the other as its object. It is the ability to see, hear, and touch, to go towards as though always for the first time”.³¹

And just I might have chosen individual pieces of cloth to make a quilt; I have made connections and brought together stories that linked the three quilts that made up this project—a ‘virtual’ rather than a ‘physical’ *cabinet of curiosities* or Wunderkammer, and a metaphor for the mind—a performance in a smooth space.

AND BACK AGAIN

The arrival of Edgar Levensen's paper, ‘The Enigma of the Unconscious’ towards the end of the initial phase of this research provided that leap of understanding that a number of the questions I was asking about the structure of space, and the functioning of a smooth space within it, can be answered by the notion of *hyperspace*—a non-Euclidian space of more than three dimensions.

Levensen's paper is about the unconscious but I believe he also manages to open up all a number of intriguing ideas that, although he does not refer to Deleuze and Guattari, do have relevance to the concept of striated and smooth space. Levensen points out:

“Conscious thinking follows the rules of Greek logic—deduction, categorizing, inferring—our Western cultural heritage (which, in Deleuzian terms is a striated space). In contrast, unconscious thinking seems closer to free-ranging hypertext...where words and concepts are pursued to their most unexpected implications (and which, in Deleuzian terms is a smooth space).”³²

The development of a text from *unconscious thinking* would be Levensen argues: ‘... a self-regenerating process’ and, the process I experienced in the writing of a blog. Levensen then goes on to state: “I think the brain is individual but mind is a field phenomenon, a network, a web”.³³

...A web that is a polycentric, synchronic world like the internet, the quilt, *and* smooth space.³⁴

³⁰ Term coined by the literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin and defined as the multiplicity of languages within the apparent unity of any national language—another ‘language within a language’—see FN 35

³¹ Min-Ha, Trihn T (1991) 23

³² Levensen (2001) 247

³³ Levensen (2001) 250

³⁴ The idea of synchronicity is that the conceptual relationship of minds, defined as the relationship between ideas, is intricately structured in its own logical way and gives rise to relationships that are not causal in nature. These relationships can manifest themselves as simultaneous occurrences that are meaningfully related.

Moreover, I realise that—in returning to the unconscious—I have returned to a space I have been before and where I started. My interest is in the unconscious—its unpredictability, its disparities and, "And below is always the accumulated past..." the Marilynne Robinson quote that became the mantra for *Reconfiguring the Wall*. It is that glimpse of a possibility that the concept of a smooth space can be helpful in generating new ways of seeing and new ways of hearing stories in my research—in Deleuze's terms: "another language within a language".³⁵ And the creation of what could be described as an interactive and 'virtual' cabinet of curiosities—of 'wondering' and of 'wonder'.

What I had thought would be an evolution in my writing and research practise has in fact become a revolution—a 'turn around' in my thinking—with the intriguing possibility: it is not 'I' who am performing the quilt; it is the quilt that is performing 'me'. Thus I find that the blog, like the patchwork quilt offers the possibility of **a self-regenerating text that operates in a smooth space**. Furthermore, the analysis of the weblog requires the writer to organize the text within a striated space demonstrating, as was argued by Deleuze and Guattari, that one type of space is continually being translated into the other and the two only exist in a combination—just as a quilt requires an outer edge, a binding, to be complete.

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Synchronistic events reveal an underlying pattern, a conceptual framework that encompasses, but is larger than, any of the systems that display the synchronicity. The suggestion of a larger framework is essential to satisfy the definition of synchronicity as originally developed by Carl Jung <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carl_Jung>

³⁵ Deleuze (1993) lv