



Andy Fuller¹

Ange Leech 2011: Isolated Dis-Play

Ange Leech, a Melbourne-based artist, makes collages, sculptures and video works. Leech, originally from northern Tasmania, first came to Melbourne with plans of becoming a musician. For several years, she played at pubs around Melbourne. Her rock'n'roll lifestyle, however, was complemented by a dedicated practicing of kung fu and maintaining a high level of physical fitness. After giving away both the rock'n'roll and kung fu, Leech is practicing as an energetic artist with pursuits in a wide range of materials and ideas. Her collages in her graduate exhibition were mature and clearly articulated. The work from her final year at RMIT continues to be used and referenced in her current work. Her work explores a range of aesthetics of particular objects through different forms, media and qualities. This, for example, is seen in her various creations of masks, cones and carburettors. Leech maintains regular training for endurance events, and, more recently boxing. This interest in athletics and other sports was also evident in an earlier exhibition at Place Gallery: *1956 Horsepower*.

The Head Alterations of *1956 Horsepower*

1956 Horsepower, Place Gallery 2009, was a further exploration of Ange's interest in heads and the human form. Her exhibition of collages at the RMIT graduate exhibition in 2008 consisted of a series of collages with various machine parts placed over a photocopied self-portrait. These works were a result of an ongoing process that was well documented in Ange's notebooks. Some of the pages of the notebooks appear as complete works, others merely indicative of the process she is working through to arrive at more complete and clarified statements of the aesthetics of movement, the human body and the dialogue between 'human-body as machine' and 'machine as a body'.

In *1956 Horsepower* one can also consider the ideal of 'the amateur' as espoused by the Olympics. On the one hand, space for the amateur continues to diminish. Experts with their fancy titles and jealously held access to knowledge are increasingly dominant. Yet on the other hand, the presence of the amateur thrives through the seemingly endless possibilities available on the Internet. Despite the complexity of the processes involved in her making, Ange's work is accessible and easily consumed. Ange's flexibility of expression relates well to the ideal of the amateur who is capable of performing numerous roles, without being tied to one role in particular. An amateur, and amateurism, is less about the quality of work performed, but more to do with ideal of detachment and flexibility.

Isolated Dis-Play

This exhibition draws on practices of both viewing and interacting with objects. Viewers are invited to remake dismantled objects. The whole objects, so readily recognisable, are reduced to fragmentary parts – whose interrelation is perhaps, generally, only known to specialists. These objects are thus deconstructed in a particularly literal manner. Placed in one another's contexts their differences and similarities are

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revealed. A hairdryer: a tool of the bathroom and domestic space. *It blows hot air*. Its noise soothes babies. It dries painted toenails. It contrasts with the manly connotations of the plane, carburettor and Kalashnikov. These tools play varying roles in shaping appropriate gender roles. The hairdryer is the sole electrical tool of the exhibition. Yet, like the carburettor it relies on the fast movement of air through its body for it to function. The tools of Leech's exhibition are interrelated by degrees: the selection somewhat whimsical and also speaking of Leech's earlier work. Leech's deconstruction of these tools allows viewers and users to notice the similarities across the different parts of the different tools. Yet, these are not replicas, but instead, are variations and derivations. Their similarities are enhanced by the uniformity of the material which has been used to remake each tool. Something plastic (the hairdryer) has become wooden and thus heavier and stronger than its original material (and less malleable). While, the Kalashnikov becomes lighter and weaker than what it was modelled on. The plane, however, remains relatively consistent between derivative and original.

Isolated Dis-Play also comments on technologies and the way tools are used in everyday lives. The deconstruction of these tools allows viewers an opportunity to approach their inner workings. As such, their deconstruction is successful to varying degrees. The plane, for example, can be reassembled most logically and successfully. It has, after all, no parts that require an outside source of power. It is the simplest and most basic example of technology of the four – and, at the same time, it is the most enduring and classical. It is romantic in that it speaks of a carpenter's workshop and invokes ideas of craftsmanship. The hairdryer, however, appears somewhat de-contextualised and muted in its wooden form, removed from its ability to conduct electricity and to produce heat. Yet, it is this degree of separation and transformation of medium that comments on the aesthetics and physical qualities of the original tool. The carburettor, on the other, in contrast to the simplicity of the plane, relies on the input of fuel, airflow and the presence of different air pressures to function. Moreover, the carburettor is a tool that serves another. It doesn't have the independence of the Kalashnikov, hairdryer and plane. Leech's deconstructions also invite viewers to question their own technical and scientific skills in deduction. These frequently used and easily recognised objects become illegible in their dismantled state. Their ease of use bellies the skill and scientific knowledge that was a part of their creation.

The Way of the Kalashnikov

This weapon is known by two names. Its names have their own connotations. In some instances it is called AK47, in others, it is known as Kalashnikov. Both names refer to the instrument's founder and inventor, Mikhail Kalashnikov. The '47' being the years of its completion in its initial form. Although, this is a weapon that has become iconic, it is one that is also frequently updated and improved with whatever necessary modifications. Christopher Carr, in his book, *Kalashnikov Culture* (2008), writes of its use in South Asia (Pakistan), East Africa, the Middle East (Yemen) and South America (Brazil). He writes of how the Kalashnikov is used as the main weapon of 'irregular warfare'. This term, Kalashnikov culture, was initially coined by Benazir Bhutto – the then prime minister of Pakistan – in the 1980s. She used it to refer to 'an admixture of tribal discontent, urban political factionalism, organised crime, corruption, drugs and ... the proliferation of military-type weapons throughout Pakistan' (Carr, 2008, p.vii).

The Kalashnikov is an iconic weapon of non-state warfare. It is a weapon that although developed by the military of the Soviet Union has, in many instances, been adopted by non-state forces. A Kalashnikov's attributes suggest some reasons for its wide use by insurgents and irregular warmongers. A Kalashnikov facilitates a certain kind of tactics and a particular kind of insurgency. (Recently, in Iraq, when insurgents were using Kalashnikov's against US forces, the US armed pro-US forces with Kalashnikov's, as a means to counter their advantage.) In the case of Mozambique for example, the Kalashnikov is a part of the national flag: so central was it to the FRELIMO struggle for independence it was adopted as a national symbol upon gaining independence. The Kalashnikov's relation to the state is thus one that is shifting according to its context: it is not beholden to a particular ideology.

Its wide use by insurgents rests with its strength, reliability and relative accuracy. Moreover, a Kalashnikov made in one part of the world can easily be mixed and matched with a Kalashnikov made in another factory in another country. This non-specificity of attributes contrasts greatly with contemporary non-compatibility of so much software and computer programs. The Kalashnikov is easy to use and thus can be used by those who have no military training. Its durability allows it to be kept in rough and dusty conditions and still be effective, even with minimal maintenance.

Planing

A book on 'the way of the carpenter' by William Coaldrake, a historian of Japanese architecture, begins with this anecdote:

Three small, unassuming Japanese planes rest on my desk. The gift of a retired master carpenter, none is larger than the span of my outstretched fingers nor greater in width than the base of my thumb. Two are straight, one sweetly curved. The oak block of each plane is scarred with use, the cutting blade pockmarked with rust (Coaldrake, 1990, p.3)

Coaldrake uses the planes as a tool to introduce ideas and concepts that are fundamental to that of Japanese carpentry, or, dogu. This is translated as 'the way of the tool' (Coaldrake, 1990, p.4). The planes are important symbols for Coaldrake as 'they form tangible links with the people and processes of building in the past' (Coaldrake, 1990, p.3). His text serves as an account of methods and practices that are upheld by the Kyoto Dento Kenchiku Gijutsu Kyokai – a modern guild for traditional building craftsmen. The esoteric practices of blessings, sacrifices and secrets he describes, contrast with the popularity of plane websites and instructional video clips available on You Tube. In these videos one sees amateurs and professionals extolling the virtues of particular planes – each with their own set of attributes and specific function. It is a tool with a history of thousands of years: a tool whose inventor is unknown. Its design features are consistent across so many variations: a flat base, a thin blade, and a mouth to expel shavings. Its variations, derivations speak of efforts for endless refinement and increasing diversity. Indeed, the more skilled the carpenter, the more kinds of planes the carpenter will need and use.

A basic plane used in Japanese carpentry is made up of: blade groove, blade seat, head, blade retaining pin, mouth, sole, toe and throat for shavings ejections (Coaldrake, 1990, p.67). Like the plane, the blade also has its parts named after parts of the body: it has both a head and an ear. *The plane as body*. Whether of Japanese design or other, the purpose of the plane is consistent: to smooth a rough surface. When pushed or pulled (as Japanese planes are) a plane's mouth eats up the rough wooden surface and spews it out as shavings. The quality of these shavings speak of the plane used: their smell and fineness reflect the craftsmanship of the plane. Sennett's description of an emblematic craftsman invokes the carpenter who works in a tidy shop, surrounded by apprentices and tools, in a room filled with the 'smell of wood shavings' (Sennett, 2008, p.19). And, as Coaldrake writes, a 'superlative cutting steel, skilful technique and careful setting of the blade results in long, continuous ribbons of shavings, which may be less than 0.03 millimetres in thickness' (Coaldrake, 1990, p.66).

White Noise Maker

She's a girl with time to have a good time. She'll look fine in six minutes. She's saving time with the new fast drying Clairol 1200...*hairdryer!* Hmmm...This sporty, bright and green machine. It's light and small, it blows real mean. The best thing blowing on the hairdrying scene is the Clairol 1200 hairdryer.²

So goes an advertisement for the Clairol 1200. It shows a woman somersaulting off a diving board into a pool, swimming, getting out, drying her hair with said hairdryer, driving a golf buggy to a tennis court and then playing tennis with a friend. Such a hairdryer allows the user to live a fast life, full of pleasure. The

² Available here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9cBN-INE-hY> (accessed January, 2011)

advertisement ends by showing a photograph of the fun loving woman lying down, with one knee raised as she holds the hairdryer towards her face.

Another advertisement shows three members of a family all gaining pleasure from their new tool that dries their hair so quickly. They each state, in surprise at its efficiency: 'son of a gun!' And like a gun, a hairdryer has a discharge – hot air – a handle, a 'trigger' and some kind of 'snout'. As a domestic product, however, it is targeted at female consumers. Yet one brand overcomes this by using a semi-naked and well-muscled man in its advertisement. Full of self-admiration, he stares into the camera as he blows his long and flowing blonde locks. The hairdryer becomes a tool for admiring oneself. His pleasure, however, is interrupted by his partner who suddenly appears and tries to take the hairdryer from him. Numerous other advertisements use the hairdryer as a tool for showing freshly showered young ladies wearing towels and addressing the camera as if it were their bathroom mirror.

A hairdryer, however, is also notable for its noise. Its hum, apparently, is useful in putting babies to sleep. A high-pitched white noise loop has thus become available on various websites for download. The white noise of the hairdryer is glossed over in most advertisements through the presence of loud, fast paced music (such as in the Clairol advertisement). This attribute links it with its forebear, the vacuum cleaner – that essential warrior of modern domesticity. In the case of a Philips advertisement, however, two hairdryers are shown blowing on ping-pong balls. The balls float at different heights. The power of the Philips hairdryer is seen in that its ball floats at a higher level than the other hairdryer's ball. All the while throughout this 30-second advertisement, a light, gentle and soft classical piano melody is played. A hairdryer's white noise is perhaps as soothing – at least for some.

Engine Feeder

The carburettor, first developed in the late nineteenth century, is a device that mixes air with fuel. The carburettor regulates the flow of this fuel to the engine's cylinders. A carburettor is made up of a butterfly valve (or throttle valve), choke valve, air cleaner, Venturi, float valve, float arm, float, float chamber and discharge nozzle (or jet).

A carburettor works in the following way: fuel comes into the float chamber, and is spat out through the discharge nozzle. This fuel is then mixed with the air that is passing through the carburettor. The fuel and the air are sent to the engine's cylinders. The float in the float chamber stops the flow of fuel when the float chamber is full of fuel. Air is filtered through an air filter and passes through the carburettor. As the carburettor is shaped as a Venturi, the air speeds up as it passes through the constricted space. The mixture of air and fuel passes through the butterfly valve. This is controlled by the user's throttle. If one opens the throttle, more air will pass through the butterfly valve and increase the power at which the engine is functioning. Even when the butterfly valve is closed, however, a small amount of air and fuel still passes through – this keeps the engine idling.

The purpose of the choke is to restrict the flow of air that passes through the carburettor. The throttle valve (or butterfly valve) regulates the amount of fuel that passes through the carburettor. Changing the amount of fuel increases or decreases the engine's power.

Exhibiting Unmaking and Remaking

This exhibition consists of four cabinets, each with its own tool inside. The objects are presented as if in a scientific exhibition. And thus reminds viewers of spatial practices that are similarly formal and somewhat different to those of encounters in museums of art. The plane relates to Leech's work with wood – as in her exhibition at Blindside in 2009. This earlier exhibition included a wooden model of a carburettor that viewers were invited to reassemble by using a pair of gloves that connected the viewer with the work. The work thus became not only the disassembled wooden carburettor, but also the viewer's (or, user's) efforts at re-assembling the carburettor. As such, Isolated Dis-Play is a further exploration of the earlier exhibition at Blindside. In making these works, Leech has been based at Chapman and Bailey in Abbotsford, under the specific

guidance of Mark Jackson.³ By being based at Chapman and Bailey, Leech has been able to develop her skills in carpentry and, in particular, cabinet making. Her work here has presented her with greater opportunities to learn more detailed and specific ways of using woodworking tools. The plane – which appears as a self-referential object – is in contrast to the three other tools, as it has no moving parts. It is also an ancient tool, in contrast to the modernities of the Kalashnikov, hairdryer and carburettor.

The carburettor has also been used in some of Leech's collages. It has appeared as an element that covers an unknown face. These collages were exhibited in her RMIT graduation exhibition in 2008. The face with a machine appendage also relates to her work *1956 Horsepower* (Place Gallery, 2009), in which athletes' heads were replaced with truck cabins. Leech frequently speaks of the important guidance provided by her father, who works as a vintage car restorer in northern Tasmania. It seems possible that his detailed knowledge of cars and their internal workings may have played a role in Ange's interest in this part of the car. Unlike the other three objects in this exhibition, the carburettor is dependent on other devices for its function. It is one device that is essential for making a car run, and is only one part of the process. The carburettor incorporates the principles of the vacuum and also uses relations of air pressure and chemical reactions.

Leech also, over the past six months has worked closely with Scott Mahoney of Metal Masters Panels. With him, Leech learnt skills in metal working and welding. In the cases of the mentorships with Mahoney and at Chapman and Bailey with Mark Jackson, Leech has developed new skills as well as developing new ideas for future projects. Leech speaks enthusiastically of her indebtedness to Mahoney and Jackson in helping her develop her artistic practice.

Leech's work is diverse, rich, and playful. Her work speaks of a desire to both learn how to shape materials and how to make something that is both engaging for the viewer and for the maker herself. Leech clearly relates her work to her own specific context: that of background, education, physical and intellectual interests (which prove so difficult to separate). Her work draws on her experiences in both direct and indirect manners. Her work speaks of her own curiosity regarding the science and aesthetics of technological development, and, also the way the human body interacts with these technologies. These tools themselves become referential to the movements and acts of the body. Her work draws on traditions of craftsmanship, while engaging with contemporary art theories and senses of touch and sight.

References:

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³ Mark Jackson is a furniture designer and maker. He started his career in the UK restoring antique furniture. He then moved to New Zealand and made furniture for the designer David Trubridge. Mark now makes furniture for Chapman and Bailey in Melbourne. Ange Leech expresses her gratitude to Mark Chapman for facilitating the apprenticeship.