

Hany Armanious

Selflok (1993-2001)

Selflok is like a parallel universe that could be seen as an amalgamation of an elfin workshop, fantastic pre-industrial grotto and pharmacological paradise. Do these references resonate for you?

How did you discover hotmelt and what properties about the material spoke to you?

How do you see *Selflok* furthering into your own practice? Are there ideas that have continued from this work?

You often adapt works when installing, adding elements spontaneously. How do you see your work functioning in a collection context which is less dynamic?

Selflok was made gradually over about ten years.

The project was elaborated upon and expanded with each exhibition it was in. In this time the work gained its own momentum and narrative autonomy separate from other work I was making during this period. In some ways it imposed itself on my practise through a series of coincidences and chance encounters which I was compelled to submit to.

The themes and imagery are not things that I am personally drawn to, but became convenient vehicles for realising the installation. This involved a play with the very physicality of objects plus the complexity of display and of perception.

What this work is “about”, I have no idea, but in some of the research I later looked at regarding pharmacology and psychedelics there appears to be a specific correlation between altered states of consciousness and direct communication with an explicit subterranean world of mischievous elves! These are vivid experiences which have been reported and recorded consistently in clinical neuroscience studies and within psychedelic folklore.

For me, an art work becomes active when it unwittingly stumbles upon the right questions.

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Principal Funder



In Play:

Hany Armanious, Peter Robinson, Jim Speers

In Play is an exhibition that brings together three large-scale installations held in the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery Collection, by artists Hany Armanious, Peter Robinson and Jim Speers. In markedly differing ways, each artist has built a multi-part construction that plays with scale, colour and material to challenge audience expectations around art and everyday objects, public spaces and image-making, as well as modernism and the imagination.

Hany Armanious' *Selflok* (1993-2001) is a whimsical installation, described as a blend of elfin workshop, fantastic pre-industrial grotto and pharmacological paradise. The work is constructed largely of hotmelt, a synthetic latex that can be easily softened and moulded. Unconventionally playful, it is a theatrical re-creation of an imaginary place, presenting a simulated artisanal past and bringing together a complex of materials and associations.

Peter Robinson's *If You Were To Work Here: The Mood In The Museum* (2013) is work made of numerous poles covered in blue, red, green and yellow felt. These colours reference the principles of Hippocratic medicine and the proposition that certain hues can influence our mood or frame of mind. Each time the installation process is site-specific, reflecting the artist's interest in bringing people together to co-create work with him. At the Govett-Brewster it relies on the participation of museum staff to install elements of the work in 'non-gallery' spaces, expanding the work beyond the usual boundaries it inhabits.

Jim Speers' *Crystal Spirit* (2009) is an enigmatic assortment of found images, text and colour that appear to be an inventory of visual footnotes harvested from the internet. The juxtaposition of visual, historical and verbal references muddles the space between art and the things that surround us every day. Using existing material from a global, digital culture, the installation alludes to post-industrial packaging and signage, social media and design, while eloquently inhabiting a space between the poetic and the skin-deep.

Through these installations – and albeit in strikingly different ways - Armanious, Robinson and Speers create complex universes, bringing together formal and conceptual concerns, and adeptly keeping numerous readings available and 'in play'.

Open six days

Sun, Mon, Wed, Thu, Fri, Sat 10 am – 6 pm
Closed Tuesdays and Christmas Day

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Room Brochure

Peter Robinson

If You Were To Work Here: The Mood In The Museum (2013)

If You Were To Work Here... is a site specific installed work. Can you say something on the installation process of this work at the Auckland Triennial in 2013? How did you see the making of this work connecting the two institutions, the Auckland Triennial and Auckland War Memorial Museum?

The work was conceived as a response to Hou Hanru's invitation to present a work in He Taonga Māori gallery at the Tāmaki Paenga Hira Auckland War Memorial Museum. The opportunity to exhibit in this context though extremely exciting was also incredibly complex. There were many issues that needed to be attended to, including working sensitively around Taonga (treasures), navigating institutional anxiety and responding to the specific nature of the museum and its relationship to war. It was an extremely difficult project to conceptualise and develop, problems seemed to arise at every juncture but once I decided to allow these issues to form the work rather than try to resist or circumvent them, the work opened up in more interesting directions than I could have anticipated. The work literally connected the two institutions through the parade that took place between them.

The colours of the poles are solid dark red, blue, yellow and green. What inspired the selection of these particular colours? Is the patterned presentation in the gallery set, as a starting point, or changeable each time you install?

I was thinking about the morale and the hierarchy of the people that worked at the museum, all the people that work behind the scenes. Eventually I came upon the idea that I could offer the staff of the museum the opportunity to place the sticks in locations of their choosing. To place an object within a museum usually is associated with holding power within the institution. By offering staff (ranging from security, conservation through to curatorial and management) to place a stick anywhere in the public domain, this opened up a moment where the hierarchy was flattened. As well as this, staff were invited to assign an emotional value to the sticks which when placed in the exhibition areas would indicate their sense of morale while working there. The code of emotional values that the staff members assigned to their sticks remained a private thing. Nevertheless the colours needed to be quite different to one another to provide the staff with a way of expressing a wide range of emotional values. The presentation of the work in the Govett-Brewster is the second showing of the work, the visual configuration is adaptable for each context but the basic consistent idea is to reveal the morale of the institution in which it is presented (although rather feebly) and to deconstruct the hierarchies (albeit momentarily) within the staff.

The title, *If You Were To Work Here: The Mood In The Museum*, suggests a comment on museum and gallery culture, possibly asking audiences to consider what museum work entails. Can you tell us about the title of the work?

I guess I've already answered this in the previous response to your question, at least to some extent. The first part of the title for me was messing with Hou Hanru's title for the triennial, *If You Were To Live Here*. I perceived Hanru as a very playful curator, a trickster to some extent and thought I'd like to give him a little of his own back. I also thought that perhaps his title was a reference to Martha Rosler's *If You Lived Here* so this chain of titles forms a kind of infinite regress that gets distorted slightly with each iteration.

How do you envisage collaboration and working with different groups, in and out of the museum space? Do you see it as a kind of liberation of artwork, galleries, staff or visitors?

If You Were to Work Here is the first in a series of works that I've made in recent years including Tribe Subtribe presented at The Dowse Art Museum, Recreation Centre commissioned by the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, Syntax System exhibited at Artspace Sydney, and Syntax System, Jakarta Style curated into the 2017 Jakarta Biennale by Charles Esche. All of these works were experiments whereby I tried to distort or collapse the conventional relationships between the artist, the institution and the audience. It's not particularly new territory – it's well founded by artists such as Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Pape and Franz Erhard Walther – but I think a small thing I may have achieved is to reverse the relationship of artist/ audience with respect to the authorship of the work. A friend of mine, Theo MacDonald, suggested to me that the Syntax Systems are like oil paint which I provide for the audience to paint with. So, yes, I do see the work as an attempt to liberate the art and all the parties concerned.

Jim Speers

Crystal Spirit (2009)

What inspired the title of the work, *Crystal Spirit*?

This title is borrowed from the last line of a George Orwell poem, written in memory of an Italian militia man and included in the essay Looking back on the Spanish War. I'm a great fan of Orwell but it's not so much the poem that I'm interested in, as it's of its time; rather, I'm interested in it as an artefact that's somewhat lost in time. The fact that it once had polemic purchase connects it, in my mind at least, to the lost material world in which it was made – a world of typewriters and printing, politics and radios. The images used in the prints are all borrowed by burrowing through the internet to this pre-digital world of paper and mass broadcast.

Your installations have been described as leaving the viewer feeling 'stranded in an unfamiliar place'. Is this how you see the viewing experience for *Crystal Spirit*? And does an 'unfamiliar' space allow for new ideas to emerge?

Most of what I make shares an open weave and this is because I'm often still responding to the incoming information I use. While I use it I'm unsure of its effect on me but aware that I enjoy being within a chain of connections, even if they're partial. I imagine meaning to be something I make in my own head; so, for example, one of the prints involves a picture of an industrial milling machine. It's Japanese and branded as Okamoto and it's a tiny element of the post-war industrial expansion. At the same time it shares this name with Kōzō Okamoto who in 1972 was a militant communist and terrorist, involved in the JRA hijacking of a passenger plane in Poland. It seems possible to make a connection between the two even though lots of other objects or actors occur around them. So in a sense it's an assembly of parts, from a list of the clubs footballer George Best played for taken from his obituary, to images of scientific instruments or photographs of meadows. It's all associative for me and at times the links face outward, away from what's made available to the viewer. George's clubs, listed in chronological order, remind me of the circling pattern Rem Koolhaas ascribes to Corbusier; both travelled so they could work, the architect in the tropics and George in San Jose. I think if there's another thing I'm interested in, its simultaneity. I like to imagine different flight paths crossing over without an awareness of one another.

How do you view contemporary commercial design and how it inhabits public space?

I'm not an expert but I do think that public design has become more orientated around users, and while that might make it more effective it also means that it's less likely to deliver something new. Harmony isn't so interesting and

there are not many differences between the design products and their producers. I regret that this results in the lessening of an opportunity to insert the previously unheard of within a local language - and at the same time that shared structures of development create sameness across local environments that might contain real points of difference. I'm interested in design as a practice that aims to communicate something it generates itself. There's always been design that's capable of driving consumption without creating anything – it acts like a Post-it note and it's effective but it doesn't interest me. While acknowledging that art itself often doesn't achieve this, I'm interested in design that acts in the way art might, to express possibilities beyond the tasks it finds itself responsible for. These possibilities might be excessive or even acts of refusal. Putting this to one side, I also want to look at design without considering the intention that brought it into being, as if it were an ecological outcome and a response to need in an evolutionary sense, subject to mistakes and revision. I don't think the arrival of a digital world changes this, apart from the fact that the loop between consumption and messaging has been sped up. Having said this, now and in our part of the world, the physical can seem nostalgic. I'm both wary of this, as well as feeling that the digital lives as if it is physical, in a way I wouldn't have imagined 20 years ago.

We collectively have (comparatively recent) engagement with masses of electronic images through online formats. Has your engagement with images shifted alongside these changes? What is your relationship to this plethora of visual information, and how do you navigate this to create work?

One way or another I work with materials physically. I include virtual processes in this category though. Whether a process is being pursued within a modelling programme or through screen-printing, my thought is about what this object or image should feel like as a material, even if it is accessed through a screen. As I've described above, I'm interested in the un-curated image - but alongside this is the fact that I read less and less because I'm looking at a screen more and more and I'm aware that I graze through images less and less. It is an active choice to do this now; avoiding forms of mediation requires an active decision to leave the aggregating tools we are surrounded with. In a curious way, the problem of too much intent and not enough roaming follows me into the digital world. By this measure, this kind of work also reminds me that I enjoy random walks (even if they never turn out to be as random as you thought). I'm looking to find connections between things but I don't think that an audience and I need to follow the same path for it to be worthwhile.