

## Notes on Half the Page

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For her recent exhibition *Notes on Half the Page* at Gambia Castle, Fiona Connor collected together a range of objects from around the world which are used to display and hold newspapers. There was a tiered wooden shelf; a hanging wire stand with skins of plastic sheeting to protect its contents from rain; a *New Zealand Herald* dispensing rack, with wheels so it could be trundled and a matching yellow sun umbrella; there was a wooden ladder with wire rungs; and my favourite, a stand from a library in which sat a series of wooden rods, the rods coded with coloured tape so that each paper (*The Christian Science Monitor* or the *San Diego Union Tribune*) could be returned daily to its designated tier—regular readers would thus know where to reach.

When faced by a room of objects collected by Connor, anyone familiar with her practice will be inclined to consider them closely, as in many previous projects she has made replicas of various objects or structures. Fiona mentioned that for *Notes on Half the Page*, she would have considered trying to source originals of all the newspaper stands if it had been possible; but with the size and weight of the largest structure—a metal and glass display case which stretches along the bulk of one of the gallery's walls—it's easy to appreciate that logistically it made more sense to replicate such a structure than to relocate it from wherever in Asia she first saw it.

Thinking though the multitude of ideas contained within *Notes on Half the Page*, there are two that seem most interesting to me. Firstly, there is the category under which the selected objects fit: they are all structures that in some way display

newspapers. Here the function of a newspaper is explored as well as the characteristics of the objects in which papers pause between production, distribution, and consumption. Secondly, by presenting handmade versions of some of the objects and readymade versions of others, the question is raised as to what, if anything, is interesting about the practice of presenting replicas of everyday objects as artworks.

When displayed in a gallery space, any object—be it a replica or a readymade—is on show for close observation. It is nice to have your eye pulled towards a screw or a glued joint, to be encouraged to have a more detailed sensory experience of objects than if you were to simply encounter them in their everyday contexts. I became aware of how the objects Fiona chooses to work with have evolved, or have been designed for interaction with the body. For example how in a flight of stairs you can see how a leg lifts, and how a knee might falter; in a rod from which newspapers are hung you can see what width of wood a hand best grasps; in a plank of wood you can observe what strength is required to support the weight of a hundred years of pacing.

Fiona's work encourages a reconsideration of the relationship between the body and the function of objects and structures; but its particular strength is its ability to retain a link in the viewer's mind between the original and the copy. In past works I believe this link has been retained simply by having the original and the copy in immediate or close proximity to one another.

In *Old Buildings* (Gambia Castle, 2007), a copy of the floor was created and installed



Research material: May 26 2008, Bourke Street, Melbourne



Research material: January 8 2006, Geisel Library, University of California San Diego

directly above the existing floor. At the point of entry onto the new raised space, a cross-section was visible showing the workings of the replica floor hovering, two feet or so above the original. Props (2008) presented a crumpling version of the Artspace stairwell inside the gallery. The viewer had to ascend the original in order to reach the first floor on which the replica was presented, the original stairs always bracketing the viewer's experience of the replica.

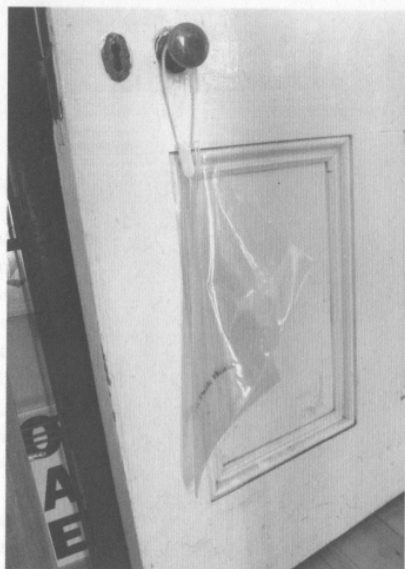
In *Inner City Real Estate 174/147*, the interior of the old Enjoy Public Art Gallery at 174 Cuba St Wellington was reconstructed within the rooms of the new Enjoy further down at 147. Here, the distance between the original and the replica was greater—the two versions couldn't be taken in in the same glance, and the original could not be visited. However, for those people visiting the new Enjoy space who had also regularly frequented the old space, the continuity of the gallery's agenda and community made reimagining the old space while standing in its replica relatively easy.

The collection of newspaper dispensers in *Notes on Half the Page* included many exotic examples. Many of the replica objects that Fiona has constructed are based on photographs taken of objects that anyone based in New Zealand is not likely to have ever seen. These strange stands were presented alongside much more familiar items, stands that you see everyday outside supermarkets and inside dairies. The objects that are most interesting to me are those for which it is possible to imagine the specific original from which she has created the replica included in the show, as it is then possible to simultaneously grasp in your mind both the original and the replica. This suspended state, this magnetism by which two objects and two specific sites can be connected is for me the success of Fiona's work, as it requires an active process of

imagining along with an awareness of one's immediate surroundings. More conventional representational works—a painting of a grassy glade for example—invite you to imagine yourself wholly in that place, to be 'transported' to the grass. But with Fiona's replica environments you are always in-between, imagining distant sites, while observing the material, details and forms of objects right in front of you.

The replicas in *Notes on Half the Page* that allow me to most easily imagine a specific original are those which escape being generic, either through their strangeness, or through an individualisation of the objects that ties them to a single and specific location. For example the stand with the colour-coded rods and title labels appears to be tailored to a specific library, with the newspapers stored on the structure marking its belonging to a specific geographic area.

The objects that seem generic are those which one has a degree of familiarity with, even if that familiarity is not first hand but mediated, such as with *The Province* dispenser. I feel as though I have seen similar boxy blue dispensers enough times just in movies (where characters put their pennies in the slot, pull down the chute and pull out their morning *Province* to take to the diner and read while they eat pie), so that the replica of *The Province* dispenser is as much a replica of that 'type' of object as it is of a specific original. Similarly, the yellow *Herald* trundler is sufficiently embedded within my visual memory from passing such objects on the street, and from constant exposure to the *Herald* brand, that it is less easy to imagine a single original trundler than it is to think of the spattering of many similar dispensers all over Auckland. Imagining an entire series, or a 'type' of originals does not allow for the original and the replica to simultaneously be grasped



*Notes on Half the Page* (installation detail)



*Notes on Half the Page* (installation detail)

in one's imagination, as the site of the original is multiple rather than specific.

The act of considering an object that is in your presence, while simultaneously imagining an object at a different site, means that Fiona's replica works succeed in being at once of the world and about the world. While material details of the objects can be closely examined, so too can the imaginative process that is triggered. An examination of this imaginative process reveals the manner in which the mind builds associations, which in turn can reveal the social structures that affect our thought processes.

The 'workings of the mind' is not a subject Fiona necessarily seeks to actively explore with her work. However in my view the replicas in *Notes on Half the Page* trigger a unique contemplation of the moments of confusion and elation that continually but quietly occur in many of our interactions with objects, and arguably with people.

The process of imagination, as a subject, is more overtly explored by the writer Lydia Davis. In Davis' short story 'Example of Confusion', it is interesting to consider how the process of imagining objects in specific places, which has to be consciously done with Fiona's replicas, unconsciously occurs in other situations. Here Davis chronicles everyday slippages where the link between an original and an imagined object are distorted:

I am reading a sentence by a certain poet as I eat my carrot. Then, although I know I have read it, although I know my eyes have passed along it and I have heard her words in my ears, I am sure I haven't really read it. I may mean understood it. But I may mean consumed it: I haven't consumed it because I was already eating the carrot. The carrot was a line, too.

[...] I have decided to take a certain book with me when I go. I am tired and can't think how I will carry it, though it is a small book. I am reading it before I go, and I read: The antique bracelet she gave me with dozens of flowers etched into the tarnished brass. Now I think that when I go out I will wear the book around my wrist.<sup>1</sup>

Through remaking, creating recreations, renditions and replicas, Connor's work moves beyond the act of displaying elements of the world to describing processes of thought. We see more than what is in the world; we see the processes by which we think through the facts and objects that surround us.

This process is in stark contrast to how we normally read newspapers and think about current events. When presented in newspapers events seem distant and generic, and are largely written in a manner that is specifically crafted to hide any sense of authorship. In many cases the subjects of news stories—the people and places described—become secondary to the fact that they are 'news'. There is little in the form of mainstream newspaper articles that invites connections to be made between the information presented and the real events that are actually occurring. Newspaper articles seem akin to 'ready-made' objects or generic replicas. The facts are simply there, to be absorbed without any imaginative leap.

#### Notes

- 1 Lydia Davis, 'Examples of confusion', in *Almost No Memory*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997, p.183-185.