

As if a gauge of accuracy or a measure with which to sense the past, Caporn's spirit levels (degree of haunting?) are poised on the delicate border between precision and imprecision, balance and correction. The language of mental illness routinely uses degrees of balance or imbalance or describes a pendulum in motion. Chemical intervention makes subtle adjustments to the workings of the mind by modifying the biochemistry of the brain; incremental and gradual or blunt and shocking as with the use of Cardiazol and Electro Convulsive Therapy at Heathcote from the 1930s.

By the 1960s, occupational therapy was integral to treatment and recovery at Heathcote. By keeping occupied, working or creating things, the mentally ill may find balance again. For idle hands, so the proverb goes, are the devil's playground. The notion that salvation (mental health) might be reached through occupation reflects the Protestant work ethic and the disciplinary impulse applied to the body and mind of the mentally unwell in institutional care.

Occupation as a form of treatment in asylums has its origins in the late 18th century when physical labour was a way of promoting order, encouraging routine and resocialising patients. Occupational therapy grew as a method of treatment in Western Australia post WWII. By early 1947 occupational therapy contributed to the rehabilitation of ex-service men under post-war reconstruction used to get servicemen back to work.

Caporn's shed, a space of production, a place to retreat and occupy oneself by making things invokes the use of occupational therapy on the site and much more. But this shed is not any shed; it is a shed within a shed, a ghost and a memory – a doppelganger of itself. Caporn has used a personally significant object– his grandfather's shed, removed from its original location, rebuilt and encased in a transparent shed and given an afterlife in a gallery. In its rebuilding and reproduction a shift occurs – it is no longer a shed and the object's history becomes a memory.

Theodor W. Adorno's critique of the museum and gallery in the late sixties observed that objects presented in museums undergo a fragmentation of meaning, and are 'in the process of dying' because they have been removed from their original use.³ For Adorno, museum objects acquire new meaning in their museological context. Caporn's shed is an artefact of post-war suburban culture, yet is bereft of function, emptied of its original purpose. It gains new meaning in a complex space – in dialogue with the history of the site as a mental hospital and the space as a contemporary art gallery and heritage precinct.

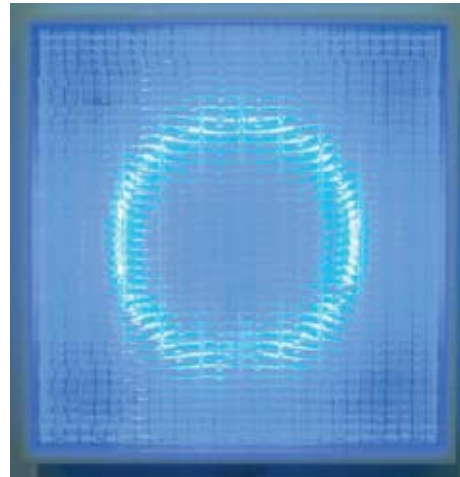
Dr Kate Gregory

November 2010

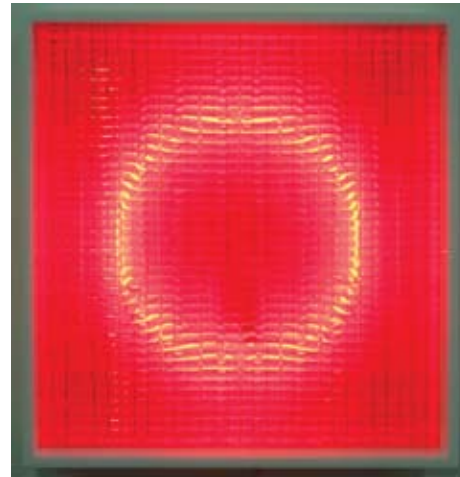
¹ W. Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', 1940

² M. Kwint, 'The physical past' in *Material Memories*, Oxford: Berg, 1999

³ T. W. Adorno, 'Valéry Proust Museum', *Prisms*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1967



ABOVE LEFT:
Blue Bubble
Neon, acrylic, level vials



ABOVE RIGHT:
Red Bubble
Neon, acrylic, level vials

Thank you to:

City of Melville

Artist, Paul Caporn

Kate Gregory

Jane and family

Neo Geo from Write Light Neon

Alex and Scott from Supersigns

Gary Silverton

Peter Baxendale



City of
Melville

Heathcote Museum & Gallery • Heathcote Cultural Centre

Swan House • Duncraig Rd, Applecross • T: 9364 5666

Gallery hours: Tuesday - Friday 10am - 3pm • Saturday & Sunday 11am - 3pm

absence **Paul Caporn**
of occupation is not rest

'To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognise it the way it was. It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.'

For Walter Benjamin, history was a dialogue between present and past. A sense of the past can only be retrieved with empathy, synchronicity or disjuncture for this invokes a brief understanding of the past.¹ Thus history is a dynamic process, fuelled by the element of surprise, open to the unexpected and most likely encountered as a shock or moment of realisation, perhaps a tingle up the spine. Pointing to the limits of archives and chronology, Benjamin in effect conjures an embodied engagement with the past where sensory response is a valued method in the tools of historical methodology.

Ever elusive, traces of the past might best be glimpsed in peripheral vision – by not always looking squarely at the documentary evidence and by using a combination of methods to get you there. Acknowledging that the past is never fixed but created in the present and changing over time helps to give agency to any 'reader' of history who brings their own meanings, memories and bias to bear on historical objects. In the context of museum displays, for instance, Marius Kwint argues that meaning is in flux; dependent on the relationship with the viewer and the context in which objects are presented.²

Approaching the history of Heathcote through art therefore brings another prism through which to view the past and sets up provocative dialogue between past and present, object and viewer. Paul Caporn plays with the meaning of the place and its history by modifying the space of the gallery, weaving archival voices and juxtaposing objects from the site in a new framework.

Heathcote Reception Home was established with the Mental Treatment Act of 1927 that enabled people with mental illness to admit voluntarily rather than being certified insane which carried greater stigma. Heathcote was designed as place of refuge and respite, far from the assault of modernity frequently cited as the cause of declining mental health and increasing anxiety. The healing qualities associated with the natural beauty of the site, fresh sea breezes, and magnificent vistas would provide a setting for patients to recover and rest.

Caporn's installation invokes an element of psychological drama – unrest, dis-ease and tension filled presence/absence. Playing with notions of confinement and freedom, through an encased shed within a shed, or a soft but stifling mattress, vistas that drown and cannot be seen, Caporn shapes a view of Heathcote that is at odds with the placid and benign beauty of the place, and apparently progressive approach to mental health treatment.

Heathcote operated as a government mental hospital from 1929 to 1994, before its reinvention as a cultural precinct, museum and gallery. Places and objects change use, function and meaning over time – a shed is not a shed, a mattress not a mattress and this is not an empty room. René Magritte's once radical tactic finds relevance in this 'historic' site. The room holds past actions and past use, is loaded with potential meaning and enlisted as a player in an art installation.

20-19
November December 2010

Absence of occupation is not rest is the 2010 exhibition of the Tilt program showcasing West Australian art practise. The Tilt program was developed by the City of Melville to support local artists and provide engaging art experiences to residents and visitors. Each year an artist is invited to respond to the Heathcote site, with its multi-layered history, by creating artwork through their chosen or a new exploratory medium.

The process of making connections between objects, environments and people gives one the opportunity to engage with the world that surrounds them beyond the habitual range of experiences, both as maker and observer.

Paul Caporn continues a dialogue between past and present through ordinary gestures, observations and materials, negotiating an unusual setting, that of the former Heathcote Mental Reception Home.

In exploring aspects of mental health that impart a feeling of unrest he reminds the viewer of both the relentless yet familiar nature of mental health in limiting freedom, despite the best intentions of a society.

This project is part of a series of innovative approaches aimed at interpreting our cultural heritage and its diverse manifestations, and articulating that plurality of perspectives we often have of our past.

Soula Veyradier
Curator
City of Melville

The View Is Magnificent
Video and mattress

FAR RIGHT:

Absence of occupation is not rest
Vinyl text and signs from Heathcote collection

