



Derek Hart Time Tides

SEÁN KELLY

Installation is central to all of Hart's work.

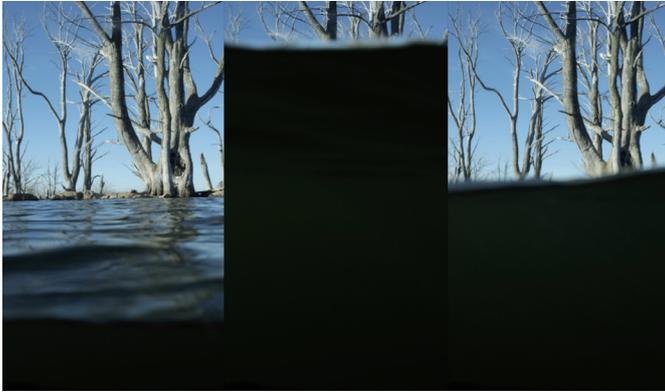
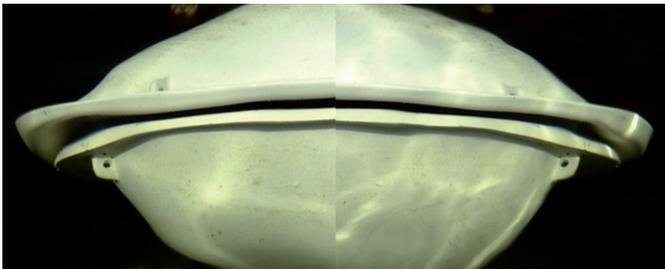
Any discussion of installation practice must take into account the key principles of this mode. The term is often applied very broadly and may only describe little more than a setting up of elements which have no significant 'en suite', to the simple act of 'installing' a body, or group of works within a space – 'installation' as a verb. When appreciating Hart's work it is vital to consider the characteristics of 'installation' that best define it as a specific practice in which the totality of the experience is at the fore. As a discrete mode of practice installation implies a primary interest in the development of sets of interior relations between elements within a given space or site, and how these structure the viewer's first-hand experience. Individual components are generally subordinate to the effect/meaning of the whole, despite the fact that they may also exist as discrete elements simultaneously. This interior dynamic/dialogue is central to an appreciation of a practice which is defined as 'Installation'.

Phenomenology must be invoked since the affective engagement between viewer and work is constantly a core consideration. The way in which the viewer is implicated or inculcated into the work is something which causes Hart's work to stand out from the plethora of installations which exist in a purely static state, sitting at a somewhat objective distance from the viewer, providing an encounter which is not necessarily 'engaging'. The activity of a dynamic engagement is central to Hart's thinking and it is partly for this reason that time and motion are such key elements in all of his work, including that preceding his arrival in Australia (in 2004).

Hart's postgraduate work at Chelsea College of Art & Design in London was informed by the traditions of experimental film and his practice remains primarily time-based. Video installations of non-linear structure such as *Hey, cut it out* (2000), and *Just watching the light change* (2000), are slices of found footage from the film *Down by Law* (1986) by Jim Jarmusch carefully selected to enable it to be manipulated and looped, almost imperceptibly, creating the sense that the action exists in a kind of limbo, forever repeating. In Hart's works, time is the central element. It is not extended; rather a moment reflexively shifts forward and back. In the absence of narrative we have only moment. The work is all present. Effectively this reflexivity does not modify time but essentially annihilates it.

Christina Huntington noted:

Derek Hart's *Hey, cut it out* makes imprisonment both literal and temporal by recreating a few seconds from a jail scene in Jim Jarmusch's *Down by Law*. A man gazes past bars while his cell mate draws the proverbial hash marks on the wall. The latter appears to have stalled; he scribbles continuously in the same spot, his last mark growing wider and blacker. About halfway through the six-minute video, the first man delivers the title line. Nothing else changes. Hart stretches a moment into an eternity not with a slower film speed, but with absurdly prolonged action.¹



P47: *Fleet*, 2005-06, mixed media, Hobart.

This page: 1/ *Bivalve*, 2008, stills from two-channel video projection, DVC Pro, 8 minutes, no sound.

2/ *Lake Levels (Arthurs Lake)*, 2010, video still.

3/ *Blind and Naked Horde*, 2008, mixed media, Design Centre – Tasmania
Photograph by Phil Kuruvita.

4/ *Smouldering*, 2008, still from two-channel video projection, DVC Pro, 5 minutes, no sound.

All images of work by Derek Hart.
All images courtesy the artist.

Many of these qualities can be clearly seen at work in later video installations, such as *A Maravilha do Rio de Janeiro* (2002, centralised on the viewpoint explored in multiple images of Rio from a helicopter), and developed since in alternate installation modes in works completed in Australia since 2004, such as the works from his recent practice in *fro and to* (shown at the Design Centre, Launceston, 2008). Time and viewpoint – the reversal and mirroring of moving images – are central in this exhibition. Forward and reverse could also be seen as time-mirroring, one the reflection of the other, whether this is reversal of a section of video in which a dry riverbed slowly fills and then drains (*Whitewater at Cataract Gorge*, 2008), or even the symmetrical floor arrangement of a group of mechanical earth compactor wheel ‘teeth’ (*Blind and Naked Horde*, 2008), worn smooth by years of use and which have no front or back.

In *Bivalve* (2008), two adjacent screens depict an image of a sink edge and its counterpart reflection, but in this case the ‘time-mirroring’ overlays that symmetry as the images also reverse in direction of movement, creating a doubling of image and time oscillation. The net effect is subtle yet compelling. The ‘strangeness’ itself is apparent

but the mechanism of its construction is not. One senses a slight oddness, a remove from the apparent known but the engagement engendered is not intruded upon by artifice or any sense of obvious or overt manipulation. One is held, time suspends, the elemental aspect of the work, the ‘sensate’, is dominant in the experience. *Bivalve* exemplifies this character completely.

The abiding ‘content’ referent which ties *fro and to* together is water. Water moving – forward, backwards, speeding up into abstraction (*Channel*, 2008); water flowing sensuously over the bulbous lips of a sink edge in the exquisitely sexual *Smouldering* (2008) in which the artist neatly conflates the flowing water with the smoke which prolonged exposure with the work may suggest. This is highly ‘physical’ work, replete with sensuality and carefully mediated allusion. Water is an appropriate element to explore as it is ‘fluid’ in more than just the physical sense, existing in diverse states and always in relation to time.

Hart’s recent site-specific installation, *Carpet* (2010) at Kelly’s Garden in Hobart, had the effect of engaging or implicating the whole space merely through the artist’s



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Image: Nick Mourtzakis,
A Portrait of Alex Wodak, Winner 2008 Xstrata
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actions at a key point. This carefully placed, compelling intervention created the illusion that the 'normal' surface or 'carpet' of stones had been partially rolled back, as if breaking away from the edges of the walls and folding back on itself, as a lifted carpet folds back to reveal its own underside as well as the ground or 'floor' beneath. Here the 'revealing' of the ground beneath the stones strongly implies archaeology. Yet, like all of Hart's installations this work is a priori a highly formal construction and succeeds entirely on that level while it also bespeaks the process of its construction.

Connections with Surrealism are present in Hart's work in a number of ways: the 'magical experience of things'; the unfamiliar within the familiar; the 'found' object; biomorphism; the apparent but non-narrative figurative elements; figuration subverted into elementalism; openness to the gifts of serendipity; juxtaposition and disjuncture; humour – all are present in Hart's work and process. Many works are replete with a subtle humour, allusive and relational connections are made, titles tease as much as they explicate, wit abounds. The ghost of Duchamp is floating here. *Vanity Fish* (2008), for example – a bisected marble bathroom 'Vanity' top, curiously resembles a fish and the amusing analogy extends back into its very watery bathroom origin. The avant-garde's formal traditions are maintained/extended within a decidedly contemporary modality in Hart's work.

The installations *Fleet* and *Awash* exemplify Hart's capacity not only to create impressive 'sculptural' site-responsive installations, to re-cast a concept in other sites, but also his interest in crossing the same content into other forms. Coinciding with the Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race, *Fleet* (2005-6) was installed in Watermans Dock in Hobart as part of *Dockworks* (Contemporary Art Spaces Tasmania). It comprised a large group of bathroom sinks, their backs enamelled, mounted vertically in the water at the mean height of the diurnal tide shift so that they were alternately submerged or exposed. Time again constructs the view. A later version was installed for *Contempora* in Melbourne's Docklands in 2008. In *Awash* (2006) Hart installed an expanse of paired sinks in the D'Entrecasteaux Channel's tidal flats at Peppermint Bay, Tasmania. Again responsive to tidal effects they rewarded extended viewing by a constant change from complete exposure to complete submersion. As Hart states: 'These domestic objects are transformed by their new context, assimilated by the ever-changing environment, setting in motion the imagination.'²

Another vital aspect is the notion that a work may not have a definitive version, that from the initiating version further explorations can be made, both in the structure of the work itself and through the installation modes which can be explored, both to draw out, even re-prioritise specific elements of the work, and to respond to different site possibilities. Reworked for the indoor space of the gallery,

original relational referents derived from the work's connection to a specific originating site are then subverted. The indoor state of the work develops as a more reflexive response to the documentary record of the original work purely as source open to all manner of non-narrative, non-relational explorations.

Can there, or should there be a 'definitive' version of a work? We should not even have to ask this question but the weight of tradition implies that there is a definitive work, or state of a work. Time-based media and the found object as a digital artifact lead us to the question that perhaps there may never be a definitive state, at least where many elements and components exist to be explored, and certainly while ever installation or re-installation are subject to site character and issues. Even in painting the picture is never 'finished', the artist simply stops at a point of acceptable resolution. The artist working with digital media is far less constrained. In this sense a work and its component elements is therefore 'contingent' and can always present another 'best' face or further state of development. Hart's exploration of material, time and context is itself always shifting forward and backwards, as if the work itself exists out of time, in any potential state, and able to conform to any context or material state. The only constant is the principle of contingency. ■

1. Christina Huntington, *Art Papers*, July/August 2001 (USA), review of group exhibition *And then there was the bad weather*, David Lusk Gallery, Memphis.

2. Derek Hart, Artist's Notes, 2008.

Hart recently exhibited *Carpet* for the Kelly's Garden Curated Project series, Salamanca Arts Centre, Hobart, 1 April to 14 May 2010; *Film Stills*, the Long Gallery, Salamanca Arts Centre, Hobart, 28 August to 6 September 2009; is currently exhibiting *River Levels*, 146 Arts, Arts Tasmania's foyer gallery, Hobart, 21 May to 28 June; and *Lake Levels*, The Barn, Rosny, 18 June to 11 July; and is undertaking an Australia Council for the Arts residency hosted by Hydro Tasmania July 2010 to June 2010. www.derekhart.info

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