

## PRIMED SUSPECTS: Gail Hastings' sculptural situations

“The withheld work of art is the only eloquence left.”  
Don DeLillo, *Mao II*

The ‘sculptural situations’ and ‘architectural follies’ of Gail Hastings have been acknowledged in Europe (especially Germany) and America for their shimmering intelligence and their sharp twists on the minimalist project of urging the viewer into more acute participation with the work. Here in Australia, despite lack of proper critical attention, Hastings continues her investigation into the interactive powers in making work, drawing us inward toward a fictional pretext – a kind of detective story – in two, three and four dimensions. (The fourth dimension being the time it takes to figure out all the plans, as well as the recognition that it may not be about the art, but the promise, the perpetual incipience, of art. More about this later.)

Called sculptural situations, paintings look like pages torn from an encyclopaedia, and sculpture looks like furniture. It’s like encountering a picture of eyes in the dark that happen to be the wings of a butterfly. Here sculpture regains architectural integration but not – as in hardcore minimalism – at the cost of everything else (including humour.) In *to enter, to leave (no. 2)* furniture doubles as both functional amenity and decorative artifice, in other words furniture you can use *and* look at, at the same time. Hastings, in this maze of sleek geometries, has also created a space that you remain outside, even as you occupy it. These barbed queries into art viewing as entrapment, or double-bind, suggest to me the work of Bruce Nauman.

As in a detective story, or the scene of a crime, everything is primed or poised for meaning. That corridor to the library and that picture on the wall: everything in the mystery seems chosen, asking us why it is there. Everyone becomes a suspect. We bring our private eyes along and take partial views of the whole. In the meantime we

interview eyewitnesses, flick through art catalogues, and try to second-guess the spooks. It's an environment of suspicion, and we have to read between the lines. It's a bit like our current political situation, a culture of duplicity (Bush, Blair, Howard). Along the way Hastings calls our attention to art. To the status of the art object as material and on our own processes of production and reception.

Based on the general pattern of the puzzle or enigma – an actualisable game model – we become involved in elegant watercolour floorplans that tease us towards a missing picture. But what we encounter is a blank, primed canvas. It's a bit like discovering that the corpse in the library is nowhere to be found. That empty canvas, what is it? Whole or hole? Perhaps it is a sign of the ideally empty consciousness of the viewer? A tabula rasa? A passive, receptive canvas that is full of potential, of a work to come? The gap that separates desire from its fulfilment? (I was reminded of Proust's device. The main character of *A la recherche*, Marcel, plans to become a writer. Fifteen volumes later, beneath the notes, drafts, cancellations and interpolations that litter his journey toward the printed page, at the end of the book, Marcel is ready to begin the *livre à venir*, the book to come.)

In Gail Hastings' sculptural situation entitled *plans* exhibited at Heide Museum of Modern Art in Melbourne (January to July 2003), the work's completion hinged on gaining access to a space through a missing door. Accompanying pages from the 'Encyclopaedia of Plans in Works of Art' read: *'The door? Well, it's not been built yet. The rest of 'house c' has, but not the door. They forgot somehow. Without it we can't enter to hang this painting as per our plan. They say they hope to finish it before afternoon tea. That's at four.'*

So does the primed canvas represent a future-driven, promissory dimension

underlying art? Or is it rather that the failure to attain the goal is the goal? Is it an attempt to re-present the unrepresentable? (Beckett's 'imagination dead imagine'?) Hastings doesn't offer answers, she sharpens questions.

Why are we so drawn to stories about frauds and counterfeits? Is it some conscience-stricken human foible of ours, some parable about God's imperfect creation of man? (Hastings' ongoing use of the encyclopaedia suggests definitional authority, a kind of Bible, summa or book of books) In the culture of duplicity everyone's a suspect, but at the same time deception is built into the business of representation. To write a work of fiction is essentially to tell a story. And to tell a story is to tell a lie. Just as to paint a picture is to duplicate a scene in paints which happen to be appropriate. Everyone's a liar. Sustaining one's own life, sustaining the lie of one's own life, takes so much energy that an additional and concurrent lie such as a fiction, is rarely possible. (This may be my own anxiety, of no possible use to Gail Hastings!)

In *The Big Cover-up: white with blue stripe* blank canvases are covered with white vinyl. This is a cover up of a cover up. The semiotics of the secret and the layers of duplicity suggest a crisis in human relations. But perhaps, as Umberto Eco insisted, all signs lie. Just because a sign is there does not imply that the real is there. Signs just refer to other signs. The real thing in this set up would become only an intrusive and jeopardising presence. (For some reason I think of Freud's case of the man who returned a borrowed kettle damaged. The man protested he gave the kettle back undamaged; that the kettle had a hole in it when he borrowed it; and finally that he never borrowed the kettle at all.) The double-jointedness of these 'Top Secret' works is bleakly comic.

A fiction is a projection of real wishes and real fear, real crimes and real punishments,

upon persons who do not exist. Our resistance to art, however, also involves projection: the fear of revealing oneself (what will others think?), the fear of hurting, or destroying others, the fear that others will revenge themselves.

In this work Gail Hastings achieves a new interdependence between the creative and critical spirit. And yet its metafictional status is not 'out there', in the province of Theoryland as a specialised place, but ingrained in the very carpentry and design of the work itself. Critique has been integrated (in the mathematical sense of the term) in the art, and in doing so moves towards the loquacious silence of an equation.

Hastings continues to renovate the minimalist enterprise by thematising the role of the viewer and of the ontological status of work that both creates and breaks down artifice. No longer a mere consumer, the viewer is someone who learns to construct a new set of relations. A sculptural situation proposes an imaginary alternative world (by using the detective story as a model) for which, like fiction, there is infinite room in the world.

George Alexander, 2003