

We carve our desires in the air

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“Essentially a sculpture

we carve our desires in the air.

Together with you this sculpture presents

as much contact for experiencing as is possible.”

- Excerpt from *Six Points towards a better understanding*, Gilbert & George

What is a sculpture? A three-dimensional object that can take up space. At times the body is to manoeuvre around the sculpture, at other times it may completely block access. In the introductory text *Six Points towards a better understanding* by Gilbert & George, the British artist duo equates a sculpture to carving *our desires in the air* – a poetic way of understanding how one can use an object and space to leave their mark or share their view on the world through their artmaking.

When approaching the Kaldor Public Art Projects digital archive, space becomes almost flattened – it is now in an online realm. We cannot physically engage with the sculptural works that feature in the artists’ projects. Instead as a viewer we are guided to look through various ephemera that show the process from engagement to install to realisation. There are letters between curators and artists, faxes, photographs of the process and its final iteration. The archive captures moments in time, over 50 years of an organisation.

Cultural theorist Stuart Hall comments in his paper ‘Constituting an archive’ that “An archive may be largely about ‘the past’ but it is always ‘re-read’ in the light of the present and the future.” (Hall 2001: 92) With this in mind I am drawn back to the concept of space. In art, the term ‘space’ has multiple definitions. Firstly, as something that can be measured – a blank wall for an artwork to go on, the distance between the light and the subject or the square footage of an empty gallery space that needs to be filled. When making an artwork or an exhibition, or in Gilbert & George’s case a sculpture, the concept of a physical space must be taken into account.

But what about a metaphorical idea of space? The second way in which space can be engaged with or experienced. The hush of breath between two bodies or an object, the metaphorical space that a body can take up when it is brown, when it is queer, when it is large or even when it is small. When re-reading archives ‘in the light of the present’ these voices and experiences are often excluded from such collections. Archives are representative of moments in time, of a past that is often exclusionary, written by and viewed through a colonial lens. Therefore there are inevitable gaps of knowledge and voices within the files, folders, objects and boxes of an archive.

We carve our desires in the air as a “mini” exhibition attempts to instead take a lens that is of this present time, one informed by the lived experience of a Pacific Island heritage cisgender female – a voice generally not represented in historically dominant archives and narratives. On the one hand,

the exhibition looks at how the artists in the archive have explored metaphorical and physical space, but there is another element to this experience – I too am trying to take up space. To have my voice and perspective heard in the light of a longstanding organisation.

Tatzu Nishi and Christo and Jeanne-Claude's projects look to the Art Gallery of New South Wales, an imposing colonial structure with large monuments and a grand entrance of columns. For those not inclined to engage with the art sector, this structure can appear unwelcoming. In *War and peace and in between* (2009), Tatzu Nishi claimed his space by taking the monuments outside the Gallery and building a room around them, into which visitors could step and come 'face to face' with the monument. In doing so, the monumental becomes small, the idea of space and hierarchy is flattened. Similarly in Christo and Jeanne-Claude's project, *Wrapped Vestibule* (1990), and in the particular photograph in the exhibition, a sculptural bust and columns in the Gallery's entry foyer are covered in the artist duo's signature draping of fabric. The austerity of the Gallery foyer is then somewhat removed, the physical space is now blank for those who enter to project their own lived experiences onto instead of the inverse.

The only First Nations artist to have a major project in the archive is Wiradjuri and Kamilaroi man and artist Jonathan Jones. *We carve our desires in the air* includes a photograph of a small vial of kangaroo grass and a large aerial photograph of the Royal Botanic Garden Sydney where his installation, *barrangal dyara (skin and bones)* (2016), was held. Kangaroo grass, a native flora, formed the heart of the project and became a way of indigenising space. By planting the grass, Jones created a way to physically weave in the deep history and knowledge of First Nations history on the land when to this day it is still deeply unacknowledged.

Another artist who also looks to create their own space that references their cultural heritage is Latai Taumoepeau, who participated in the *do it (australia)* online Instagram project in 2020. Taumoepeau included a list of instructions on how to connect with oneself, those that came before them and those that will also come after. She acknowledges the multigenerational histories of culture within this prompt, thus bringing her own cultural perspective to the digital space where it exists.

When looking through the archive there are objects that allude to an event or a happening, but the evidence of that event is often not included. Simon Fujiwara's project folder from Project 27: *13 Rooms* (2013) contains a list of actions. It begins with the words '*Repeat after me*' and then follows with a bullet point list of actions such as *To accept, to decay, to flower, to kneel*. Positioned next to Fujiwara's list in the mini exhibition is another view of Tatzu Nishi's project. However this time it is an interpretation of the artwork as seen by a member of the public. It is not merely a drawing, it is a cut-out of the negative space – the space around the sculpture itself. If negative space is thought of as the thing that we cannot see, then the presentation of these two objects together articulate what that can mean. We have actions without the outcome, and the space around an object, but not the object itself.

Allora & Calzadilla's object works similarly – it is an instructional drawing for their piano performance *Stop, Repair, Prepare: Variations on 'Ode to Joy' for a Prepared Piano* (2012). We see six versions of movement for the six different performers, but again the actual visual of the action is missing – this object or drawing is isolated and pulled into a different context. Even with this removal from its original context the movement around space is still suggested through the curved loops of the pencil on paper. Although we cannot see it, we can *feel* it.

Photographs are a dominant feature of archives. They are a form of documenting something ephemeral to ensure that a moment will be captured and have a life post its end. The negative of Richard Long's project, *Stone line* (1977-1978), is then followed by a positive image taken of a long row of rocks that were carried from one location to the Gallery. When a black-and-white negative is placed into a photographic enlarger, light is emitted and beamed through the negative onto light-sensitive paper. The darker parts of the negative block the light, and the parts that are more transparent allow the light to come through, thus creating the shadows and image that we see in a final photographic print.

In photography, light is key in the process, and can be controlled in certain environments to ensure that the subject is illuminated correctly and the right mood for the resulting image is given. I mentioned in an earlier passage that space can be both physical and metaphorical. With this inclusion from Marina Abramović's work *Luminosity* (1997, re-performed at Project 27: *13 Rooms* in 2013), the focus is on the physical. The featured photographs are of a seat and a light with marker pen annotations denoting the distance and height of each object. Although the images are fairly nondescript there is something strangely alluring about them. The sleek darkness that surrounds the seat on one side and the bright harsh light on the right.

In Latai Taumoepeau's prompt for *do it (australia)* she ends with 'FACE THE PAST AND BACK INTO THE FUTURE'. This is a version of an old saying common amongst Pacific cultures where the notion is that in order to move forward we must acknowledge, learn from and respect the past. To end this mini exhibition I chose to take this quite literally and end the slideshow with the back of one of the photographs from Richard Long's project. The viewer is not granted access to the front of the image – instead the white back of the photograph is presented with small handwritten details on a sticker in the top left corner.

Archives are important to have as documentation of time and history, but it is just as important to ensure that they are critically engaged with and questioned within the context of the present moment. This is a continual process and one that does not end. If we are to ensure that the future is one where inclusivity and diversity are not token words but embedded into our daily practices, then we need to acknowledge all parts of history, even if those may be difficult.