



# MONASH University

## ***After Ever A Project***

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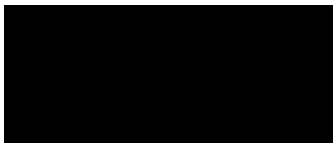
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Michelle Neal  
March 2018

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With gratitude to M.C.

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## **Abstract**

*After Ever: A Project* investigates how a visual art practice might elucidate the diminished sense of security experienced with ambiguous loss. Ambiguous loss describes the grief that can be experienced with life-changing events such as a relationship breakdown, employment termination, or forced migration from a homeland. Although this grief can be significant, it often remains unacknowledged by society. There are no comforting societal rituals and public displays of mourning that offer support, and no shared iconography that can be used to represent this loss. This research addresses this issue by examining how ambiguous loss may be more effectively identified and understood in art practice.

The project focuses particularly on the themes of mastery, connection and collecting in relation to ambiguous loss and the desire for the security of an assumptive world. These themes are explored with subtlety as a method for assisting in the recognition, acknowledgment and valorisation of that which is not stated explicitly. The everyday materials used in the research, including wool, flannelette pyjama fabric, cardboard from household boxes, and flowers from a domestic garden, provide a sense of security and accessibility, and reflect the unceremonious and often private nature of ambiguous loss. In the process, *After Ever: A Project* also provides new ways of understanding the methodological, material and conceptual choices made by other artists whose work concerns loss, security, collecting, mastery and/or everyday materials. The project proposes that such works can be read through the lens of ambiguous loss, creating the potential for new readings and the development of new avenues of critique.

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## Introduction

Art is an ideal vehicle with which to convey the emotional experience of loss and grief. Grief and loss are common themes for artists, and there are many examples of works concerned with both physical and emotional loss. These artworks often use a visual and symbolic language borrowed from the world of mourning: the altar-like shrines of Christian Boltanski's *Monument* (Odessa) (1991), the 'strident blackness' of Kathy Temin's *My Monument: Black Cube* (2009), or the hymns and clothes of the bereaved in Martha McDonald's *Hospital Hymn: Elegy for Lost Soldiers* (2015) [figures 1-3].<sup>1</sup> Other works speak of that which is missing by highlighting or amplifying absence, such as Ruth Maddison's photograph of empty lounge furniture in her series *The Beginning of Absence* (1996), taken when the artist stayed at her parents' house while both her mother and father were hospitalized [figure 4].<sup>2</sup> In a similar vein, Félix González-Torres' billboard-sized pillow indents and empty unmade bed in his work *Untitled* (1991), created in the year of his partner's death, pay homage to intimacy and loss in bereavement [figure 5]. The familiar visual cues used in these works lead us to recognise, acknowledge and pay tribute to the themes of loss and grief within the work.

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<sup>1</sup> Art Gallery of NSW, "AGNSW Contemporary Project – Kathy Temin, *My Monument: Black Garden*", Art Gallery of NSW, <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/media-office/kathy-temin/>, accessed March 23, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Ruth Maddison in Helen Ennis, *Reveries: Photography and Mortality* (Canberra: National Portrait Gallery, 2007), 224.



Figure 1: Christian Boltanski, *Monument (Odessa)*, 1991  
gelatin silver prints, tin biscuit boxes, lights, wire.  
installation: 203.2 x 182.9 cm approx.



Figure 2: Kathy Temin, *My Monument, Black Cube*, 2009  
synthetic fur and filling, wood, steel,  
355 x 370 x 370 cm



Figure 3: Martha McDonald, *Hospital Hymn: Elegy for Lost Soldiers*, 2015  
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Figure 4: Ruth Maddison, from the series *The Beginning of Absence*, 1996  
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Figure 5: Félix González-Torres, *Untitled*, 1991  
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Other losses, such as forced migration from a homeland, a relationship breakdown, or employment termination can also be accompanied by significant grief.

However, this grief often remains unacknowledged by society.<sup>3</sup> There are no comforting societal rituals and public displays of mourning that offer support,<sup>4</sup> and no shared iconography that can be used to represent the loss. This is a grief of which named recognition is difficult for both the sufferer and the onlooker, and as such is often experienced in private.<sup>5</sup> In 1999 Pauline Boss identified this grief with a condition she defined as ‘ambiguous loss’.<sup>6</sup> Ambiguous loss can be experienced when our sense of trust in a magnanimous personal world – our assumptive world – is broken. This can result in feelings of insecurity, lack of trust in the world, disconnection from the ‘normal’, and a sense of not being in control.<sup>7</sup>

My own experience of ambiguous loss was the motivation for this study, which examines how a studio practice can shed a different light on the subtleties and experiences of ambiguous loss. An assumptive world can offer its occupant a sense of mastery;<sup>8</sup> that they control and have evaluated correctly the unwritten rules

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<sup>3</sup> Pauline Boss, *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live With Unresolved Grief*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999) 8.

<sup>4</sup> Pauline Boss, “Ambiguous Loss Theory: Challenges for Scholars and Practitioners,” *Family Relations* 56, no. 2 (April 2007): 106.

<sup>5</sup> Pauline Boss, “Ambiguous Loss: Living with Frozen Grief,” *Harvard Mental Health Letter* 16, no. 5, (November 1999) un-paginated; Howard R. Winokuer and Darcy L. Harris, *Principles and Practice of Grief Counseling* (New York: Springer Publishing, 2012), 106.; Darcy L. Harris, “The Social Context of Loss and Grief”, in *Counting our Losses: Reflecting on Change, Loss, and Transition in Everyday Life*, ed. Darcy L. Harris, (New York: Taylor and Francis Group, 2011), 19.

<sup>6</sup> Boss, *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live With Unresolved Grief*.

<sup>7</sup> Winokuer and Harris, *Principles and Practice of Grief Counseling*, 99 and 101, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.monash.edu.au/lib/monash/detail.action?docID=877105>, accessed February 27, 2018. The authors cite Elizabeth Bruce and Cynthia Schultz, *Nonfinite Loss and Grief: A Psychoeducational Approach* (Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> Mastery is a term used by Boss, see Pauline Boss, *Loss, Trauma, and Resilience: Therapeutic Work with Ambiguous Loss* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2006). I acknowledge the word's problematic gendered connotations but a full discussion of this history is beyond the scope of this project.

and nuanced structures that scaffold their life. In my assumptive world, these qualities provided me with the sense that my voice had value, and allowed me to comment on the resonance of my personal rules and structures within society at large. Loss of trust in my assumptive world, conversely, cast me as a quiet observer as I was obliged to watch the guiding rules of my life being re-written on my behalf. By necessity, my project follows the trajectory of my experience of ambiguous loss; from feeling a rekindled sense of authority to speak in my first work, *Permission to Speak*, to physically connecting and working with others in *Ever*, my last.

Although it began from personal experience, the project is underpinned by larger questions about ambiguous loss and its potential relationship to art making. These include:

How might a visual art practice elucidate the diminished sense of security experienced with ambiguous loss?

How might everyday domestic materials be used in a visual art practice to explore mastery, connection and the sense of an assumptive world?

How might the subtle gesture in a visual art practice assist in the acknowledgment and valorisation of the experience of ambiguous loss?

The exhibition component of this project is not intended to explain the symptoms or stages of ambiguous loss, or even to name the condition. The intention is to foster a mode of engagement or recognition of the *experience* of ambiguous loss - to encourage people to look closely and to consider what may lay behind a

message that is presented with subtlety, while accepting that significant and influential facts may not be visible.

Consideration of the research questions led to a key theme of my project: security. I address this theme throughout my project in two distinct ways. The first concerns the sense of security experienced from feeling in control. The activity of collecting is central here. Collecting engenders feelings of sovereignty, which result from determining the criteria for what will be collected and how it will be handled and displayed. The categorisations of amateur and professional collecting are also important, and have links to mastery. The second way I address security in my project concerns connection. Here, my focus is multi-faceted, with an exploration of both physical and metaphoric connections. My study of physical connection centres on the haptic quality of materials, including wool and flannelette. These materials also have a connective quality associated with emotional security for me as the maker, and for the viewer. This study is then extended to the physical connection of working with a team of people to realise an artwork. My investigations into metaphorical connections include connection with a virtual community of stitchers sewing the shared images provided in mass-marketed craft kits. I focus upon the security to be found in belonging to a group in which a sense of idealised identity is formed. I also use the activity of sewing the kits to contemplate connection between a stitcher's inner and exterior worlds.

As a project about loss, the notion of grief is ever-present. Reflecting the character of grief experienced in ambiguous loss, I present it in my practice with subtlety. On the surface grief is barely discernible, but like ambiguous loss it is not difficult

to see if you look for it. For both the suffer and observer, acknowledging the depth of this grief requires attuned observation. My work asks the viewer to notice that which is not stated explicitly. It walks a fine line, inviting viewers to notice the barely perceivable without making it a feature of the work. Rather than presenting my work trussed within a grand and overt gesture, this project is concerned with the small and the everyday. It uses modest-sized artworks, and collections that I determine to be complete even when their boundaries are not expansive or they are discreetly presented. I use commonplace materials as representative of the amateur, and to reflect the unceremonious and private nature of ambiguous loss. The materials also provide a sense of security and accessibility through their familiarity: wool, cardboard from cereal boxes and laundry powder, and flowers from a domestic garden.

My first chapter positions this research project within a larger body of scholarly literature on ambiguous loss, collecting and creative practice. I present the literature on ambiguous loss using the writings of Pauline Boss, Darcy Harris and Howard Winokuer to detail and describe the condition and its links to security, mastery, finding meaning and reconstructing identity.<sup>9</sup> These issues are examined in relation to the activity of collecting, using the findings of Susan Pearce and Russell Belk to draw links between the motivations and boundary-establishing rules of collectors to the sense of mastery, identity and meaning discussed by Boss. Aspects of ambiguous loss identified in the literature resonate with certain aspects

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<sup>9</sup> Pauline Boss, "The Trauma and Complicated Grief of Ambiguous Loss," *Pastoral Psychology* 59, no. 2 (2010): 137-145; Pauline Boss, *Loss, Trauma, and Resilience: Therapeutic Work with Ambiguous Loss* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2006); Howard R. Winokuer and Darcy L. Harris, *Principles and Practice of Grief Counseling* (New York: Springer Publishing, 2012). <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.monash.edu.au/lib/monash/detail.action?docID=877105>, accessed February 27, 2018.

of contemporary art. I look at the theme of mastery in relation to the interpretation of contemporary art and the processes used by other contemporary artists. I present Michael Sheringham's discussion of 'the project' in art and acknowledge my psychological alignment with aspects of this idea during the creation of my work, before detailing my reasons to eschew formal affiliation with this approach.<sup>10</sup> This chapter also addresses the rules that may be adopted in art making as a form of mastery, evident in the practices of artists Sophie Calle and Annette Messager, and details my reluctance to adopt a similar tactic.

Themes of security, connection, mastery, subtlety, text and the everyday provide the contextualising framework within which I position my studio practice in my second, third and fourth chapters. In chapter two I introduce my work *Permission to Speak* – a series of thirty-six fabric drawings of all the houses in my street each accompanied by a short text relaying my relationship to the house and /or its occupants. While the collecting process underpins the production of this work, the collecting theme is not highlighted in the presentation in an effort to introduce the idea of subtlety and close, careful and attentive observation. I discuss the presentation of the amateur in art and, focusing upon the work of Lily van der Stokker, explore the relationship that this categorization has to mastery and the professional. The theme of security provided by connection is highlighted by detailing insider knowledge, relayed with plural pronouns, as a way of cementing a privileged sense of belonging to both a neighbourhood and a collective entity that speaks with one voice. The knowledge I present, however, is gleaned from the outside looking in, complicating this territory. In this chapter, I also convey the

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<sup>10</sup> Jonnie Gratton and Michael Sheringham, eds. *The Art of the Project: Projects and Experiments in Modern French Culture* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005); Michael Sheringham, "Epistemologies of the Project," *AA Files* 60, (January 2010): 3-8.

reasoning behind my resistance to contextualise my work with details of the event that led to my own ambiguous loss. This choice sits in opposition to the practices of Louise Bourgeois and Tracey Emin, who both present details of their lives to frame their work. To emulate their choice risks inviting voyeuristic distraction away from the central concern of ambiguous loss.

While *Permission to Speak* concerns my street and neighbours, in chapter three I analyse broader cultural conceptions of the ideal home as a desire for connection. Drawing on the writings on the ideal home compiled by Tony Chapman and Jenny Hockey, I investigate notions of belonging to a desired collective that offers the ability to speak with a societal voice and a sense of security gained through collective identification.<sup>11</sup> I address these themes in two works, *Dreams* and *Home Made*. For *Dreams*, I use collaged elements from real estate promotional brochures to create a series of new houses made from fragments of ideal homes. The work complicates notions of the ideal home, while metaphorically representing the process of recognising ambiguous loss. Although from a distance the houses appear to be feasible homes, close and careful inspection reveals that things are not quite right. I further investigate notions of the generic ideal home, connection and security in my work *Home Made*. In this work, I use found representations of the ideal home, as offered in mass-produced Semco longstitch kits popular in the 1980s, and stitch them together to form a streetscape into which my own home is inserted. The work highlights the desire to belong to the security of a promoted ideal, establishing a standard to demonstrate the impact inflicted by the loss of an assumptive world.

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<sup>11</sup> Tony Chapman and Jenny Hockey, eds. *Ideal Homes?: Social Change and Domestic Life* (London: Routledge, 1999).

The research in my fourth chapter is informed by a three-month residency at Heritage Hill, a house museum surrounded by an expansive and beautiful garden in the Melbourne suburb of Dandenong. I use this garden and its flowers as impetus to consider the transformative qualities of posttraumatic growth – the positive changes, insights and sense of gratitude that can occur after a traumatic event. In this chapter I present three works that address the creation of a new assumptive world and the security it offers. I begin by discussing my anthropologically-flavoured work *Collected Todays*, which draws attention to the security found in familiarity; the sights, sounds and experiences of an assumptive world. As a text-based work, *Collected Todays* develops my study of control within text, focusing upon grammatical patterns within the English language. Recognition and acknowledgement of these patterns formed the basis of a highly ritualised methodology in the work's creation. My next work, *My Flower Collection*, continues my examination of connection and neighbourhood. In contrast to the overt presentation of neighbourhoods in *Permission to Speak* and *Home Made*, the connections presented in this work require close observation to perceive. Viewers are encouraged to physically bend down to see the details of the small, paired flowers that constitute this work. Rather than assaulting the viewer's senses with a large collection, in this work I invite the viewer to spend slow and quiet time with the artwork, and to acknowledge the small-scaled and the understated. The final work, *Ever*, is a roadside bed of flowers planted to spell out the title word. This work references the security offered by actual social connection and working together as a team. As a work made of annual flowers, *Ever* highlights the ephemeral nature of the assumptive world and demonstrates the beauty to be found in changed circumstances.



Together, these works contribute to our understanding of the ways that ambiguous loss might be presented in creative art practice. My research provides new ways of understanding the methodological, material and conceptual choices made by artists whose work concerns loss, grief, security, collecting, mastery and/or everyday materials. I suggest that such works may be read through the lens of ambiguous loss, creating the potential for new readings and the development of new avenues of discussion and critique. My interest in the subtle gesture in artwork asks viewers to notice that which is not stated explicitly, and consequently may be used to assist in the recognition and acknowledgement of ambiguous loss more broadly.

## Chapter 1

### Surveying the Field

In this chapter I present the literature on ambiguous loss; a condition that can be experienced when a person's sense of an assumptive world – the set of 'assumptions or beliefs that ground, secure, stabilize, and orient people' – is damaged.<sup>1</sup> Ambiguous loss can involve feeling a diminished sense of security, 'disconnection' from what is considered 'normal' or 'mainstream', a rupturing of future dreams and a sense of disempowerment.<sup>2</sup> Literature on ambiguous loss outlines methods of coping that include finding meaning, tempering mastery, reconstructing identity, and human connection.<sup>3</sup> Much of this existing research was initiated in the field of psychology. While elements of ambiguous loss are commonly expressed in the arts,<sup>4</sup> it is noticeably lacking in art history, theory and criticism. Issues of meaning, mastery, identity, and connection are discussed in art criticism, but are not understood as part of ambiguous loss. This project addresses this shortfall.

Aspects of ambiguous loss also resonate with discussions of collecting and mastery in museum studies, art criticism, and cultural theory. In linking these discourses to ambiguous loss, this chapter sheds new light on the characteristics of collections and collectors, and the relationship between work made as a 'project'

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<sup>1</sup> Joan Beder, "Loss of the Assumptive World - How we Deal with Death and Loss," *OMEGA* 50, no. 4 (2004): 255.

<sup>2</sup> Howard R. Winokuer and Darcy L. Harris, *Principles and Practice of Grief Counseling* (New York: Springer Publishing, 2012), 99 and 101, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.monash.edu.au/lib/monash/detail.action?docID=877105>, accessed February 27, 2018. The authors cite Elizabeth Bruce and Cynthia Schultz, *Nonfinite Loss and Grief: A Psychoeducational Approach* (Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Pauline Boss, *Loss, Trauma, and Resilience: Therapeutic Work with Ambiguous Loss* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Pauline Boss, *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), 5.

and the presentation of mastery. I conclude this chapter by identifying the theme of ambiguous loss in the work of French artists Sophie Calle and Annette Messager. I examine the roles that ambiguous loss, collecting and the presentation of mastery play in their practices and contrast their aims with my own.

## **Ambiguous Loss**

In 1999, Pauline Boss coined the term ‘ambiguous loss’ to describe the experience of ‘unclear,’ ‘traumatic losses’.<sup>5</sup> She defined two types of ambiguous loss.

Examples of the first type, ‘physical absence with psychological presence,’ include the sense of loss associated with missing people whose fate is unknown, adoption, and non-custodial parents in separated families.<sup>6</sup> Examples of the second type, ‘psychological absence with physical presence,’ include caring for people with mental health issues, addictions, or the experience of homesickness.<sup>7</sup> In order to reflect a broad spectrum of experiences, this project references elements of both types of ambiguous loss.

In the absence of physical death, ambiguous loss can defy closure. With no ‘clear ending’ the associated grief can be on-going.<sup>8</sup> Society can be critical of this state, pushing for grief-filled sufferers to ‘get over it’.<sup>9</sup> Difficulty in coping with non-death related grief is compounded by the trouble people have in naming and/or

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<sup>5</sup> Boss, *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live With Unresolved Grief*.

<sup>6</sup> Pauline Boss, “The Trauma and Complicated Grief of Ambiguous Loss,” *Pastoral Psychology* 59, no. 2 (2010): 138; Pauline Boss, “Ambiguous Loss Research, Theory, and Practice: Reflections after 9/11,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66, no. 3 (August 2004): 554; Winokuer and Harris, *Principles and Practice of Grief Counseling*, 105; Madeleine Seifter Abrams, “Resilience in Ambiguous Loss,” *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 55, no. 2, (2001): 283.

<sup>7</sup> Boss, “The Trauma and Complicated Grief of Ambiguous Loss,” 138; Boss, “Ambiguous Loss Research, Theory, and Practice: Reflections after 9/11,” 554; Winokuer and Harris, *Principles and Practice of Grief Counseling*, 105; Seifter Abrams, “Resilience in Ambiguous Loss,” 283.

<sup>8</sup> Boss, “The Trauma and Complicated Grief of Ambiguous Loss,” 141.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

articulating their loss. Many find it challenging to identify ‘exactly what has been lost’.<sup>10</sup> A lack of understanding can result in a failure to recognise and acknowledge the experience.<sup>11</sup> Without acknowledgement of the loss there is a sense that it is not validated. This adds to the difficult task those experiencing ambiguous loss have in moving on and creating a life that adapts to the loss.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, many sufferers experience a sense of self-blame and shame for their loss.<sup>13</sup> Identifying and naming the condition empowers a person, helping them to understand the source of their grief, and providing a way for their loss to be validated.<sup>14</sup> It also highlights the externality of the situation, reducing the emphasis on a person’s character as having an influence on their response to the loss.<sup>15</sup>

Fundamental to my research is the assumptive world and its relationship to ambiguous loss. Literature on the assumptive world has developed over several decades. In 1975, C. Murray Parkes based his concept of the assumptive world on John Bowlby’s 1969 description of ‘working models’.<sup>16</sup> Bowlby proposed that ‘[e]ach individual builds working models of the world and of himself in it, with the aid of which he perceives events, forecasts the future, and constructs his plans’.<sup>17</sup> Parkes viewed an assumptive world as being an ‘individual’s view of reality’ and claimed it to be ‘a strongly held set of assumptions about the world and the self which is confidently maintained and used as a means of recognizing, planning and

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<sup>10</sup> Winokuer and Harris, *Principles and Practice of Grief Counseling*, 104.

<sup>11</sup> Pauline Boss, “Ambiguous Loss: Living with Frozen Grief,” *Harvard Mental Health Letter* 16, no 5, (November 1999) un-paginated.

<sup>12</sup> Boss, *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live With Unresolved Grief*, 7-8.

<sup>13</sup> Seifter Abrams, “Resilience in Ambiguous Loss,” 284.

<sup>14</sup> Winokuer and Harris, *Principles and Practice of Grief Counseling*, 108.

<sup>15</sup> Boss, *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live With Unresolved Grief*, 10.

<sup>16</sup> Winokuer and Harris, *Principles and Practice of Grief Counseling*, 16.

<sup>17</sup> John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss: Vol. 2. Separation: Anxiety and Anger*, (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 236.

acting'.<sup>18</sup> Advancing this work, Ronnie Janoff-Bulman describes such assumptions as 'form[ing] the nucleus of our internal world' and claims that they are 'the very first' we create.<sup>19</sup> She suggests that 'three fundamental assumptions' constitute a person's assumptive world. These are: the belief in a 'benevolent' world, that the world is mainly good and most people can be trusted; belief in a meaningful world, which, in a simplified form, notions of karma play a role; and a world that recognizes the worth and value of the self.<sup>20</sup> When a person's assumptive world is shaken by a major change, and their familiar, customary world is altered, people can be left feeling 'deeply vulnerable and unsafe'.<sup>21</sup> The optimistic outlook inherent to the assumptive world is tarnished along with any held 'illusions about...[a person's] own invulnerability'.<sup>22</sup> Winokuer and Harris propose that grief and attachment are 'interrelated' and suggest that in loss not involving a death, we perhaps grieve 'the loss of either an aspect of ourselves to which we are attached or our place in the world, which makes us feel safe and secure'.<sup>23</sup> The authors give examples of people compensating for this loss of security. They cite migrants searching in a new country for 'commonalities with their known culture' and people seeking the reassuring familiarity of 'comfort food' in times of stress.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> C. M. Parkes, "What Becomes of Redundant World Models? A Contribution to the Study of Adaptation to Change", *British Journal of Medical Psychology* 48, (1975): 132. Parkes based his term 'the assumptive world' on Hadley Cantril's 'assumptive form world'. See Jeffrey Kauffman, ed., *Loss of the Assumptive World: A Theory of Traumatic Loss* (London: Routledge, 2013), 177.

<sup>19</sup> R. Janoff-Bulman, *Shattered Assumptions: Towards a New Psychology of Trauma*, (New York: Free Press, 1992), 5 and 12.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>21</sup> Winokuer and Harris, *Principles and Practice of Grief Counseling*, 98; Janoff-Bulman, *Shattered Assumptions: Towards a New Psychology of Trauma*, 78.

<sup>22</sup> Janoff-Bulman, *Shattered Assumptions: Towards a New Psychology of Trauma*, 60.

<sup>23</sup> Winokuer and Harris, *Principles and Practice of Grief Counseling*, 99.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

The experience of ambiguous loss is also described by Winokuer and Harris in terms of chronic sorrow, living losses and non-finite losses.<sup>25</sup> There are similarities between these conditions, and scholars propose that varying definitions of these experiences of loss may be due to their links to different areas of study.<sup>26</sup> For example, Harris and Gorman suggest that nonfinite loss has an ‘intrapersonal’ focus while ambiguous loss is examined within the wider framework of a family structure.<sup>27</sup> In this exegesis, I adopt Boss’s term ambiguous loss, preferring the word ambiguous and its associations with notions of being hard to understand, identify or classify. Winokuer and Harris’s summation of the defining characteristics of non-finite loss are, however, pertinent to my research. These include a sense of being separate from ‘the mainstream’ and from what is regarded as ‘normal’, the derailment of plans, hopes and dreams, difficulty with anticipating the future, and a ‘sense of helplessness and powerlessness’.<sup>28</sup> This project uses a visual art practice to examine these ideas; presenting an assumptive world through representations of the ideal, future dreams and notions of ephemerality. Although these themes are common within the practice of art, the identification of them in relation to an assumptive world and ambiguous loss is not. As a result, the potential to learn how an art practice can enhance understanding of ambiguous loss has not been investigated. To address this gap, I invoke themes of optimism, the comforting security provided by materials, of feeling part of the mainstream, and

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<sup>25</sup> Winokuer and Harris, *Principles and Practice of Grief Counseling*, 97-114.

<sup>26</sup> Darcy L. Harris and Eunice Gorman, “Grief from a Broader Perspective: Nonfinite Loss, Ambiguous Loss, and Chronic Sorrow”, in *Counting our Losses: Reflecting on Change, Loss, and Transition in Everyday Life*, ed. Darcy L. Harris, (New York: Taylor and Francis Group, 2011), 7.

<sup>27</sup> Harris and Gorman, “Grief from a Broader Perspective: Nonfinite Loss, Ambiguous Loss, and Chronic Sorrow,” 7.

<sup>28</sup> Winokuer and Harris, *Principles and Practice of Grief Counseling*, 101. The authors cite Elizabeth Bruce and Cynthia Schultz, *Nonfinite Loss and Grief: A Psychoeducational Approach*.

the reclamation of a sense of agency. My approach is drawn from four suggested methods for coping with ambiguous loss which I will now detail.

## **Meaning, Mastery, Identity, Connection**

Boss presents a variety of methods for coping with ambiguous loss. This exegesis engages in particular with her strategies of finding meaning, tempering mastery, reconstructing identity, and connecting with others. Finding meaning is the ability to ‘make sense out of what is happening’.<sup>29</sup> It is critically important for a sufferer of ambiguous loss to find meaning. This is because meaning is linked to hope and as such influences mental and physical health.<sup>30</sup> Living a life without meaning is one in which ‘actions are robotic; [and] life is colorless’.<sup>31</sup> Boss notes the importance of action and movement in the quest to find meaning in the wake of the ‘paralyzing’ experience of ambiguous loss.<sup>32</sup> Amongst the strategies she lists are ‘naming the problem’, undertaking ‘small good works’, ‘rituals’, ‘positive attribution’, and ‘hope’.<sup>33</sup>

Aspects of these strategies have been adapted as key areas of investigation throughout my research. For example, many of my artworks are tiny and involve a slow methodology. This metaphorically interprets Boss’s observation that the process of undertaking small good works is ‘painfully slow’ and her colleagues working with people experiencing ambiguous loss ‘start small, very small’.<sup>34</sup> The idea that developing and adhering to rituals is important in the creation of

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<sup>29</sup> Boss, “The Trauma and Complicated Grief of Ambiguous Loss,” 141.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid; Boss, *Loss, Trauma, and Resilience: Therapeutic Work with Ambiguous Loss*, 74.

<sup>31</sup> Boss, *Loss, Trauma, and Resilience: Therapeutic Work with Ambiguous Loss*, 74.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 83 and 91.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 94.

meaning, and providing a way to honour and continue systems of belief,<sup>35</sup> is reflected in the highly ritualized processes I employ for sourcing and compiling materials. Efforts to highlight, wherever possible, positive aspects of the loss over the negative<sup>36</sup> is reflected in the choice to focus on feel-good sentiments in the text and imagery I present in my artwork. Adapting Boss' ways of finding meaning following ambiguous loss to an art practice provides a new way to view these issues in art. It synthesises discussion of an artwork's relationship to size, duration, methodology and repetition within the one area of ambiguous loss.

The second method of coping concerns mastery. In describing mastery, Boss cites Leonard Pearlin's definition of having a 'sense of control over one's life'.<sup>37</sup> For Pearlin, mastery involves the actions people do of their own accord. He suggests that when faced with a threat, 'having a sense of control' results in feeling less vulnerable.<sup>38</sup> In art, expressions of control or lack of control are often presented as a dominant element within the work. For example, Sophie Calle's sentiment 'I like being in control and I like losing control' are reflected in her work, *Suite Vénitienne* (1980); a work I will discuss shortly.<sup>39</sup> Boss proposes that ambiguous loss calls for the desire for mastery to be 'tempered'; that people find ways to live with situations that are beyond their control.<sup>40</sup> I develop Boss's proposition of tempered mastery by using materials and methodologies that have associations

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<sup>35</sup> Boss, *Loss, Trauma, and Resilience: Therapeutic Work with Ambiguous Loss*, 95.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>38</sup> L. I. Pearlin, "Some Conceptual Perspectives on the Origins and Prevention of Social Stress" in *Socioeconomic Conditions, Stress and Mental Disorders: Toward a new Synthesis of Research and Public Policy Collection*, ed. A. Maney and R. Ramos (Washington: Mental Health Statistical Improvement Program, National Institute of Mental Health, 1995), 12.

<sup>39</sup> Iwona Blazwick, "Introduction: Talking to Strangers," in Jean Baudrillard, *Sophie Calle: The Reader*, (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2009), 10. The author cites Christine Macel, "Biographical Interview with Sophie Calle," in *Sophie Calle: M'as-tu-vue*, ed. Christine Macel (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2003), 79.

<sup>40</sup> Boss, *Loss, Trauma, and Resilience: Therapeutic Work with Ambiguous Loss*, 99 – 101.



with the professional and the amateur in art. I also look at the concept that encourages people experiencing ambiguous loss to ‘control what they can and to let go of what they cannot control’.<sup>41</sup> One way of dealing with the stress of not being able to control a situation is to focus on what can be controlled: one’s inner world.<sup>42</sup> In chapter three I examine the inner world accessed through the process of stitching. This distinction of interior and exterior worlds is troubled, however, through my choice to stitch exteriors of homes as subject matter. Examining the notion of mastery in art through the lens of ambiguous loss opens the scope for presenting mastery in a subtle manner.

Ambiguous loss forces many people to re-evaluate their identities and the roles they played before the loss occurred. This includes examining who and what constitutes their family, home and community.<sup>43</sup> One of the triggers for re-evaluation can simply be the addition of the prefix ‘ex’ to a person’s identity, for example, ex-partner, and ex-employee.<sup>44</sup> Works detailed in the following chapters look at identity through belonging to a community. Employing varying degrees of subtlety, the research presents neighbourhoods, shows representations of an aspirational ideal, and the sense of a mirrored belonging. Existing research also highlights the importance of connection to ambiguous loss. In overcoming the grief associated with ambiguous loss, Boss claims connection with others is more essential than medication.<sup>45</sup> Connecting with others can involve narrating one’s

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<sup>41</sup> Winokuer and Harris, *Principles and Practice of Grief Counseling*, 109.

<sup>42</sup> Boss, *Loss, Trauma, and Resilience: Therapeutic Work with Ambiguous Loss*, 113.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>45</sup> Pauline Boss and Donna Carnes, “The Myth of Closure,” *Family Process* 51, no. 4, (December 2012): 462.

story as a method of empowerment.<sup>46</sup> My research examines this concept through the narrative of a neighbourhood and a collection of observations gathered throughout my day. In cases of diminishing mental awareness, when all other methods of connection have been lost, connection through physical touch can remain.<sup>47</sup> Reinterpreting concepts of ambiguous loss, identity and connection from psychology in a creative context provides a way to look at the role that the haptic qualities of an artwork play in relation to security and comfort. It also provides an opportunity to represent the concept of belonging.

The association that ambiguous loss has with the everyday is also addressed throughout my research. Ambiguous loss is described as a theory ‘ordinary people’ can understand and use in their lives.<sup>48</sup> Additionally, when working with clients, therapists are encouraged to eschew a hierarchical relationship and to value the ‘common, everyday knowledge’ that patients can provide.<sup>49</sup> Utilitarianism, and professional and amateur authority are manifested in my work through everyday domestic materials, such as food boxes and pyjamas, simple language, the small size of my work and the use of amateur craft kits. These materials and strategies also reflect the everyday normality and sense of individual mastery inherent to an assumptive world.

Boss advocates art as a constructive vehicle for dealing with ambiguous loss, however her advice is centred around art as therapy.<sup>50</sup> She does not take into account the methodological, material and conceptual implications of ambiguous

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<sup>46</sup> Boss, *Loss, Trauma, and Resilience: Therapeutic Work with Ambiguous Loss*, 88.

<sup>47</sup> Boss, “The Trauma and Complicated Grief of Ambiguous Loss,” 144.

<sup>48</sup> Boss, “Ambiguous Loss Research, Theory, and Practice: Reflections after 9/11,” 558.

<sup>49</sup> Boss, *Loss, Trauma, and Resilience: Therapeutic Work with Ambiguous Loss*, 80.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

loss for an art practice. Applying the psychological findings on ambiguous loss to the field of art creates the opportunity for new critical art discourse. It presents a new way to view the choices made by an artist in relation to subject, processes, and materials thus broadening the scope for understanding and contextualising an artist's work. It also provides an important opportunity to advance understanding of the relationship between art and ambiguous loss beyond the sphere of client and psychological therapist.

## **Collecting**

To investigate the methods of coping with ambiguous loss that I have outlined, I use the activity of collecting. Notions of mastery and a sense of control are echoed in the literature on collecting. Mastery has important connotations with a sense of inner-authority, the setting of self-defined rules and boundaries, and the sense of worth obtained through achievement of a challenge. While Museum Studies academic, Susan Pearce, is amongst the researchers that have examined collecting by focusing upon the characteristics of the activity, I am examining those characteristics in the context of ambiguous loss to shed new light on its links with creative practice.

Pearce writes of the difficulty in defining the ways in which a collection differs from 'other kinds of accumulation'.<sup>51</sup> Presenting commentators' definitions of what constitutes a collection dating back to 1932, she suggests that Russell Belk provides the most encapsulating.<sup>52</sup> Belk writes:

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<sup>51</sup> Susan Pearce, "The Urge to Collect" in *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, ed. Susan Pearce, (New York: Routledge, 1994), 157.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 158.

We take collecting to be the selective, active, and longitudinal acquisition, possession and disposition of an interrelated set of differentiated objects (material things, ideas, beings, or experiences) that contribute to and derive extraordinary meaning from the entity (the collection) that this set is perceived to constitute.<sup>53</sup>

Pearce questions Belk's inclusion of the term 'active,' suggesting it does not adequately allow for the collections that people build sub-consciously. She offers as an example someone who for years keeps a particular designer's range of clothes without viewing them as a collection per se.<sup>54</sup> Pearce proposes that '[p]erhaps the real point is that a collection is not a collection until someone thinks of it in those terms'.<sup>55</sup> This statement suggests possessing and exercising authority in the creation of a collection, and engages with the concept of self-defined mastery. Pearce's sentiment is pertinent to my approach to mastery and acts as a guiding principle of my project.

The focus upon the everyday in my research extends beyond its association with ambiguous loss and the assumptive world. It also includes collections, which are distinguished from archives. The characteristics that distinguish collections from archives are rarely articulated. Artists and theorists, however, acknowledge a difference by strategically mobilizing the terms within their work. Charles Merewether writes of the two entities, positioning the archive as 'the foundation

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<sup>53</sup> Russell Belk, Melanie Wallendorf, John F. Sherry Jr., and Morris B. Holbrook, "Collecting in a Consumer Culture" in *Highways and Buyways: Naturalistic Research from the Consumer Behavior Odyssey*, (Provo, Utah: Association for Consumer Research, 1991), 180.

<sup>54</sup> Pearce, "The Urge to Collect," 158.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

from which history is written' and implicitly casting collecting in a less august position.<sup>56</sup> In discussing two exhibitions that feature collected items, *Folk Archive* (2005) and the *Enthusiasts* (2004), Tate Museum archivist Sue Breakell writes that the exhibitions were '*collections* rather than archives'.<sup>57</sup> Breakell states that the term archive was used deliberately as 'an assertion of the changed status of this material, which has gone from obscurity to preservation and presentation'.<sup>58</sup> These theorists' comments place collections in a less influential and prestigious position than archives. This aligns collections more closely with the everyday. Highlighting the everyday and personal nature of collections allows for the presence of the collector to be featured and associated issues of self-defined mastery to be explored.

Discussions of the motivations and characteristics of collectors recur throughout the collecting literature. Pearce stresses that collectors are not 'a separate caste with personal or social defining characteristics'.<sup>59</sup> She blames research from 1920 to 1940 for feeding a stereotype of the collector as being 'a dispiriting, anorak-clad loner who is unable to form personal relationships, especially with the opposite sex, and who uses collecting as a substitute for personal emotional satisfaction'.<sup>60</sup> Contemporary writers continue to single out collectors and their pastime to paint them in a less than flattering light. Jean Baudrillard claims collectors 'invariably

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<sup>56</sup> Charles Merewether, "Introduction / Art and Archive" in *The Archive*, ed. Charles Merewether, (London and Cambridge Massachusetts: Whitechapel and The MIT Press, 2006), 10.

<sup>57</sup> Sue Breakell, "Perspectives: Negotiating the Archive", *Tate Papers*, (Spring 2008): 5, <http://www.tate.org.uk/download/file/fid/7288>, accessed September 8, 2015.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. It should be noted that Breakell believes the notion that the archive belongs 'to the lawmakers and the powerful' is out-dated and that theoretical discourses reflecting this idea need to change.

<sup>59</sup> Susan Pearce, *Collecting in Contemporary Practice* (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 46.

<sup>60</sup> Pearce, *Collecting in Contemporary Practice*, 27.

have something impoverished and inhuman about them'<sup>61</sup> and, along with psychoanalyst Werner Muensterberger, suggests their motivations may be linked to anal retentiveness formed in childhood.<sup>62</sup>

Disparaging portrayals of collectors are also found in popular culture. In his review of *The People's Show*,<sup>63</sup> Robin Francis notes that the majority of media surrounding the event 'focused on collecting as an unusual, even "kinky," pastime'.<sup>64</sup> Casting collectors and their behaviour as unusual sits at odds with the observations of numerous scholars. Both Pearce and Belk suggest that around one-third of the population from wealthy countries collect.<sup>65</sup> Belk believes that collecting is an almost ubiquitous activity amongst Western children, while G. Thomas Tanselle proposes that 'collecting is part of the behavior of every person'.<sup>66</sup> These claims support the view of collecting as a commonplace, rather than an unusual, activity. This is a view held by Matthias Winzen who is unequivocal in his assessment of who constitutes a collector. He opens his

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<sup>61</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "A Marginal System: Collecting," translated by James Benedict, in *The System of Objects*, (London: Verso, 1996), 106.

<sup>62</sup> Baudrillard, "A Marginal System: Collecting," 87; Werner Muensterberger, *Collecting An Unruly Passion: Psychological Perspectives*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 20. Anal retentiveness is a stage in infancy, identified by Freud, when children hold onto their faeces as a form of control.

<sup>63</sup> *The People's Show* (1990) exhibited the collections of everyday collectors at the Walsall Museum and Art Gallery in the UK. The show was so popular the concept was expanded to multiple venues in 1992 and was accompanied by a conference *The Politics of Collecting*. In 1994 the concept became a festival exhibited in 50 museums throughout Britain. Robin Francis, "The People's Show: A Critical Analysis," *Journal of Conservation & Museum Studies*, no. 1, (May 1996), <http://www.jcms-journal.com/articles/10.5334/jcms.1963/>, accessed September 16, 2015.

<sup>64</sup> Francis, "The People's Show: A Critical Analysis," <http://www.jcms-journal.com/articles/10.5334/jcms.1963/>.

<sup>65</sup> Russell Belk, *Collecting in a Consumer Society*, (London: Routledge, 1995), 83; Pearce, *Collecting in Contemporary Practice*, 27. Pearce bases the findings in her book upon 1993 and 1996 surveys of collecting in Britain, information from the People's Show 1992 – 1995, and media and collector research. Pearce, *Collecting in Contemporary Practice*, 18.

<sup>66</sup> Russell Belk, "Collecting as Luxury Consumption: Effects on Individuals and Households," *Journal of Economic Psychology* 16 (1995): 484; G. Thomas Tanselle, "A Rationale of Collecting," *Studies in Bibliography* 51 (1998): 18.

catalogue essay for the exhibition *Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing, and Archiving in Art*, with the two word sentence: ‘Everybody collects’.<sup>67</sup>

Belk believes that with such a large proportion of the population involved in collecting it is difficult to summarize an all-encompassing reason as to why.<sup>68</sup>

Based on interviews with around two hundred collectors he proposes that ‘[p]erhaps the most general benefit ... is gaining a feeling of mastery, competence, or success’.<sup>69</sup> Belk’s conclusion resonates with the findings of McIntosh and Schmeichel<sup>70</sup> and, to a degree, with Tanselle whose claim that the ‘need to find order’ is ‘possibly the most fundamental – explanation of collecting’.<sup>71</sup> This resonates with the sense of control that is experienced with attaining mastery.

The association with a sense of mastery, and the authority implicit in creating and overseeing order, reflects Boss’s advocacy for people experiencing ambiguous loss to regain a sense of control over their lives.<sup>72</sup> This link informs my decision to pursue collecting as a line of inquiry. Studio research has a rich history concerning expressions of authority, power and hierarchies. Art provides a multifaceted way to convey nuanced expressions of mastery. It offers a platform from which to express quietness, subtlety, vulnerability, tenacity, perseverance and burgeoning strength through multiple points of connection. Subject matter, materials and processes used in studio research provide a means to connect with viewers on an

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<sup>67</sup> Matthias Winzen, “Collecting – So Normal, So Paradoxical” in *Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing and Archiving in Art*, ed. Ingrid Schaffner and Matthias Winzen, (Munich and New York: Prestel, 1998), 22.

<sup>68</sup> Belk, *Collecting in a Consumer Society*, 83.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>70</sup> William D. McIntosh and Brandon Schmeichel, “Collectors and Collecting: A Social Psychological Perspective,” *Leisure Sciences* 26, no. 1 (2004): 87.

<sup>71</sup> Tanselle, “A Rationale of Collecting,” 8.

<sup>72</sup> Boss, *Loss, Trauma, and Resilience: Therapeutic Work with Ambiguous Loss*, 110.

emotive as well as an intellectual level, offering the potential for a visceral, and therefore potentially profound, understanding of mastery. These ideas inform the research in this project by seeking to create recognition of ambiguous loss through metaphor, scale, materiality and shared meanings. This is achieved by using small works that must be handled delicately to be viewed, using thickly stitched wool to reference comforting softness, and by presenting tiny and detailed flowers that call for viewers' close attention.

### **Collecting: Mastery and Control**

The links between the assumptive world and control may bring to mind notions of panoptical control in which people self-regulate their behaviour in response to potential monitoring.<sup>73</sup> Such ideas allude to an exercise of power over another and frame control within an external and somewhat malevolent setting. In contrast, this project is interested in a form of grassroots control. It looks at the sense of control offered by an assumptive world that enables individuals to define their own boundaries, classifications, rules, and systems. It is concerned with having a sense of control over one's life, and focuses control on the world of the individual.

The concept of creating or controlling a personal world, either real or symbolic, through collecting recurs in the literature. Belk describes the potential that collectors have to 'control a "little world"' <sup>74</sup> through owning 'an interrelated set of

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<sup>73</sup> Michel Foucault discusses Jeremy Bentham's concept of the panopticon in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, (New York : Vintage Books, 1979). Bentham designed the panopticon as a way of encouraging occupants to self-police their behaviour. The circular structure consisted of backlit cells built around a central guard post. The idea was that occupants, such as prisoners, never knew when they were being watched and so modified their behaviour accordingly.

<sup>74</sup> Belk, *Collecting in a Consumer Society*, 70.



objects'.<sup>75</sup> William Davies King writes of the 'whole world' he made in childhood from the collection of 'treasures' he gathered from his neighbour's incinerator.<sup>76</sup> These worlds allude to a burgeoning sense of omnipotence obtained through object ownership. Susan Stewart credits the 'hermetic world' of the collection with an achievement of 'authority', an observation that privileges the collection rather than the collector.<sup>77</sup> While the nature of what I collect is of course important, it is not the items themselves that hold the only value in my research – it is the act of collecting that is important. Brenda Danet and Tamar Katriel describe collecting as a way to create 'an idiosyncratic symbolic world' an idea that chimes with ideas of mastery and the creation of an assumptive world.<sup>78</sup> Similarly, Baudrillard focuses upon notions of world mastery. His observation that children use collecting as 'a rudimentary way of mastering the outside world, of arranging, classifying and manipulating' carries implications of negative and malicious control.<sup>79</sup> This sits at odds with my desire to invoke the feel-good positivity of an assumptive world.

It is Tanselle's assertion that collecting is undertaken 'to tame the external world' that reverberates most closely with my interests. His acknowledgement that the activity is a method of 'making the environment seem less threatening and more understandable' synthesizes collecting with notions of security and small-scale mastery within an assumptive world.<sup>80</sup> Tanselle's definition of collectables as 'tangible things', however, is too limited to include collections of observations and

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> William Davies King, *Collections of Nothing*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 2008), 18

<sup>77</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 152.

<sup>78</sup> Brenda Danet and Tamar Katriel, "No Two Alike: Play and Aesthetics in Collecting," in *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, ed. Susan Pearce (New York: Routledge, 1994), 222.

<sup>79</sup> Baudrillard, "A Marginal System: Collecting," 87.

<sup>80</sup> Tanselle, "A Rationale of Collecting," 14.

recollections. Similarly, his all-inclusive description of collections being everything that people accumulate subconsciously, is too broad for my concerns and lacks the association with mastery that is implicit in action.<sup>81</sup> Tanselle aligns aspects of his research with the findings of Muensterberger. He supports Muensterberger's claim that the origins of collecting and order are located in infancy when babies take order of their environment through objects.<sup>82</sup> Muensterberger describes the way infants may alleviate the trauma of being left alone or experiencing vulnerability, by finding comfort in objects, and proposes this as a possible basis for the desire to collect.<sup>83</sup> While this idea is certainly aligned with the focus of my research, issues of childhood trauma are beyond the scope of this study.

Tanselle details four areas that he asserts are influential factors in a person's relationship to their collecting of 'tangible things'. These are: 'the creation of order, a fascination with chance, curiosity about the past, and a desire for understanding'.<sup>84</sup> For Tanselle, order is related to obtaining and re-contextualising an object within a new environment. This references a sense of mastery through creating and controlling a world. Obtaining objects is directly related to what is found through the vagaries of chance. This notion of chance mirrors the idea of the unpredictability of outcomes. Both are issues that resonate with the creation of a new assumptive world. Objects can also provide a direct link to the past. When viewed as being 'a tangible survivor' they can be the subject of intense

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>83</sup> Muensterberger, *Collecting An Unruly Passion: Psychological Perspectives*, 9.

<sup>84</sup> Tanselle, "A Rationale of Collecting," 9.

examination.<sup>85</sup> Becoming an expert through the study of collected objects provides increased knowledge not only of the object's provenance but also its wider environment.<sup>86</sup> In this way, collecting provides an avenue for expression of professionalism and mastery.

Opportunities to exercise control through collecting include the establishment and maintenance of the criteria for what will and will not be included in the collection; determining the number of items that the collection will include and when the collection will be deemed complete; establishing the methodology and duration of the collecting process; and deciding how the collection will be presented and viewed.<sup>87</sup> Tanselle describes collecting as a way for a person to 'feel in control of some part of the chaos around them'.<sup>88</sup> My research examines these themes from a variety of perspectives, detailed in depth in the following chapters. Initial work involves collecting the complete set of items while later works present a deliberately limited number of objects as a form of mastery. I use these themes to examine mastery through the selection of items and by creating work according to the strict rules of my collecting process.

## **Collecting: Rules and Control**

Central to this project is the sense of control that collecting offers the collector. I propose that this sense of control marks a desire for the experience of an assumptive world, and can be invoked to reveal some of the little acknowledged subtleties of ambiguous loss. Although ambiguous loss is not named in the

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<sup>85</sup> Tanselle, "A Rationale of Collecting," 10.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>87</sup> See: Susan Pearce, "Controlling Collecting" in *On Collecting: An Investigation into Collecting in the European Tradition*, (London: Routledge, 1995), 178 – 196.

<sup>88</sup> Tanselle, "A Rationale of Collecting," 18.

literature on collecting or visual art practice, some commentators address notions of control from the perspective of rules that establish the criteria for the founding of a collection and influence the reception of its contents. Stewart's description of collections involving a 'manipulation of context' alludes to the opportunity collections offer for asserting control.<sup>89</sup>

Louise Bourgeois echoes Stewart, describing collectors as 'manipulators'. Her suggestion, however, that collectors' quests for 'dominion over a definite area' is a method to overcome fear and anxiety links control to a search for mastery.<sup>90</sup>

Pearce references a more sanguine approach to control, writing that it is 'the collector who decides upon the rules of the game, and allows himself whatever licence he feels like'.<sup>91</sup> This succinct description takes notions of control to a personal level. Walter Benjamin's description of collecting as 'the locking of individual items within a magic circle' presents a somewhat more benign sense of control in the creation of a collection and its demarcation as a world.<sup>92</sup> His 1931 text 'Unpacking My Library: A Talk About Book Collecting' offers an insider's perspective on the 'mental climate of collecting'.<sup>93</sup> The reference to his library's 'militant age', a period when only books he hadn't read could be included in his collection,<sup>94</sup> demonstrates a strict subscription to boundary-establishing rules of which he is in control. However, the framing of his text within the gentle philosophical musings of 'genuine collector' softens any association with ideas of

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<sup>89</sup> Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, 151.

<sup>90</sup> Louise Bourgeois, "'Collecting: an Unruly Passion' by Werner Muensterberger," *Artforum* 32, no. 10, (Summer 1994): 11.

<sup>91</sup> Susan Pearce, *On Collecting: An Investigation into Collecting in the European Tradition*, (London: Routledge, 1995), 187.

<sup>92</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library: A Talk About Book Collecting," in *Illuminations*, (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 59.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

manipulation.<sup>95</sup> My project adopts this more affable presentation of rules and control.

The importance of the authority to determine what can enter a collection is evidenced in collectors' responses to collection-related gifts. Gift-giving is often discouraged because it undermines a collector's 'selective control'.<sup>96</sup> The authority to establish and enforce a collection's criteria, deeming what is of worth and what is not, is reflected in Belk's claim that collections can provide their owner with an 'an omnipotent sense of mastery'.<sup>97</sup> Rules offer a method for collectors to set achievable and measurable goals.<sup>98</sup> Success in achieving these goals contributes to a sense of mastery. King writes of the 'small spasm of pleasure' he experienced on receiving stamps that matched his collection stating: 'I had the collector's limited joy in filling, completing, mastering a universe'.<sup>99</sup> While gifts offered as additions to collections are discouraged, gifts and chance findings are common impetuses for the establishment of a collection.<sup>100</sup> Discussing the unintentional beginning of her postcard collection, artist Tacita Dean observes that: 'It started with finding an attractive postcard of a frozen water fountain. On finding the second frozen water fountain, I had begun a collection'.<sup>101</sup> King concurs, having been told 'If you have more than one, it's a collection'.<sup>102</sup> This idea is reflected in the limited size of my own collections.

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>96</sup> Belk, *Collecting in a Consumer Society*, 70.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> McIntosh and Schmeichel, "Collectors and Collecting: A Social Psychological Perspective," 87.

<sup>99</sup> King, *Collections of Nothing*, 12.

<sup>100</sup> Russell W. Belk, Melanie Wallendorf, John Sherry, Morris Holbrook and Scott Roberts, "Collectors and Collecting," *Advances in Consumer Research* 15, (1988): 548.

<sup>101</sup> Terry, "Tacita Dean on Collecting," *Vertigo*, February 18, 2008.

<http://sebald.wordpress.com/2008/02/18/tacita-dean-on-collecting/>, accessed May 24, 2012.

<sup>102</sup> King, *Collections of Nothing*, 113.

A collection may begin with an inauspicious start, such as King's stamps and Dean's postcards, however the growth of a collection is a deliberate act often likened to hunting. Pearce subscribes to the hunting analogy believing it 'promot[es] ideas of cunning, stealth, patience, prowess, competition and ultimate success with the acquisition carried home in triumph'.<sup>103</sup> Other commentators frame the process of collecting within the notion of a quest,<sup>104</sup> while one collector draws comparisons to being an early explorer.<sup>105</sup> The idea of hunting, exploring, or embarking on a quest celebrates the challenge involved in collecting. A successful quest reflects well upon the collector, in their own view and in that of others.<sup>106</sup> A common measure of successful collecting concerns the duration of time. Stewart and Pearce cite the passage of time as an essential element in creating a collection, suggesting that a collection must be built piece by piece to have credibility.<sup>107</sup> Susan Sontag echoes this sentiment in her fictional description of the Cavaliere and his passion for collecting in her book *The Volcano Lover*. Sontag's description highlights the importance of the hunt and the duration of time for 'true collectors'.<sup>108</sup> Collector Robert Opie reinforces this idea. In speaking of his collecting methods, he states that buying new stamps from the post office rather than collecting postmarked stamps that arrived serendipitously in his letterbox

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<sup>103</sup> Susan Pearce, "Controlling Collecting" in *On Collecting: An Investigation into Collecting in the European Tradition*, (London: Routledge, 1995), 184.

<sup>104</sup> Belk, *Collecting in a Consumer Society*, 72.

<sup>105</sup> Collector Robert Opie interviewed by John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, "'Unless you do these crazy things ...' An Interview with Robert Opie" in *The Cultures of Collecting: From Elvis to Antiques Why do we Collect Things?*, eds. John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1994), 31.

<sup>106</sup> McIntosh and Schmeichel, "Collectors and Collecting: A Social Psychological Perspective," 91; Pearce, *On Collecting: An Investigation into Collecting in the European Tradition*, 184.

<sup>107</sup> Pearce, *On Collecting: An Investigation into Collecting in the European Tradition*, 235; Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, 166.

<sup>108</sup> Susan Sontag, *The Volcano Lover*, (Canada: HarperCollins, 1992), 25.

would be ‘like cheating’.<sup>109</sup> Successfully engaging with a hunt and the passage of time provides worth to a collector and to their collection. Negotiating such a challenge is a method for providing a sense of mastery which resonates with coping with the experience of ambiguous loss. It suggests overcoming imposed conditions and negotiating the predictability, and unpredictability, of outcomes. As I demonstrate in the following chapters, my research addresses these ideas through the rule-bound collection of grammatical letter patterns and negating unpredictable outcomes by working with prescriptive, mass-produced, amateur craft kits.

## **Collecting: The Project**

This research provides an important opportunity to advance the understanding of the relationship between ideas of the collector as hunter, adventurer or explorer working within clearly defined and articulated boundaries, and Michael Sheringham’s description of artists who make work as ‘a project’.<sup>110</sup> Sheringham adopts Georges Perec’s description of a project stating it ‘implies a preoccupation with the domain of practice’ that puts the focus on the ‘processes, practices, constraints and durations’ in an artwork’s evolution.<sup>111</sup> It is common and often fundamental in artwork projects for artists to use the tools and methodologies of other professionals: ‘the artist as scientist, journalist, archivist, archaeologist, private detective etc.’<sup>112</sup> Christine Hill employs tropes of small businesses for her ‘organisational ventures’ such as *Volksboutique* (1996) a work that began as a

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<sup>109</sup> Robert Opie interviewed by John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, “‘Unless you do these crazy things ...’ An Interview with Robert Opie,” 30.

<sup>110</sup> See Michael Sheringham, “Epistemologies of the Project,” *AA Files* 60, (January 2010): 3-8 and Jonnie Gratton and Michael Sheringham, eds. *The Art of the Project: Projects and Experiments in Modern French Culture*, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005).

<sup>111</sup> Michael Sheringham, “Configuring the Everyday” in *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 388.

<sup>112</sup> Michael Sheringham, “Epistemologies of the Project,” 4.

shop in Berlin and grew to boast ‘mobile offices’ and a studio Hill refers to as the Volksboutique Products Division [figures 6-8].<sup>113</sup> Sophie Calle adopts the deadpan voice of the journalist or private detective in her work *Suite Vénitienne*, discussed further below. Adopting the tropes of professional evidence collectors provides artists with a form of authority to collect and, with that, a sense of mastery.

In establishing and building a collection, collectors share traits with artists who make work as projects. They are the principal protagonists who set the rules and determine the framework within which the collected items will fall. They influence or determine not only the rules but how the end product is presented and received.

Rules involving collections often extend beyond defining the criteria and methodology of collecting to include the way a collection is presented, handled and viewed. Danet and Katriel’s discussion on collections as ‘objects of domination and control’ includes commentary on the importance collectors place on being able to govern who may touch their collection.<sup>114</sup> Permission to handle and touch a collection includes the collectors themselves. Ownership facilitates the

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<sup>113</sup> Christine Hill, Barbara Steiner, Doris Berger, Kunstverein Wolfsburg, *Inventory: The Work of Christine Hill and Volksboutique*, (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2003), 22; MOMA, “Art and Commerce: Alternative Economies: Christine Hill and Rirkrit Tiravanija,” The Museum of Modern Art, <https://www.moma.org/explore/multimedia/audios/128/456>, accessed August 23, 2017. Hill highlights her use of tropes by referencing the past and out-dated modes of business operation.

<sup>114</sup> Danet and Katriel, “No Two Alike: Play and Aesthetics in Collecting,” 228.





Figure 6: Christine Hill in the Volksboutique Small Business, 2010



Figure 7: Christine Hill, Volksboutique Accounting Archive, 2002



Figure 8: Christine Hill at work in the Volksboutique Armory Apothecary, Armory Show, New York, 2009

‘sensuous aspects of collecting’.<sup>115</sup> The creation of a specific ‘world’, the determining of its philosophical boundaries, the manipulative opportunities presented by the collected elements, and the reassuring comfort of object ownership can all contribute to feelings of mastery and can be utilized in combating the loss of a sense of control, and with it, security experienced through ambiguous loss.

Calle’s work *Suite Vénitienne* and Annette Messenger’s *Collection Albums* (1971-74) include features of the project, collecting, display and mastery. Both artists highlight their role as collectors in these works and in so doing distance their work from the associated authority of the archive. Calle and Messenger employ authoritarian tropes with the potential to question notions of mastery: Calle uses aspects of the project, including setting the boundaries, and adopting the voice of the professional, while Messenger adopts titles for herself and addresses identity through collecting practices.

### **Ambiguous Loss and Collecting: Sophie Calle**

With a focus on ‘processes, practices, constraints, and durations’<sup>116</sup> Calle’s collections of observations, opinions and recollections in work such as *Suite Vénitienne* sit neatly within Sheringham’s concept of a project. Calle’s works are often executed within exacting and specific boundaries which she highlights as an integral feature. For example, it is common for Calle to set ‘rules of the game’ in

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Sheringham, “Configuring the Everyday,” 388.

her work that either she, or her participants, must follow.<sup>117</sup> The rules ‘are always very strict’ and often specify duration.<sup>118</sup> Calle states when the work will begin and end, and whatever occurs within the set time frame forms the basis of her collection. However, the artist complicates the authority implicit in enforcing such definitive criteria. While she obsessively controls the rules on one hand, she absolves her responsibility for the impact those rules will have upon the success of her work on the other. For example, she claims that if her work is ‘boring, it’s not ... [her] fault; it’s part of the rules’.<sup>119</sup> This strategy focuses attention on the presence of a project within Calle’s practice and highlights her exploration of externally-imposed authority, a stance that is at odds with my investigation of an internalised and more subtle sense of mastery.

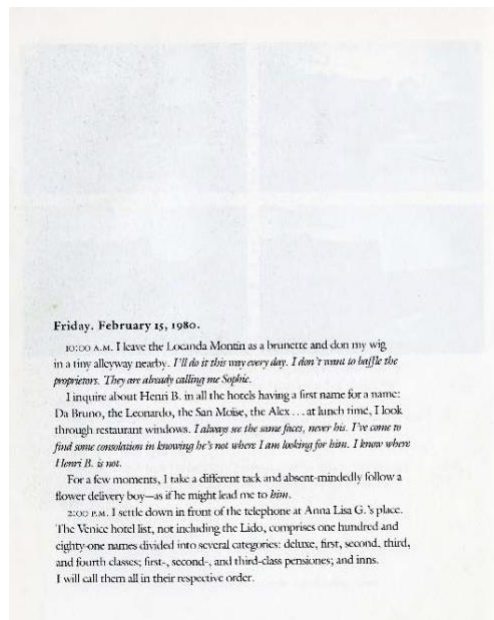
Processes and practices are important components in the creation of both a project and a collection. The notion of the collector as a hunter is recognisable in *Suite Vientiane*. In this work, Calle surreptitiously follows a man she met at a party to Venice. She trails this man, who she refers to as Henri B, around the city, covertly recording his movements via photographs and text [figures 9-10]. In the manner of an amateur sleuth, some of her observations are gathered while her face is hidden behind a newspaper. Calle again complicates expressions of authority in this work by questioning her hunter’s prowess. Appearing as italicized text, Calle’s thoughts form part of her collection, presenting her as a sometimes tired and vulnerable

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<sup>117</sup> Louise Neri, “Sophie Calle,” Interview, 24 March 2009, [http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/sophie-calle#/\\_](http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/sophie-calle#/_), accessed October 9, 2012.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Jill Magid, “Sophie Calle: The Legendary Artist on Life, Love and Cruelty,” *TOKION* (Fall 2008): 52.



Figures 9-10: Sophie Calle, *Suite Vénitienne*, 1980, excerpts

collector who is doubting the nobility of her quest. For example, in her text recorded 4:00pm, Sunday, February 17, 1980, Calle writes: '*I'm afraid of meeting up with him: I'm afraid that the encounter might be commonplace. I don't want to be disappointed*'.<sup>120</sup> And two days later she reflects: '*I've got to get a hold of myself. I lean against a column and close my eyes*'.<sup>121</sup> This display of vulnerability is contrasted with the majority of Calle's observations that are non-italicized and written in the monochromatic tone of a detective who is gathering evidence. For example:

Sunday. February 24, 1980. 10:00 A.M. The Bologna train enters the Gare de Lyon, track J, at the scheduled time. I take out my camera and hurriedly get off to find out about the Venice train ... On my left a train enters the station on track H and passes me. It is 10:06 A.M.<sup>122</sup>

Rosalind Krauss likens Calle's use of this tone to 'the journalist's report'.<sup>123</sup> The artist borrows the authority of the detective and the journalist to infuse her work with a sense of dispassionate recording. By expressing both her control and vulnerability within the work, however, Calle's intention sits in contrast to mine. In pursuit of a subtle presentation of mastery I chose to not emphasise the expression of authority, or lack of it, within my work.

Two of Calle's later works, *Exquisite pain* (2003) and *Take Care of Yourself* (2007), involve the artist's responses to relationship breakdowns. Calle claims that

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<sup>120</sup> Sophie Calle, *Suite Vénitienne*, (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), 24.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>123</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Two Moments from the Post-Medium Condition," *October* 116, (Spring 2006): 62.

the impact of the breakdown represented in *Exquisite pain* was so devastating it took her twenty years before she felt emotionally strong enough to make the work.<sup>124</sup> One iteration of *Exquisite pain* is a book of photographs and text [figure 11].<sup>125</sup> The book is divided in two. The first half counts down the 92 days before Calle learned of her boyfriend's decision to end their relationship. The second half of the book, titled 'After unhappiness', presents interviewee's responses to Calle's question: when did you suffer most? Each of the responses is presented on a page opposite Calle's retelling of the experience of her breakup as she counts the 99 days since the breakup occurred [figure 12]. For *Take Care of Yourself*, Calle asked 107 women of selected professions to respond to a break-up letter she received from her boyfriend that ended with the words 'take care of yourself' [figures 13-14]. Calle instructed the women that their responses must reflect only their professions. For example, the grammarian critiqued the letter's grammar.<sup>126</sup> Although scholarly discussion of these works references the experiences encountered with a relationship breakdown, scholars have not framed their responses using the specific lens of ambiguous loss. This means that while many have noted the characteristics of ambiguous loss that are present within the works, they have lacked the tools to position their discussions beneath an overarching umbrella. For example, Yve-Alain Bois's discussion of the 'entropic nature' of the work alludes to an unarticulated notion of the assumptive world.<sup>127</sup> Shirley Ann

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<sup>124</sup> Nancy Princenthal, "The Measure of Heartbreak," *Art in America* 93, no. 8 (September 2005): 166.

<sup>125</sup> Sophie Calle, *Exquisite pain*, (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2005)

<sup>126</sup> Neri, "Sophie Calle," [http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/sophie-calle#/\\_](http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/sophie-calle#/)

<sup>127</sup> Yve-Alain Bois, "Paper Tigress," *October* 116, (Spring 2006): 51.

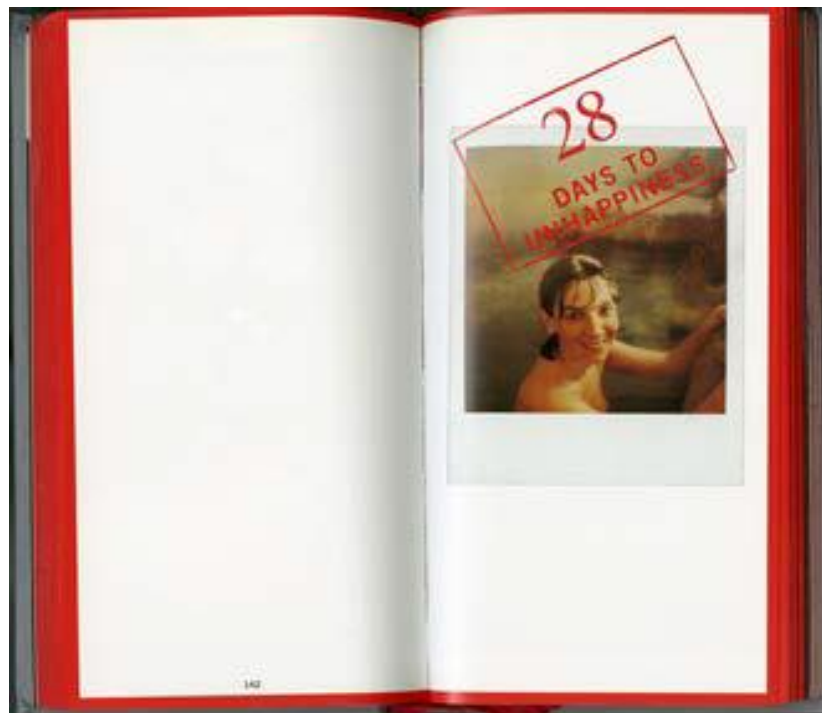


Figure 11-12: Sophie Calle, *Exquisite pain* artist's book, Thames & Hudson, 2015, 10.8 x 19.4 x 2.6 cm, 284 pages





Figure 13-14: Sophie Calle, *Take Care of Yourself*, 2007 (detail)  
 Moral Philosopher, Sandra Laugier  
 Translator, Adriana Hunter



Jordan refers to the work as a ‘soft monument’ to suffering and the ‘*experience of loss*’.<sup>128</sup> She describes the work as ‘a compelling journey through pain’ that continues Calle’s practice of highlighting an ‘alertness to our common vulnerability’.<sup>129</sup> These descriptions acknowledge the conditions and experiences of ambiguous loss but lack the framework of the term. Similarly, Giuseppe Merlino describes the breakup represented in *Take Care of Yourself* as an ‘act that evokes death within life for two people’ and that Calle’s practice involves ‘exploring a world that is visible but disregarded’.<sup>130</sup> These are also sentiments associated with ambiguous loss. James Campbell acknowledges the level of grief in the work, describing it as a ‘palpable act of mourning’, but frames his critique within Calle’s personal experience.<sup>131</sup> Without the context of ambiguous loss and acknowledgment of its commonplace nature, Lauren Sedofsky views *Exquisite pain* as ‘highly formulaic trauma’ that is conveyed using ‘the bleating textual code of romantic fixation’.<sup>132</sup>

In creating the collections for my research, I was aware that my work is made within the boundaries of a project, as adopted by Calle, but I take a more subtle approach in the presentation. I present my individual collections without highlighting the presence or authority of ‘a project’. There are other important differences. *Take Care of Yourself* spoke to the therapeutic benefits of art-making.

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<sup>128</sup> Shirley Ann Jordan, “Exhibiting Pain: Sophie Calle’s *Douleur Exquise*,” *French Studies* 61, no. 2 (2007): 197 and 205.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 198 and 208.

<sup>130</sup> Giuseppe Merlino, “Sophie Calle: A Lover’s Monologue,” *Aperture* 191, (Summer 2008): 24. Merlino’s description echoes Darcy Harris’s claim of non-death loss as being ‘internal’. Harris expresses the experience as being ‘when something that dies is inside of us’. Darcy L. Harris, *Counting our Losses: Reflecting on Change, Loss, and Transition in Everyday Life*, (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis Group, 2010), xvii.

<sup>131</sup> James D. Campbell, “Sophie Calle,” *Border Crossings* 27, no. 4, (2008): 100.

<sup>132</sup> Lauren Sedofsky, “Reviews: Sophie Calle M’as-tu Vue,” *Aperture* 175, (Summer 2004): 18.

Calle recognised the potential in the words ‘take care of yourself’, the parting line of her boyfriend’s letter. The work reflects the experience of ambiguous loss, and includes details of the event that caused a sense of loss to occur. In contrast, my work does not present or rely upon details of ‘what happened’, but deals with the experience of reconnecting with the positive and poetic in life after experiencing loss. In doing this, the effects of the loss are presented subtly, as a mood that permeates the subject matter, rather than being positioned overtly as the subject. This approach reflects the obtuse presentations of ambiguous loss; the conclusion drawn is that there is a sense of grief, but by not being stated explicitly that sense is not necessarily validated by the artwork.

### **Ambiguous Loss and Collecting: Annette Messenger**

Like Calle, the practice of Annette Messenger includes work that involves collecting, the collector, and the portrayal of mastery. One of the methods Messenger uses to consider these themes is to highlight her presence within the collection process. She does this by adopting a persona. This strategy was initiated by circumstance. In 1970, early in her career, Messenger lived and worked in a small Parisian apartment. A visiting friend questioned her practise of simultaneously making two distinct artworks in different rooms. Messenger’s solution to the perceived lack of relationship between her works was to develop personas for each workspace. ‘Annette Messenger Artiste’ (Annette Messenger Artist) worked in the living room, designated as her studio, and undertook ‘artist’s work’ such as knitting clothes for fake sparrows to create *The Boarders at Rest*

(1971-1972) [figure 15].<sup>133</sup> ‘Annette Messenger Collectionneuse’ (Annette Messenger Collector) operated from the bedroom and undertook ‘collector’s work’; assigned to ‘constantly sort, gather, organize, sift through and condense everything into numerous Collection Albums’.<sup>134</sup> The text and images that Annette Messenger Collectionneuse amassed were to become the *Collection Albums* (1971-1974), [figure 16] a series of fifty-six albums each presenting a specific collection. The albums include *Collection to Find My Best Signature, Collection Album no. 24*, (1972), an album filled with variants of the artist’s signature [figure 17]; *My Collection of Good Mushrooms and Deadly Mushrooms, Collection Album no. 43* (1972-73), an album of coloured pencil drawn mushroom varieties labelled as either ‘bon’ (good) or ‘mortel’ (deadly) [figure 18]; and *My Handwritten Envelopes, Collection Album no. 22* (1973-74) featuring a selection of envelopes addressed to the artist [figure 19]. Later in her career, Messenger anointed herself with further titles that included Annette Messenger Tinkerer, Annette Messenger Liar, and Annette Messenger Practical Woman. For each persona, she outlined distinct characteristics. For example, she described Annette Messenger Practical Woman as an ‘active, stable women’ who ‘never stops writing down affairs of the home or of daily life, which might come in handy’.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Sheryl Conkelton and Carol S. Eliel, *Annette Messenger*, (New York and Los Angeles: The Museum of Modern Art and Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1995), 11; Annette Messenger and Harald Szeemann, “Interview by Harald Szeemann, 1974,” in *Annette Messenger, Word for Word: Texts, Writings and Interviews*, (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2006), 384.

<sup>134</sup> Messenger and Szeemann, “Interview by Harald Szeemann, 1974,” 384; Annette Messenger, “Artist’s Notes 1971 - 2005,” in *Annette Messenger, Word for Word: Texts, Writings and Interviews*, (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2006), 355.

<sup>135</sup> Messenger, “Artist’s Notes 1971 - 2005,” 356.



Figure 15: Annette Messenger, *The Boarders at Rest*, 1971-72  
mixed media (feathers, wool, and fabric), glass case, 153 x 93 x 100 cm



Figure 16: Annette Messenger, *Collection Albums*, 1971-74  
mixed media, dimensions variable





Figure 17: Annette Messenger, *Collection to Find My Best Signature*, Collection Album no. 24, 1972, ink and pencil on paper, album size 23 x 18 cm



Figure 18: Annette Messenger, *My Collection of Good Mushrooms and Deadly Mushrooms*, Collection Album no. 43, 1972-73, cardboard binding containing drawings and text in ink, pencil and coloured pencil, 32.5 x 25 cm, 12 pages

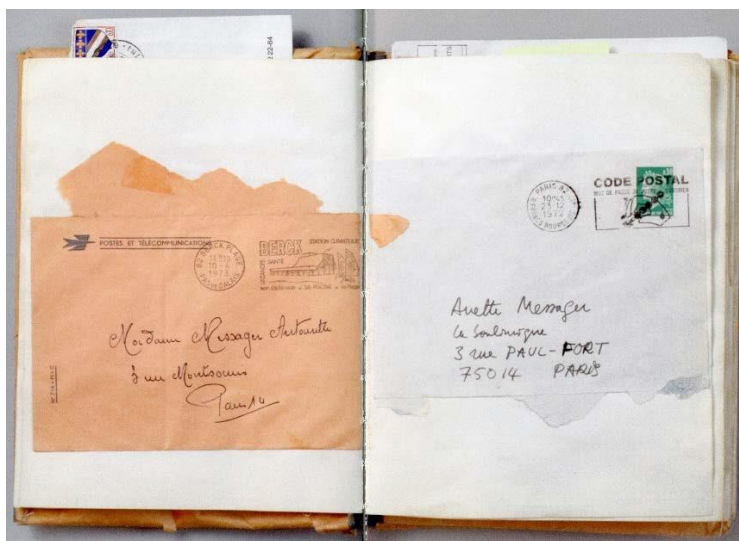


Figure 19: Annette Messenger, *My Handwritten Envelopes*, Collection Album no. 22, 1973-74, bound notebook, envelopes mounted on 112 pages, 23 x 17 cm

While Calle's work contrasts the authority associated with factual, evidence-gathering occupations, such as the detective or the journalist, with the more emotional and vulnerable characteristics of an individual artist, Messenger adopts personas that are not normally associated with authority and elevates them to a position of prestige: artist (female), collector, tinkerer, and liar. Additionally, many titles in her *Collection Albums* include the pronoun 'my', such as *My Cookbook*, *Collection Album no. 9* (1972). This stakes a strategic claim on the authority of the individual.

Although the presence of the artist is central to the projects of Calle and Messenger, both artists play with the autobiographical truthfulness of their work. Calle's claim that her work is based on fact is one that is frequently questioned.<sup>136</sup> Messenger, on the other hand, contests that her collections are 'stories seen by others'.<sup>137</sup> By highlighting herself within the work but stressing that work is not about her, Messenger positions the generic female voice in a central role, creating a work that comments on stereotypical presentations of women as well as the relationship between female artists, collectors, and authority.

Many of Messenger's albums involve other issues relevant to ambiguous loss such as identity, mastery, and the assumptive world. These themes are exemplified in her album *The Marriage of Miss Annette Messenger*, *Collection Album no. 1* (1971) a notebook featuring images of brides and grooms cut from newspapers with each bride's name replaced with Messenger's own [figure 20-21]. The work presents

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<sup>136</sup> Louise Neri, "Sophie's Choice" in Jean Baudrillard, *Sophie Calle: The Reader*, (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2009), 153.

<sup>137</sup> Annette Messenger, "Interviews 1974 - 2005," in *Annette Messenger, Word for Word: Texts, Writings and Interviews*, (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2006), 385.

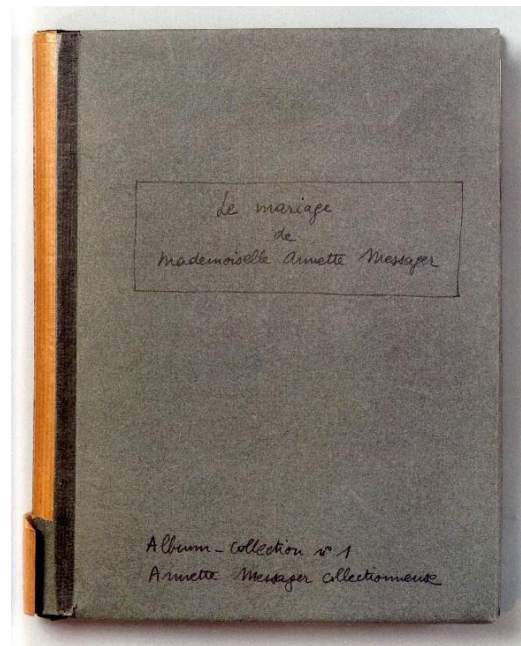


Figure 20-21: Annette Messenger, *The Marriage of Miss Annette Messenger*,  
Collection Album no. 1, 1971  
paper-covered hardback notebook, 23 x 18 cm, 108 pages



idealised dreams and identities common to an assumptive world. Messenger's contextualisation of her albums as non-autobiographical, however, means it is not a personal assumptive world that the work references but a stereotypical view of a female assumptive world. The album is a comment on this world rather than a personal longing. This approach contrasts to my work *Home Made*, which I discuss in chapter three, where I present an image of my home nestled within a streetscape of idealised homes. I contextualise my work within an autobiographical framework that creates a level of poignancy for the work and a sense of genuine longing for the idealised dreams of the assumptive world. In contrast to Messenger, my presence as a collector is not as a fabricated or clichéd identity but as an authority valued on its own terms. Similarly, my work does not use the borrowed authority of a professional occupation, like those employed by Calle. In doing this, my work develops Calle and Messenger's approaches to collecting and authority beyond the sphere of the project.

## **Conclusion**

As a common life occurrence, there is a distinct need for the concept of ambiguous loss to be addressed in the field of art. While themes that resonate with ambiguous loss, such as relationship breakdown, migration and mental health deterioration, are frequent subject matter across art forms, they have not been addressed as ambiguous loss by scholars in the art field. As a result, the broader shared characteristics and experiences of ambiguous loss problematically remain under-recognised and under-acknowledged – reduced instead to the experiences of individuals. In an attempt to address this problem, in this chapter I examined the literature on ambiguous loss from the field of psychology and adapted it to the context of a visual arts practice. I focused upon four areas: finding meaning,

tempering mastery, reconstructing identity, and human connection. I noted the presence of these themes within the literature on collecting and used this as a vehicle to develop concepts of ambiguous loss through visual art.

Throughout this chapter I also discussed the significance of the subtle gesture in relation to ambiguous loss. This idea pervades my work in the small-scale of some artwork, and the avoidance of tropes, such as date and time recordings associated with authoritarian evidence collection, that are commonly used to focus attention on a more narrowly defined biography or theme. In the following chapters I elaborate on these issues. In the next chapter I introduce *Permission to Speak*; my first work exploring the themes of ambiguous loss, the assumptive world, finding meaning, tempering mastery, reconstructing identity, human connection, collecting and the subtle gesture. *Permission to Speak* is autobiographically based; made in response to a situation I experienced that caused me to feel intense and sustained fear within the surrounds of my home. Yet the work has implications far exceeding my personal situation. As well as discussing these implications, the next chapter outlines the aims of this work including my desire to present a ‘feel-good’ work that did not portray the ambiguous loss and fear-inducing event itself.

## Chapter 2

### Mastery

In this chapter I present my work *Permission to Speak* and its relationship to security and the assumptive world. Issues of mastery and connection are central to this work, and I examine them with reference to collecting, attuned observation, the amateur, and shared experience. *Permission to Speak* [figure 22-23] consists of thirty-six small fabric drawings of all the houses in my street made from the fabric cut from second-hand men's pyjamas and glued onto the unprinted side of cardboard obtained from domestic boxes. Beneath each drawing, on a separate piece of paper, is typed text that seeks to relay in short, simple sentences, a feel-good and poetic recording of my relationship to the houses of my neighbours. The work has an autobiographical base, exploring the resolution of my living in a fear-filled environment and re-connecting with a personal concept of security in relation to home. As outlined in chapter one, feelings of vulnerability can ensue when the sense of an assumptive world is ruptured. *Permission to Speak* reflects such loss of security and uses collecting as a way of providing a sense of mastery obtained from feeling in control. The work involves the literal collection of materials (the pyjamas and cardboard), recollection (the relaying of past experiences), and metaphorical collection (the collective of people that constitute a neighbourhood). In the first half of this chapter I look at the relationship of mastery to the contextualization, materiality, aesthetics, and use of text in my work. The second half of the chapter looks at the security offered by connection. I approach this issue from a variety of angles, looking at connection with a community, with shared experience, and with reconnecting to a sense of optimism that has been affected by the loss of an assumptive world.



Figure 22: Michelle Neal, *Permission to Speak*, 2012 (detail)  
cardboard, pyjama fabric, typed text, dimensions variable  
photo: Clare Rae



Figure 23: Michelle Neal, *Permission to Speak* (detail)  
photo: Clare Rae

Although in *Permission to Speak* I invoke a collection as a form of mastery, I do not employ tropes often associated with the presentation of authoritative collections, such as the museum cabinet or professional-standard archive box. Instead, the wobbly-cut pieces of fabric and card are attached directly to the gallery wall. The small size of each image in the large gallery space deflects notions of overt mastery and authoritatively-held control. It suggests instead a fledgling claim on mastery and a trialling of authority following the experience of ambiguous loss. By not making a feature of these themes in my work, I render their presence as unremarkable, customary, normal: the way things are. This mirrors the unquestioned, unexamined and assumed sense of mastery and security of an assumptive world. In *Permission to Speak*, the sense of security obtained through a sense of mastery is explored in relation to four areas: contextualisation of the artwork, materiality, aesthetics and text.

### **Mastery: Contextualisation and the Confessional Artist**

In drawing upon trauma sustained in my life as the nucleus for my work, *Permission to Speak* holds some similarities with the practices of artists Louise Bourgeois and Tracey Emin. Both these artists suffered life events that resulted in work influenced by the experience of ambiguous loss. Bourgeois' practice was well-known for drawing upon her legacy of trauma following an affair between her father and her childhood governess. This 'double betrayal'<sup>1</sup> was so traumatic that the artist described her work as 'a series of exorcisms'.<sup>2</sup> Her pain informed

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<sup>1</sup> Louise Bourgeois, "Louise Bourgeois: Album," in *Louise Bourgeois Destruction of the Father, Reconstruction of the Father, Writings and Interviews 1923 – 1997*, eds. Marie-Laure Bernadac; Hans-Ulrich Obrist (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press in association with Violette Editions, London, 1998), 284.

<sup>2</sup> Louise Bourgeois, "Interview With Douglas Maxwell," in *Louise Bourgeois Destruction of the Father, Reconstruction of the Father, Writings and Interviews 1923 – 1997*, eds. Marie-Laure

works such as *Knife Figure* (2002) [figure 24] and *Cinq* (2007) [figure 25].

Bourgeois did not present the event itself in her work, per se, but the psychological ramifications that ensued and that permeated her life thereafter. These are encapsulated in what Jason Smith describes as the ‘eternal themes’ of her work: ‘familial dysfunction, desire and fear, anger and remorse, isolation and connectedness’.<sup>3</sup>

Tracey Emin too has contextualised her works by detailing the emotional fallout she suffered from the semi-absence of her father when she was a young child, her rape at the age of thirteen and her subsequent promiscuity. Her appliqued blanket *No Chance* (1999) [figure 26] pointedly details this trauma by including statements such as ‘at the age of 13 why the hell should I trust anyone’ and ‘no I said no’. These fabric phrases are dominated by a Union Jack, the presence of the British flag representing a link to unity and pride, now broken.

In drawing upon autobiographical events as impetus for their work, both Bourgeois and Emin have articulated the details of their traumatic events. In doing this, both artists have been described as ‘confessional artists’ and their personal history has become entwined with the contextualisation and critique of their work.<sup>4</sup>

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Bernadac; Hans-Ulrich Obrist (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press in association with Violette Editions, London, 1998), 245.

<sup>3</sup> Jason Smith, “Louise Bourgeois: Late Works,” in *Louise Bourgeois in Australia*, ed. Linda Michael (Bulleen: Heide Museum of Modern Art, 2012), 15.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Dormont describes Bourgeois as the inventor of confessional art in “Louise Bourgeois Invented Confessional Art”, *The Telegraph*, June 1, 2010, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/7794168/Louise-Bourgeois-invented-confessional-art.html>, accessed October 28, 2015. Christine Fanthome discusses this aspect of Emin’s work in “Articulating Authenticity Through Artifice: The Contemporary Relevance of Tracey Emin’s Confessional Art”, *Social Semiotics* 18, no. 2, (June 2008): 223-236.



Figure 24: Louise Bourgeois, *Knife Figure*, 2002  
fabric, steel, wood, 22.2 x 76.2 x 19.1 cm



Figure 25: Louise Bourgeois, *Cinq*, 2007  
fabric, stainless steel, 61 x 35.6 x 35.6 cm





Figure 26: Tracey Emin, *No Chance*, 1999  
 applique blanket, 216 x 228 cm



A consequence of this is raised by Paula Smithard. In her review of Emin's 1997 exhibition *I Need Art Like I Need God*, Smithard wrote '[s]o personal is some of the work that it almost feels that to critique it is to somehow violate the artist'.<sup>5</sup> The entwinement of the private life of a confessional artist and their work goes beyond the catchcry of the personal is political that influenced the practices of many 1970s feminist artists. Then, practitioners such as Mierle Laderman Ukeles made artworks based upon women's collective personal lives as a way of drawing attention to the overlooked. Her performance work *Hartford Wash: Washing, Tracks, Maintenance: Outside* (1973) [figure 27-28] involved the artist being on her hands and knees and washing the steps leading to the gallery in representation of the everyday, invisible maintenance activities performed by women. Bourgeois and Emin present the intimately personal with a more titillating air of which, in the case of Emin, the truth has been questioned.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast to both Bourgeois and Emin, I present *Permission to Speak* without relaying the details of the events that caused my feelings of ambiguous loss and fear to occur. Taking this course of action puts the focus of *Permission to Speak* upon the consequences of ambiguous loss rather than any specific cause. This strategy keeps my studio research open to a broad range of readings concerning themes of connection and community. It also offers greater potential for relating to an audience where diverse experiences of ambiguous loss may be triggered by a

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<sup>5</sup> Paula Smithard, "It's a Tenuous Line Between Sincerity & Sensationalism," *MAKE Magazine* 76, (June/July 1997): 29. Smithard reviewed Emin's 1997 exhibition *I Need Art Like I Need God*.

<sup>6</sup> Rosemary Betterton, "Why is my Art not as Good as me?: Femininity, Feminism and 'Life-Drawing' in Tracey Emin's Art" in *The Art of Tracey Emin*, eds. Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 26.



Figure 27-28: Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Hartford Wash: Washing, Tracks, Maintenance:Outside* (1973)  
documentation of performance at Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut, USA

spectrum of events including migration, divorce, or caring for a loved one suffering mental illness.

Just as importantly, however, relaying the details of my personal life puts a voyeuristic focus upon the events themselves that I do not wish to mobilize. Maura Reilly argues that we live in a culture obsessed with the presentation and consumption of the details of personal lives.<sup>7</sup> While Smithard suggests this is a ‘form of voyeurism’ that many of Emin’s works ‘play upon’,<sup>8</sup> she summarises her review of the artist’s work by stating that Emin ‘lost control of contextualising her own work’ with the task instead undertaken by ‘media hype’.<sup>9</sup> Emin has likened the exposure of issues from her personal life to raping herself.<sup>10</sup> Placing myself in such a position of vulnerability weakens my internalised claims to mastery and rattles my sense of control. Durden also writes of the ‘legitimis[ation]’ Emin’s ‘autobiographic narration’ provides to her work.<sup>11</sup> This is another form of validation that I do not want to employ in my research because it assigns authority to the event. My decision to withhold the details of what caused my sense of ambiguous loss also reflects the private rather than the public nature of the grieving process experienced in ambiguous loss, and allows me to address the subject with subtlety. By focusing attention on ambiguous loss and the assumptive world rather than the instigating trauma, it opens a wider space in which an art practice can contribute to the understanding of ambiguous loss.

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<sup>7</sup> Maura Reilly, “‘What you see is What I am’: Tracey Emin’s Self-Portraiture,” *Art and Australia* 83, no. 3 (Autumn 2011): 520.

<sup>8</sup> Smithard, “It’s a Tenuous Line Between Sincerity & Sensationalism,” 29.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Reilly, “‘What you see is What I am’: Tracey Emin’s Self-Portraiture,” 520. Reilly quotes Emin’s interview ‘Tracey Emin talks to Kirsty Wark’, BBC4, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Mark Durden, “The Authority of Authenticity: Tracey Emin,” *Parachute: Contemporary Art Magazine* 105, no.1-3 (January-March 2002): 28.

## **Mastery: Theoretical Contextualisation**

My exploration of the role of theoretical contextualisation in themes of mastery and control within an artwork includes looking at seriousness in art and its association with prestige and value. In their book *Art World Prestige: Arguing Cultural Value*, Timothy van Laar and Leonard Diepeveen discuss the concept of seriousness within art, its relationship to art theory and the use of both as a method for an artwork to make a claim on the concept of prestige.<sup>12</sup> Seriousness extends to notions of the professional, as opposed to the amateur artist, with the professional occupying a higher ‘unmarked category’.<sup>13</sup> For van Laar and Diepeveen the professional’s version of seriousness is associated with, amongst other qualities, ‘theoretical sophistication’ while the amateur’s version is associated with ‘trust, emotional expression, and sincerity’.<sup>14</sup> The ramifications of this for Emin’s work are reflected in what Reilly refers to as ‘the anti-Emin brigade’; a group of critics whose stance ‘speak[s] of a disdain for the emotional in favour of the intellectual, and contempt for frank representations of ‘real life’ over more abstract or theory-based work’.<sup>15</sup> In creating *Permission to Speak* I chose to not mobilize a theory-based conceptualization of the work but instead approached it as a piece based solely on intuitively-made decisions that were, at that time of making, not rationalised further. In precisely the same way that highlighting the event deflects mastery from the work to the situation, contextualising *Permission to Speak* through an association with seriousness and contemporary art theory enacts a

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<sup>12</sup> The authors define prestige as ‘a system of hierarchies of agreed-upon social value’ and discuss the concept in relation to art world ‘institutions, journals, critics, media, systems of representation, subject matters, affects, and the idea of art history itself’, Timothy Van Laar and Leonard Diepeveen, *Artworld Prestige: Arguing Cultural Value*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), viii and 5.

<sup>13</sup> Van Laar and Diepeveen, *Artworld Prestige: Arguing Cultural Value*, 51.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 45 and 50.

<sup>15</sup> Reilly, “‘What you see is What I am’: Tracey Emin’s Self-Portraiture,” 520.

validating scaffold that deflects mastery to art discourse. It dilutes the authority that my intuition holds, undermining my sense of control and mastery.

The practice of artist Lily van der Stokker is pertinent here.<sup>16</sup> Van der Stokker has critiqued the role of seriousness, theory and emotional content in art for over twenty years by presenting work filled with everyday ‘intimate thoughts’.<sup>17</sup> The style of her drawings and large wall paintings is reminiscent of stereotypical imagery made by a young girl. It commonly features flowers, clouds, doodles and text. For example, her text painting *Wonderful* (1993) [figure 29] consists of the title word painted on a background of clouds and flowers. Each letter of the bubble-written text is a different colour echoing the chorus of colours behind. The whole arrangement of clouds and flowers is surrounded by short lines that suggest an inner brightness radiating outwards. Her work conveys happiness. It demonstrates a childlike love of life and the enthusiastic belief, often lost in experiences of ambiguous loss, that the world is wonderful.

Although she creates work that draws from her experiences and focuses upon their emotional aspects, in discussing her practice van der Stokker stands in opposition to the angst-based, cause-and-effect contextualization adopted by Bourgeois and Emin. Instead, in a manner echoing her subject matter, van der Stokker takes a light-hearted attitude to the theoretical influences and rationalization of her work,

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<sup>16</sup> Van der Stokker is a Dutch artist, born in 1954 and based in New York and Amsterdam.

<sup>17</sup> Lily van der Stokker interviewed by Steel Stillman, “Lily van der Stokker: in the Studio,” *Art in America* 102, no. 8 (September 2014): 138.

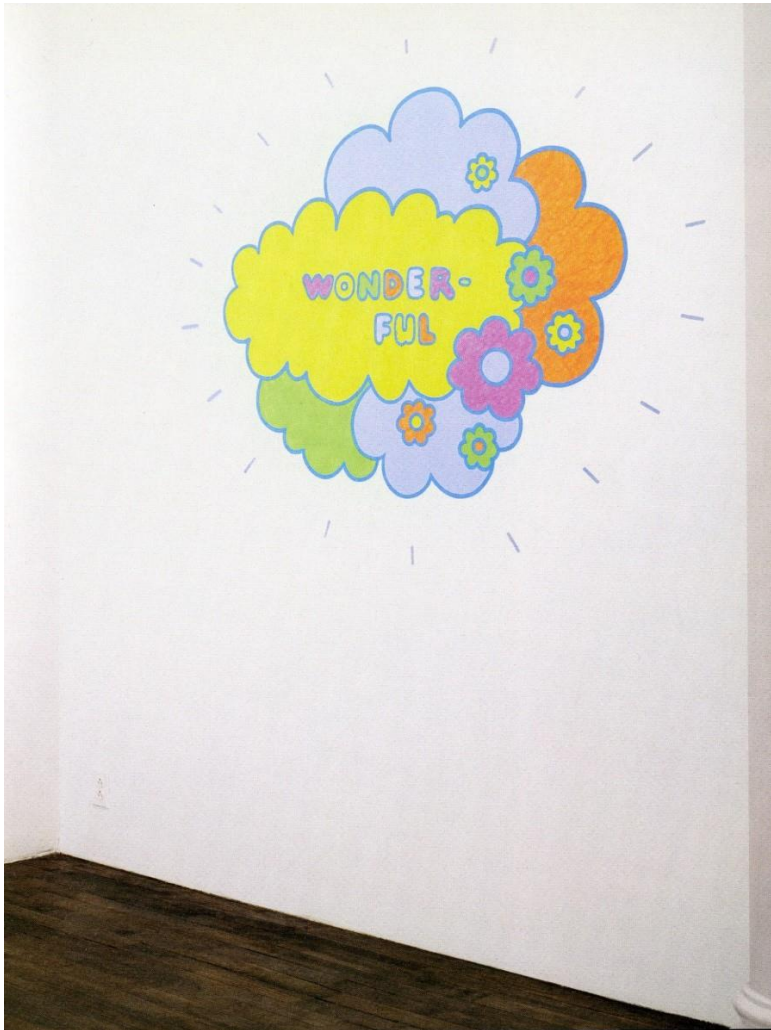


Figure 29: Lily van der Stokker, *Wonderful*, 1993  
acrylic paint on wall, 135 x 170 cm

claiming that she likes to ‘make things that have as little meaning as possible’.<sup>18</sup>

She summarizes the intent of her work by stating: ‘[t]here’s nothing deep about it’.<sup>19</sup> This rejection of depth in favor of simple joys is evident in her experience of opening philosopher Gilles Deleuze’s book *Difference and Repetition*. She relates:

On the first page he talks about his philosophy, and then he says, well, you can say a lot about it but you could also say that we have a very nice sunset today. I closed the book and said to myself: ‘Great. I will make a whole series about the nice weather’.<sup>20</sup>

Discussions of van der Stokker’s work acknowledge the preference for art world seriousness that the artist faced in her early career. Mirjam Westen observes that van der Stokker ‘had to overcome ... the fear of being found ridiculous’,<sup>21</sup> while Matthew Thompson describes van der Stokker’s presentations of ‘happiness, sentimentality, family, friendship, and girliness’ as being ‘intellectually taboo subjects’.<sup>22</sup> Early criticism disparaged the artist’s style as being reminiscent of ‘female hygiene products’<sup>23</sup> and made by someone on drugs.<sup>24</sup> Van der Stokker has responded to such comments by viewing them as compliments. Friendliness is important to both her practice and her life. Her desire for friendliness includes

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<sup>18</sup> Leo Koenig Inc., “Artist’s page” (Lily van der Stokker),

<http://www.leokoenig.com/exhibition/view/1956>, accessed January 31, 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Lily van der Stokker interviewed by Amy Kellner, “It’s Very Nice to be an Artist and People ask you Wonderful Things,” in *Friends and Family: Lily van der Stokker*, (Dijon: Les Presses du réel and Janvier, 2003), 7.

<sup>20</sup> Lily van der Stokker, “John Waters and Lily van der Stokker Interview” in *Lily van der Stokker: It Doesn’t Mean Anything but it Looks Good*, (London: Tate Publishing, 2010), 140.

<sup>21</sup> Mirjam Westen and Annabel Howland, “How Much Nerve Does it Take to Stand up for ‘Feminine Stupidity’?” *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry* 4, (2001): 25.

<sup>22</sup> Matthew Thompson, “I See Voices,” Aspen Art Museum, [http://old.aspenartmuseum.org/archive/archive\\_to\\_the\\_wall\\_thompson.html](http://old.aspenartmuseum.org/archive/archive_to_the_wall_thompson.html), accessed February 8, 2017.

<sup>23</sup> van der Stokker, “John Waters and Lily van der Stokker Interview,” 141.

<sup>24</sup> van der Stokker and Kellner, “It’s Very Nice to be an Artist and People ask you Wonderful Things,” 6.

making work that is conceptually accessible to a wide audience. She describes her joy in talking to gallery cleaners who were admiring her work because they could understand it, telling them: ““Well, I made it for you””.<sup>25</sup> Conceptual inaccessibility is an area that can be employed by artists as a method of generating prestige.<sup>26</sup> Theoretical complexity or specialised knowledge can be used to exclude and therefore provide a sense of privileged mastery. It validates the work, and in doing so diverts mastery from the work itself to an external source. Critic Jerry Saltz concurs, describing long wall labels that accompany art works as ‘a triumph of pedagogy over the object’.<sup>27</sup> While van der Stokker’s stance undermines the ‘solidly set’ rules of the art world and presents a desire for conceptual connectedness, my non-explicit and non-theoretical contextualisation of *Permission to Speak* in its exhibition is a method used to ascribe a sense of value to my own voice.<sup>28</sup> It stakes a claim for me as the arbiter of the criteria for mastery.

The materials and aesthetics of *Permission to Speak* refer to a similar self-defined mastery, but expressed through intuitive decision-making. Basing decisions on an inner sense of ‘just knowing’ or ‘it feels right’ is an expression of mastery. It demonstrates trust in the universe and what it offers. ‘Conscious reasoning’ is on the other hand the term used to describe non-intuitive decision-making, and is similar to theory or intellectualised rationalisation. It is a method of justification

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>26</sup> Van Laar and Diepeveen, *Artworld Prestige: Arguing Cultural Value*, 28.

<sup>27</sup> Jerry Saltz, Facebook entry posted March 10, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/jerry.saltz?fref=ts>, accessed March 10, 2015.

<sup>28</sup> While the art world appears to offer freedom of expression van der Stokker claims that the field ‘has its rules solidly set’. Lily van der Stokker, “My Answers to Your Questions,” in *Yayoi Kusama: Mirrored Years*, (Rotterdam: Les Presses Du Reel, 2009), 283.



for the self or for others: sound reasoning results in approval of the decision, assigning mastery to an external source.

### **Mastery: Materiality, Aesthetics and Text**

The materials I gathered for *Permission to Speak* were collected intuitively. They were not intentionally sourced for their symbolic content. However, as I made the work I became aware of the materials' important symbolic dimensions in relation to mastery and ambiguous loss. Men's flannelette pyjamas relay multiple and contrasting expressions of mastery. The jacket lapels, collar, and exterior breast pocket reference the ultimate expression of professional power clothing – the business suit. Although pyjama designers may have chosen this form to deliberately counteract associations with vulnerability, many of the pyjamas I collected from opportunity shops alluded to males in a vulnerable state.<sup>29</sup> A large number were labelled with the previous owner's name inferring that they had been worn by men who were either ill in hospital or confined to a nursing home that had communal laundering of clothes. Men's flannelette pyjamas also speak to the security of the assumptive world. They are, in all likelihood, worn more for comfort than fashion, suggesting night-time intimacy in a relationship that is long-term and secure. Flannelette relays associations with softness, comfort and enfolding security. Presented inside-out for *Permission to Speak*, the brightness of the fabric is diluted, reflecting the sense of 'colorless' associated with ambiguous loss.<sup>30</sup> The inside of the fabric also forms the exterior of the houses referencing notions of inside and outside, vulnerability and facade. Whether they are worn in intimate, long-standing relationships or in public situations involving health care

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<sup>29</sup> I collected old-fashioned, traditional style of men's pyjamas.

<sup>30</sup> Pauline Boss, *Loss, Trauma, and Resilience: Therapeutic Work with Ambiguous Loss*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2006), 74.

where clothing is a necessary practicality, flannelette pyjamas are a utilitarian cover worn to provide comfort and protection to the person underneath. In referencing notions of mastery, vulnerability and the fragile security of an assumptive world, pyjamas are an ideal material choice for my research.

Using discarded domestic cardboard also began as an intuitive choice. As with the pyjamas, working with the material revealed symbolic associations. The two-dimensional surface of the material, in its flatness, is reminiscent of the ‘psychological numbness’ that is often induced by ‘sudden and unexpected events’.<sup>31</sup> Unprinted cardboard also suggests the colourless world of ambiguous loss. The more I worked with this material, I nonetheless began to appreciate the inherent beauty to be found in its subtle colour variations of browns, greys, beiges and whites. This recognition of beauty in objects deemed to be colourless and worthless symbolized acknowledgement of a fledging sense of value to be found in a post-assumptive world. It also offset the sense of ‘robotic’ action that Boss claims a lack of meaning can entail.<sup>32</sup>

Much of the cardboard I used originally packaged food, offering parallels between the card, food, security and ambiguous loss. As discussed in chapter one, food can be a source of security, providing a reassuring link to family and culture.<sup>33</sup>

Reflecting this connection, and reminiscent of a collector who hierarchizes the objects in their collection, cardboard from Uncle Toby’s Oats boxes was my

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<sup>31</sup> Richard G. Tedeschi and Lawrence G. Calhoun, “Posttraumatic Growth: Conceptual Foundations and Empirical Evidence,” *Psychological Inquiry* 15, no. 1 (2004): 2.

<sup>32</sup> Boss, *Loss, Trauma, and Resilience: Therapeutic Work with Ambiguous Loss*, 74.

<sup>33</sup> Howard R. Winokuer and Darcy L. Harris, *Principles and Practice of Grief Counseling*, (New York: Springer Publishing Co., 2012), 99. <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.monash.edu.au/lib/monash/detail.action?docID=877105>, accessed February 27, 2018.

favourite. This brand of porridge was served in my childhood, and references food as a source of comfort. But while artist Kurt Schwitters' collections of food packaging are viewed as 'a sublimation of private longings and grievings', my collection of Uncle Toby's Oat boxes was informed by simple and intuitive pragmatics.<sup>34</sup> I liked the rarity of their whiteness and the slightly fluffy texture of the interior card.

The aesthetics of *Permission to Speak* similarly have cultural and symbolic connotations that became apparent as I developed the work. As I made the collection of houses, I noted with interest that many of the pyjamas were patterned with grids. Aesthetically, this pattern alluded to the bricks and weatherboards of the suburban homes I was creating and so perfectly suited my purposes [figure 30]. But a gridded pattern in an artwork can hold implications beyond the surface aesthetic. Bourgeois speaks of the peacefulness and completeness of the grid in which 'everything has a place, everything is welcome', a notion that echoes the harmony-seeking sentiments of my work.<sup>35</sup> Rosalind Krauss's description of the grid as 'antinatural, antimimetic, antireal' allows connections to be drawn with the grid as a deliberate presentation of control.<sup>36</sup> This is a possible rationale for the grid as a favoured pattern of men's pyjama designers who may employ it to

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<sup>34</sup> Roger Cardinal, "Collecting and Collage-Making: The Case of Kurt Schwitters" in *The Cultures of Collecting: From Elvis to Antiques Why do we Collect Things?* eds. John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1994), 95.

<sup>35</sup> Louise Bourgeois quoted in *Heide Education: Louise Bourgeois at Heide*, (Bulleen: Heide Museum of Modern Art, 2013), 17.  
[https://www.heide.com.au/sites/default/files/HeideEdResourceLouiseBourgeoisAtHeide\\_opt.pdf](https://www.heide.com.au/sites/default/files/HeideEdResourceLouiseBourgeoisAtHeide_opt.pdf), accessed October 29, 2015.

<sup>36</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October* 9, (Summer 1979): 50.



Figure 30: Michelle Neal, *Permission to Speak*, 2012 (detail)

counter associations with vulnerability that the clothing may portray.

The precise and structured lines of the grid also parry with the amateur aesthetic of *Permission to Speak*. Nothing is measured or cut with precision in my work: a subtle method of not presenting overt evidence of control. The work also references my amateur artist's aesthetic. In presenting scraps of fabric glued onto cardboard bases, *Permission to Speak* directly references the type of artwork I made as a young girl. This too was an intuitive move but one later examined critically. Until recently, girls belonged to a segment of society that was often derided for lacking mastery. Statements such as 'throws like a girl' and 'don't be such a girl', while now often condemned, were commonly-used and accepted forms of insult. The art world promoted a similar disdain for this demographic. Van der Stokker was told early in her career that her work looked 'like it had been made by a teenage girl, and that it wasn't art'.<sup>37</sup> John Waters notes her art was thought of as 'almost artistically incorrect girliness'.<sup>38</sup> While *Permission to Speak* is based instinctively upon my amateur artist's aesthetics, Van der Stokker's style is influenced by conceptually-based motives that include the tenets of feminist art.<sup>39</sup> On a similar note, her paintings are executed with the controlled and professional skills of an adult. Van der Stokker's expansive wall works feature flatly-applied paint that does not slip outside the lines. In contrast, *Permission to Speak* draws upon aesthetics of girlhood for instinctive rather than conceptually-

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<sup>37</sup> van der Stokker and Stillman, "Lily van der Stokker: in the Studio," 138.

<sup>38</sup> John Waters interviewed by Charles Esche, "As Pink as Possible," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry* 4, (2001): 14.

<sup>39</sup> see van der Stokker and Stillman, "Lily van der Stokker: in the Studio," 139.

based reasons.

References to pre-adolescent girls' art can also be understood through its associations with a transitional age bracket. Pre-adolescence is the ending of childhood before the beginning of a time involving a new mastery of adult conventions and mores. Genevieve Baily focuses upon early adolescence in her 2010 documentary film *I am Eleven*. In this work, the filmmaker interviews eleven-year-olds worldwide to record their interests and outlook on life. Bailey chose eleven-year-olds to reflect her personal memory of this age as being a time filled with optimism and possibility. These qualities echo the belief in benevolence promoted in an assumptive world. Pre-adolescence also alludes to the in-between time of twilight: it is both a dusk and a dawn, an ending and a beginning. If the experience of ambiguous loss triggers the end of an assumptive world it must also herald a new beginning. Using an aesthetic from my twilight period of childhood art-making pays homage to the transitional period between the loss of an assumptive world and the acceptance of a new reality.

The final area I will discuss relating to intuition, mastery and aesthetics is my use of image and descriptive text. The image and text arrangement in *Permission to Speak* is reminiscent of children's picture books, and opens up a familiar pathway for connection with the audience. While this format was chosen instinctively, there is also an authority associated with the annotated image. The words 'this is' that begin many of the text panels discourages speculation of other realities and casts

my views as facts. It sets a tone that is masterly and confident. For example: ‘This is Connor’s house. His mum just had another baby’ [figure 31]. As reflections of ‘the way things are’ the text presents control over my world. It also presents me as an insider privy to specialized knowledge, thereby subtly making a claim to authority. My use of a manual typewriter and pages cut from an old-fashioned accounts ledger, however, reference a nostalgic authority whose time has passed.

In the next section I build on the ideas of connection and control, focusing upon the security that a sense of connection provides in relation to three areas: community, everyday shared experience and reconnection with the optimistic in a fractured assumptive world.

### **Mastery: Connection**

Being connected to others is an important strategy in coping with ambiguous loss.

In cases of dementia, caregivers and sufferers are encouraged to modify their method of connection according to the stage of the disease: using verbal connection in the early stages and touch and tone of voice in the latter.<sup>40</sup>

Connection is also an important coping strategy for refugees and exiles experiencing ambiguous loss. Being connected to others helps arrivals adapt to life in a new homeland.<sup>41</sup> Writing of her own experience of migration, Tumarkin speaks of connection and disconnection in a metaphorical sense. She writes of feeling disconnected within the self, claiming that fragmentation is a well-known

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<sup>40</sup> Alzheimer Society of Canada, “Ambiguous Loss and Grief: A Resource for Health-Care Providers,” Alzheimer Society of Canada, (Toronto, Ontario, 2013): 5.

<sup>41</sup> Rose M. Pérez, “Cuba No; Miami Sí: Cuban Americans Coping with Ambiguous Loss,” *Journal of Human Behaviour in the Social Environment* 25, no. 1 (2015): 64.

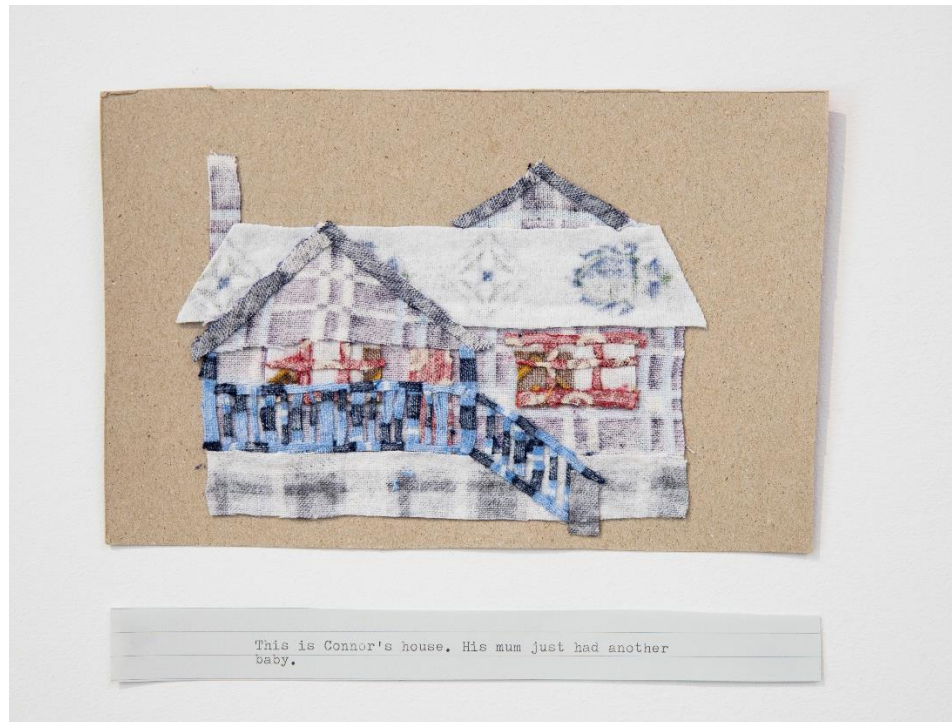


Figure 31: Michelle Neal, *Permission to Speak*, 2012 (detail)  
photo: Clare Rae



experience of first-generation migrants who carry within them ‘pieces of past worlds’.<sup>42</sup>

*Permission to Speak* explores notions of both connection and disconnection. It presents my interpersonal connections with my neighbourhood community by detailing in the text intimate knowledge, observations and shared experiences collected over a sustained period of time. The text also presents connection through my use of the subjective pronouns ‘we’, ‘us’ and ‘our’. For example: ‘This is the drug house. We saw the police raid it one morning’ [figure 32]. This plural viewpoint connects me to unidentified others and suggests a sense of my belonging to a unit that speaks with a collective voice. The importance of a sense of belonging is reflected in author Rachel Cusk’s description of the impact of her marriage breakdown on her sense of connection to idealised images of the family unit. Her words capture the feeling of becoming an outsider after she is disconnected from ‘her normal’ assumptive world. Describing her experience of attending a Christmas carol service with her two children she writes:

... I watch the other families. I watch mother and father and children. And I see it so clearly, as though I were looking in at them through a brightly lit window from the darkness outside; see the story in which they play their roles, their parts, with the whole world as a backdrop. We’re not part of

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<sup>42</sup> Maria Tumarkin, “In her Nature Sally Smart,” (Waterloo: Breenspace, 2011), [http://www.sallysmart.com/docs/flyer\\_web.pdf](http://www.sallysmart.com/docs/flyer_web.pdf), accessed November 25, 2015. Maria Tumarkin’s catalogue essay was for the exhibition ‘In her Nature: Sally Smart’, Breenspace, Sydney, NSW, Australia, 24 February 2011 to 26 March 2011.



Figure 32: Michelle Neal, *Permission to Speak*, 2012 (detail)  
photo: Clare Rae

that story anymore, my children and I. We belong more to the world, in all its risky disorder, its fragmentation, its freedom.<sup>43</sup>

The sentiment Cusk describes is reminiscent of ‘what should have been, could have been, or might have been’ that is a common reflection of those experiencing ambiguous loss.<sup>44</sup> Cusk’s experience of feeling disconnected from her normal environment, is a state echoed by Tumarkin who writes of feeling split from a ‘natural’ concept of home as a new migrant:

For years after my family’s arrival in Australia, I was fixated on all those around me who did not think twice about being at home – so utterly natural did it feel to them. I looked at them as you would look at a different species, not with envy, not with anger, but with an intense and almost anthropological curiosity.<sup>45</sup>

*Permission to Speak* plays with both connection and disconnection. While the work portrays a neighbourhood, each house is presented on its own cardboard support separate from its neighbor to highlight a physical disconnection. The details contained in the text act as portals to ‘let the viewer in’ to each house, but the drawings, while flirtatiously offering to do so, deny entry. The windows of the houses are opaque, the flannelette fabric presents a softness that may not be touched, and the representations of the house facades give no hint of three-

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<sup>43</sup> Rachel Cusk, *Aftermath: On Marriage and Separation* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 2012), 27.

<sup>44</sup> Darcy L. Harris and Eunice Gorman, “Grief from a Broader Perspective; Nonfinite Loss, Ambiguous Loss, and Chronic Sorrow” in *Counting our Losses: Reflecting on Change, Loss, and Transition in Everyday Life*, (New York: Taylor and Francis Group, 2011), 33; Elizabeth J. Bruce and Cynthia L. Schultz, *Nonfinite Loss and Grief: A Psychoeducational Approach* (Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., 2001), 9.

<sup>45</sup> Tumarkin, “In her Nature Sally Smart”, [http://www.sallysmart.com/docs/flyer\\_web.pdf](http://www.sallysmart.com/docs/flyer_web.pdf).

dimensionality [figure 33]. Even my choice not to stitch the fabric reflects my reluctance to give another dimension to the works; to connect with another side. In contrast to the descriptions of my neighbours' houses, the text panel for my own home is simply labelled with the words 'this is our house' [figure 34]. This text panel offers the least information to the viewer about the house that I know the most, highlighting the juxtaposition between connection and disconnection, inside and outside knowledge. In the limited presentation of my life in relation to my neighbours' houses I present an identity not ready for public viewing.

The buoyant outlook presented in the text of *Permission to Speak* acknowledges my desire for a reconnection with a world that held some of the characteristics of the assumptive world I had lost. That is, I wanted to distance myself from the 'unsafe, negative and threatening' world which I found myself emotionally inhabiting, and sought the optimistic in my new reality.<sup>46</sup> The idea of 'living positively' with loss is advised when coping with dementia-related ambiguous loss.<sup>47</sup> It is suggested that sufferers and care-givers focus on the positive, on what can be done rather than on what cannot.<sup>48</sup> The text of *Permission to Speak* reflects this focus on the positive. An optimistic outlook is similarly reflected in van der Stokker's painted texts that contain proclamations such as 'don't worry nothing will happen' and 'I like everything' [figures 35-36]. Van der Stokker's text

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<sup>46</sup> Darcy Harris writes that the loss of an assumptive world can result in 'the world that was once believed to be benevolent and meaningful is ... seen as unsafe, negative, and threatening'. Darcy L. Harris, "Meaning Making and the Assumptive World in Nondeath Loss" in *Counting our Losses: Reflecting on Change, Loss, and Transition in Everyday Life*, (New York: Taylor and Francis Group, 2011), 241.

<sup>47</sup> "Ambiguous Loss and Grief: A Resource for Health-Care Providers," 14.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.



Figure 33: Michelle Neal, *Permission to Speak*, 2012 (detail)  
photo: Clare Rae



Figure 34: Michelle Neal, *Permission to Speak*, 2012 (detail)  
photo: Clare Rae

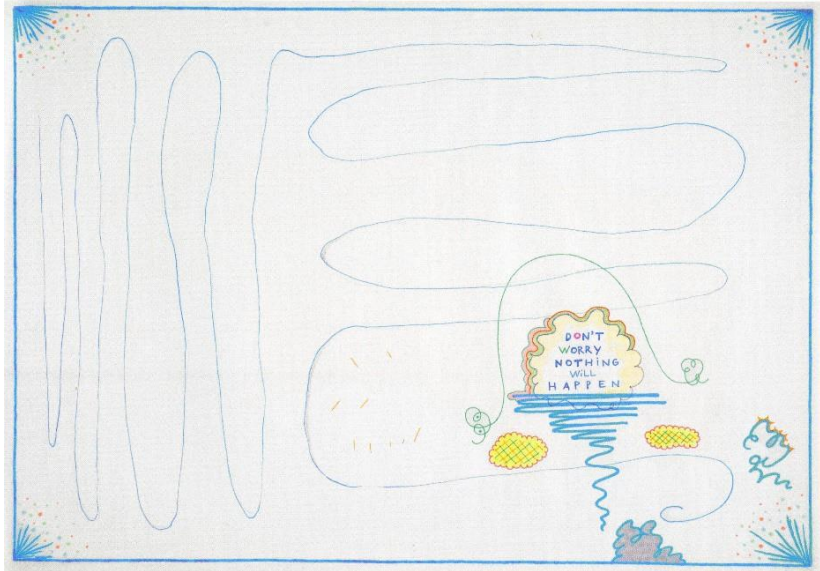


Figure 35: Lily van der Stokker, *Don't Worry Nothing Will Happen*, 1992  
marker on paper, 29.3 x 41.8 cm



Figure 36: Lily van der Stokker *I Like Everything*, 1995  
marker on paper, 20.6 x 29.6 cm

works have been described as being written in ‘a buoyant greeting card way,’ and while this description may be viewed as disparaging the artist’s tone, greeting cards are vehicles with which expressions of endearment, care and kindness are conveyed.<sup>49</sup> Greeting cards carry wishes for the bestowment of all the good things that belong to an idealised assumptive world. Pertinently, however, they speak in a subtly authoritarian tone: have a happy day.

Sharing stories is a way of connecting – to others, to the past and to ambitions for the future. By sharing a story of my neighbourhood, *Permission to Speak* not only aims to connect with viewers but to do so via everyday information. This holds similarities with van der Stokker’s text-based works that invoke triviality and small talk as subject matter. For example, the artist commonly uses the weather as a theme, relying upon the universality of the topic as a mode of connection. This is demonstrated in works such as *Not Bad This Weather* (2010), [figure 37] a wall-painting that uses the words of the title as subject matter. Other works present everyday observations with which viewers can empathise. These include statements such as ‘we are giving a large party because we renovated part of our house’, and ‘a nice new wintercoat I should go shop for this already in August because in September all the good sizes are gone’ [figures 38 and 39]. Van der Stokker’s works are based on her experiences, which she contends are ‘not so different from anyone else’s’.<sup>50</sup> This is at variance with Bourgeois’ *Couple I*

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<sup>49</sup> Leo Koenig Inc. “Artist’s page, Lily van der Stokker”  
<http://www.leokoenig.com/exhibition/view/1956>.

<sup>50</sup> van der Stokker and Stillman, “Lily van der Stokker: in the Studio,” 139.





Figure 37: Lily van der Stokker, *Not Bad This Weather*, 2010  
acrylic paint on wall and mixed media, 143 x 173 x 40 cm

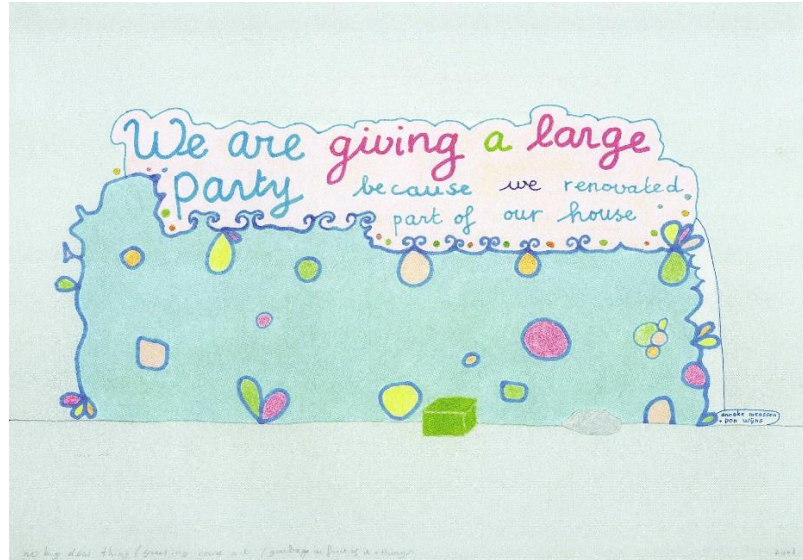


Figure 38: Lily van der Stokker *Party*, design for wall painting with objects, 2003  
colour pencil, marker and pen on paper, 20.4 x 29.3 cm



Figure 39: Lily van der Stokker, *A Nice New Winter Coat*, 2010  
acrylic paint on wall and mixed media, 227 x 755 x 78 cm

(1996) and Emin's *It Always Hurts* (2005) [figures 40-41], which draw supposedly universal themes from the uniqueness of the artists' experiences. While *Permission to Speak* shares commonalities with the work of van der Stokker, such as tone of voice, domestic concerns, and a simplistic aesthetic as methods of connection, it differs markedly from her work in scale. Van der Stokker often scales-up her small drawings into large wall paintings. However, each of the drawings in *Permission to Speak* are hand-sized, reflecting my desire to connect with an audience by requiring them to be in intimate proximity to the work. A viewer of *Permission to Speak* commented that 'it feels like it's giving you a hug'. In eliciting this response, the work emits a sense of security through the suggestion of a relationship based on accessibility and openness.

## **Conclusion**

Focusing upon the security to be found in a sense of mastery, *Permission to Speak* used collecting, materials, and aesthetics to explore ambiguous loss and the assumptive world. Although the work draws upon personal experience, this chapter argued that providing details of the event as a method of contextualisation can result in a loss of psychological control and may distract from the core issue of ambiguous loss. The chapter proposed intuition as a masterful form of contextualisation, and demonstrated that conscious reasoning used to validate the choice of materials, aesthetics and text risked deferring the authority of intuition to other discourses and meanings. It was important that a subtle expression of optimism prevailed in this work. Chapter three extends this thread of optimism. Using two works, *Dreams* and *Home Made*, I look at the security to be found in an assumptive world and its relationship to a collective ideal. While *Permission to*

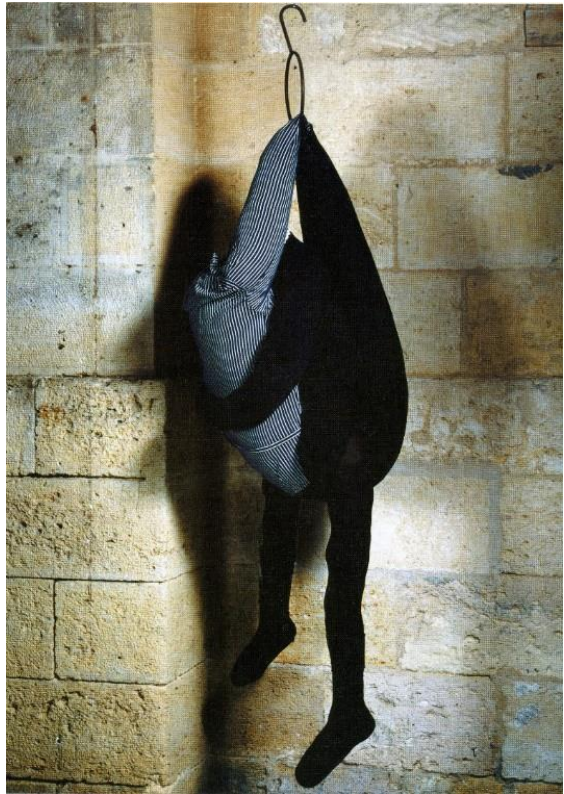


Figure 40: Louise Bourgeois, *Couple 1*, 1996  
fabric, hanging piece, 203.2 x 68.5 x 71.1 cm



Figure 41: Tracey Emin, *It Always Hurts*, 2005  
embroidered blanket, 286 x 222 cm

*Speak* explored the memory of an assumptive world that I had occupied, these next works focus upon societal representations of an assumptive world. By using images of the ideal home, expressed through real estate advertisements and mass-produced craft kits, the works explore the sense of security offered by mirrored imaging and a sense of normalcy.

## Chapter 3

### Home

In the previous chapter I looked at how a desire for control and mastery in the wake of ambiguous loss can be explored in an art practice through collecting, contextualization, materiality, subject, aesthetics, and the use of text. In this chapter I develop these ideas further through two works: *Dreams* (2012) and *Home Made* (2016). These works focus on security and the assumptive world, and examine their relationship to notions of the ideal home. First, using the medium of found photographic images, and then using longstitching, I investigate issues of permanence, constancy and continuity; connection; and internal and external worlds. Reflecting my lived experience, my artwork and exegesis centre on, and are limited to, home in a Western sense.<sup>1</sup> My research focus is further narrowed to the metropolitan suburban home as a representation of a comfort zone; in their familiarity, the suburbs foster a sense of security in the found imagery on which I draw and within me.

#### Home: The Ideal and *Dreams*

In *Dreams* I reconfigure ideals of the aspirational home by using images cut from glossy real estate agencies' promotional booklets to create three new collaged homes [figures 42-44].<sup>2</sup> My use of these photographs contrasts with the images I created for *Permission to Speak*. In *Dreams*, my own home is not represented.

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Chapman and Jenny Hockey, "The Ideal Home as it is Imagined and as it is Lived," in *Ideal Homes?: Social Change and Domestic Life*, eds., Tony Chapman and Jenny Hockey, (London: Routledge, 1999), 1 - 13

<sup>2</sup> These booklets are created by real estate agents to promote the properties they have for sale each week.





Figure 42: Michelle Neal, from the series *Dreams*, 2012  
collaged real estate brochures on paper; 50 x 65 cm



Figure 43: Michelle Neal, from the series *Dreams*, 2012  
collaged real estate brochures on paper; 50 x 65 cm



Figure 44: Michelle Neal, from the series *Dreams*, 2012  
collaged real estate brochures on paper; 50 x 65 cm



Nor is intimate knowledge shared via text. Also absent in the works is the appeal of the soft tactility of flannelette. Consequently, the glossily-printed photographs in *Dreams* lack the candour and warmth of the images in *Permission to Speak*. Instead *Dreams* draws on the visual tactics that real estate agents use to stimulate desire and to encourage buyer identification with the property for sale as their dream home. Most of the sourced images feature the property's exterior, which is photographed either on a sunny day when the skies are blue or at dusk when the house is aglow with warm interior lighting. Wherever possible, unattractive features such as power lines or neighbouring properties are cropped out. To promote customers' identification with the interior space, agents often employ professional home stylists to 'neutralise' and 'de-personalise' the homes prior to sale by removing objects like family photographs.<sup>3</sup>

The collaged images in *Dreams* are highly-designed works set on large expanses of white paper. The careful placement of elements in the collages references 'the designer life,' as each house is presented as a 'hero shot'; a nod to the aspirational images of advertising. Tony Chapman and Jenny Hockey highlight that what constitutes 'the ideal home' changes with circumstances and reflects wider societal patterns and fashions.<sup>4</sup> These can include, as Shelley Mallett notes, what constitutes 'the good life'.<sup>5</sup> Reflecting this, *Dreams* is a presentation of status. Each home is set upon the summit of a hill, positioning the viewer at a low vantage point and suggesting that the houses are something to which viewers can aspire.

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<sup>3</sup> Sandy Smith, "How to style Your Home for a Quick Sale and a Better Price," Domain, <http://www.domain.com.au/advice/how-to-style-your-home-for-a-quick-sale-and-a-better-price-20150929-gjx0qw/>, accessed June 24, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Chapman and Hockey, "The Ideal Home as it is Imagined and as it is Lived," 4.

<sup>5</sup> Shelley Mallett, "Understanding Home: A Critical Review of the Literature," *The Sociological Review* 52, no.1, (2004): 68.

Multiple garages imply the ownership of multiple cars and wide blocks of land are dotted with manicured gardens and areas of lawn. The singular and separate properties in *Dreams* are emblematic of research undertaken in Australia, Britain and the USA, which shows that ‘people from diverse backgrounds express a consistent preference for a free-standing house with a yard and occupied by a single family’.<sup>6</sup>

However, as with ambiguous loss, initial impressions can offer an appearance of togetherness that does not necessarily exist. It is with a cursory viewing only that the collaged houses in *Dreams* appear as aspirational ‘dream homes’. With close inspection nothing quite fits together; perspectives are skewed, staircases lead to nowhere, gardens grow in front of garage doors. The reworked collection of ‘ideal home’ fragments suggest an over-compensation, an excessive attempt at constructing an ideal world. The fragments represent multiple angles, suggesting altered and adjusted perspectives that must be negotiated and accommodated following loss of an assumptive world. The multi-levels of the houses and the multitude of stairs in each of the works foster a sense of moving through the emotional experience of ambiguous loss. This notion of emotional movement, both up and down, is experienced in a world where stability has been rocked, and reflects Imogen Racz’s claim that staircases are ‘places to be traversed in order to arrive somewhere else’.<sup>7</sup> In *Dreams*, however, ascent of the staircases often leads to a brick wall, while descent can end mid-air with a storey-high drop to the

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<sup>6</sup> Mallett, “Understanding Home: A Critical Review of the Literature,” 67. Mallett references J. D. Porteous, “Home: The Territorial Core,” *Geographical Review* 66, no. 4, (1976): 383 – 390; I. Cieraad, “Introduction: Anthropology at Home,” in *At Home: An Anthropology of Domestic Space*, ed., I. Cieraad, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press 1999).

<sup>7</sup> Imogen Racz, *Art and the Home: Comfort, Alienation and the Everyday* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2015), 20.

ground below. Similarly, impairment of emotional movement is suggested by the blocked garage doors that prevent the entry or exit of cars.

In combining multiple houses, *Dreams* raises questions of where and what is home. This is an issue that arises in situations of divorce and ambiguous loss, where children may occupy more than one house and have to renavigate their definition of home. In her article ‘Understanding home: a critical review of the literature’, Mallett examines the concept of home across disciplines asserting there are ‘complex and diverse lived experience(s)’ of the term.<sup>8</sup> Mallett refers to the relationship of home to identity, gender, homeland, and ‘being-at-home’ as a phenomenological activity. The interchangeability, often present in the literature, of the terms ‘house’ and ‘home’ is also noted. While the commingling of the two terms can be a deliberate method employed to meld and favourably embed the concepts with one another, home and house are often invoked by writers ‘uncritically’.<sup>9</sup> Mallett reports that it is common to bind notions of home with a physical structure and notes this approach is ‘one-dimensional’.<sup>10</sup> She conversely presents claims for home as ‘multi-layered’ and ‘multi-dimensional’ involving connotations of family, refuge, and privacy.<sup>11</sup> *Dreams* and my following work, *Home Made*, use these embedded cultural references and implied inferences for

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<sup>8</sup> Mallett, “Understanding Home: A Critical Review of the Literature,” 64.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 66. Mallett also notes the inclusion of the term ‘family’ by governments wishing to bind all three concepts.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 68. Mallett references M. Douglas, “The Idea of a Home: A Kind of Space,” *Social Research* 58, no.1, (1991): 287–307; N. Rapport and A. Dawson, *Migrants of Identity: Perceptions of Home in a World of Movement*, (Oxford: Berg, 1998); J. D. Porteous, “Home: The Territorial Core,” *Geographical Review* 66, no. 4, (1976): 383–390.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 68. Mallett references S. Bowlby, S. Gregory, and L. McKie, ““Doing home’: Patriarchy, caring, and space,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 20, no. 3 (1997): 343–350; J. Wardhaugh, “The Unaccommodated Woman: Home, Homelessness and Identity,” *Sociological Review* 47, no. 1, (1999): 91–109; P. Somerville, “Homelessness and the Meaning of Home: Rooflessness and Rootlessness?,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 16, no. 4, (1992): 529–539.

creative tension involving the ideal and the façade. Presenting only house exteriors, the works also allude to the veneer of coping with the grief of ambiguous loss.

## **Home: The Ideal and *Home Made***

*Home Made* consists of a self-designed and sewn longstitch of my house inserted into a streetscape I created by joining individual found longstitch tapestries together [figures 45-46]. The individual tapestries were completed by unknown stitchers and found mostly in the dusty storage bins of opportunity shops [figure 47]. My selection criteria for the longstitch kits stipulated that the house design had to show the façade only and that this sat square to the viewer. With no catalogue of designs to choose from, my choices were largely determined by the random chance of op shop hunting, similar to the experience of pyjama collecting described in chapter two. The longstitches I chose were created initially from kits, the majority of which were manufactured by textile firm Semco.<sup>12</sup> Semco began operating in Melbourne in 1907 and was a ‘major supplier of materials and designs for women’s fancywork in Victoria from 1915 onwards’.<sup>13</sup> The company has historically aligned itself with the dream of the ideal home. In 1930 it sponsored a needlework competition in Tasmania’s *The Ideal Home Exhibition*, and enjoyed

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<sup>12</sup> Semco was taken over by Coats in 1983 and renamed Coats-Semco Pty Ltd (It later become Coats Patons (Australia) Ltd.) While Coats-Semco Pty Ltd is the manufacturing name attributed in the fine print on the packaging of the kits, the featured brand name is Semco. Reflecting the widespread use of this name for the kits by consumers and marketplace, I adopt the Semco name when referring to the kits throughout this exegesis.

<sup>13</sup> Ruth Lee, “‘Our Fingers Were Never Idle’: Women and Domestic Craft in the Geelong Region, 1900-1960,” (MA Thesis, Faculty of Arts, Deakin University, 1993), 134.  
<http://dro.deakin.edu.au/eserv/DU:30023336/lee-ourfingerswere-1993.pdf>, accessed May 10, 2016.



Figure 45: Michelle Neal, *Home Made*, 2016  
found longstitch embroideries and original embroidery  
31 x 214 cm  
photo: Clare Rae



Figure 46: Michelle Neal, work in progress (detail) *Home Made*, 2016



Figure 47: Stitchers unknown, found longstitch embroideries  
each work approx. 27 cm diameter

coverage in the Australian press that linked the company to aspirations of domestic perfection. One commentator on this exhibition described the dream of the ideal home: ‘One thing is certain, namely, that an ideal home should contain all that is essential to the mental and physical comfort and happiness of its inmates’.<sup>14</sup> Semco embroidery kits encouraged its largely female target audience to find comfort and happiness in beautifying their homes and personalising them with something handmade.

The range of Semco longstitch kits used in my own work was created in Australia in the 1980s and 1990s, and sold through craft shops and department stores. Despite Semco’s use of the tag line ‘long stitch originals’, the kits were designed to produce a uniform result across all makers. Each kit included a photo of the completed longstitch that could be used as both a guiding reference and an aspirational image. Also included was a black and white design with areas numbered to correlate with similarly numbered lengths of coloured wool that could be threaded into a supplied shade sorter for ease of use. There was a piece of canvas onto which the outline of the image had been printed, a needle and rudimentary illustrated instructions on how to do the two or three simple stitches required to complete the work [figure 48]. The simplistic designs of *Home Made* position the work between the childlike images represented in *Permission to Speak*

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<sup>14</sup> Anon. “The Ideal Home,” *Examiner*, Launceston, Tasmania, May 27, 1930, p. 11, [http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/51664181?searchTerm=%28%28Semco%20Art%20Needlework%20Pty.%20Ltd.%29%29%20NOT%20exact\\_creator:%22Semco%20Art%20Needlework%20Pty.%20Ltd.%22%20NOT%20exact\\_subject:%22Semco%20Art%20Needlework%20Pty.%20Ltd.%22&searchLimits=#](http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/51664181?searchTerm=%28%28Semco%20Art%20Needlework%20Pty.%20Ltd.%29%29%20NOT%20exact_creator:%22Semco%20Art%20Needlework%20Pty.%20Ltd.%22%20NOT%20exact_subject:%22Semco%20Art%20Needlework%20Pty.%20Ltd.%22&searchLimits=#), accessed May 10, 2016.





Figure 48: Semco Longstitch Kit



and the realistic images of *Dreams*. While the use of photographic images to construct *Dreams* lends a realistic representation of life in a ruptured assumptive world to the work, the simplistic house designs of *Home Made* reference an assumptive world imbued with simplicity. In this, they speak to the dream of life unaffected by ambiguous loss.

Instructive sewing patterns, and in particular those made by Semco, have attracted the attention of other scholars and artists. Fiona Hackney discussed the role played by instructive ‘home craft’ patterns provided in 1920s and 1930s women’s magazines. She notes that these magazines ‘endorsed a handicrafts ethos of integrating “making” into everyday life’ through the provision of ‘accessible’ patterns that were ‘Written by named experts, with ... clear instructions, diagrams, step-by-step photographs, transfers, and colourful visualizations’.<sup>15</sup> Ruth Lee’s research examines the important role Semco played in women’s domestic crafts. Her focus from the company’s beginnings in 1907 to the 1960s precludes discussion of longstitches, but it does address consumer preferences for Semco embroidery patterns featuring house and garden designs. According to Lee, these designs presented ‘a static world ... intensely feminine, reflecting a nostalgic view of a domestic idyll’.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Fiona Hackney, “Use Your Hands for Happiness: Home Craft and Make-do-and-Mend in British Women’s Magazines in the 1920s and 1930s,” *Journal of Design History* 19, no. 1, (2006): 25.

<sup>16</sup> Lee, “‘Our Fingers Were Never Idle’: Women and Domestic Craft in the Geelong Region, 1900-1960,” 141.

In contrast, Adelaide-based artist and art theorist Sera Waters explores the nationalistic idealisation of the Australian landscape in Semco longstitches.<sup>17</sup> Waters' artwork, *Paradise tampering: The house fire*, (2010) depicts her intervention into the Semco kit no. 3095, *The Manor* [figure 49]. The original image in this kit is of a two-story brick dwelling in an established garden [figure 50]. Waters' intervention consists of stitching a raging fire visible through the house's windows, erupting through the roof and filling the sky above with flames and clouds of smoke. Waters' work reflects her interest in 'darker narratives' and in this, it differs from my own.<sup>18</sup> Coincidentally, I began *Home Made* using the same Semco pattern as Waters: *The Manor*. Rather than intervening in the image to explore a dark theme, I used the image to explore themes of community, security and happiness.

The work of Melbourne-based artist Matthew de Moiser shares a close thematic alignment to my work but differs in its conceptual intent. His series *Home Sweet Home* (2010) consists of five Semco longstitches that began as found works depicting landscape [figures 51-55]. Into these found images, de Moiser has stitched iconic modernist homes. For example, into the sheep grazing and gumtree-dominated rural landscape of Semco kit no. 3104 *Afternoon Reflections*, de Moiser has stitched 'one of the most significant architectural projects constructed'; Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye, located in France [figure 56 - 57].<sup>19</sup> His work *Atherton*

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<sup>17</sup> Sera Waters, "Inside the Outback: An Exploration of Domesticated Landscapes in Semco's Long Stitch Originals Series of the 1980s," *Craft + Design Enquiry* 7, (2015): 27-48.

<sup>18</sup> Sera Waters, "Lecturer Profile: Sera Waters," Adelaide Central School of Art, 2013, <http://www.acsa.sa.edu.au/the-school/staff/academic-staff/sera-waters/>, accessed June 29, 2016.

<sup>19</sup> William Feuerman, "Sublime Design: Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye," *The Conversation*, <http://theconversation.com/sublime-design-le-corbusiers-villa-savoye-26625>, accessed July 15, 2016.



Figure 49: Sera Waters, *Paradise tampering: The house fire*, 2010  
found longstitch, wool, 40 x 40 cm



Figure 50: Stitcher unknown, Semco kit no. 3095, *The Manor*  
long stitch embroidery; mount 38 x 38 cm



Figures 51-55: Matthew de Moiser, *Home Sweet Home* (series) 2010  
longstitch embroidery, each work 47 x 47 cm





Figure 56: Stitcher unknown, Semco kit no. 3104, *Afternoon Reflections*  
longstitch embroidery; mount 38 x 38 cm



Figure 57: Matthew de Moiser, *Villa Savoye*, 2010  
longstitch embroidery, 47 x 47 cm

*Gardens Commission Housing* presents a multi-storey block of Fitzroy commission homes in the place of the small miner's cottage originally nestled in the pastoral landscape of Semco kit no. 3075 *Early Spring*. In *Rose Seidler House*, de Moiser has replaced the pitch-roofed Captain Cook's Cottage of Semco kit no. 3081 with the architecturally designed flat-roofed modernist house named in the work's title [figures 58-59].

De Moiser's works re-contextualise both modernist architecture and the longstitch kits, addressing the hierarchical divisions of art and craft in architectural modernism. While commentators have lauded the ironic undertones of de Moiser's work<sup>20</sup> the artist states that his attraction to the kits stems from his recognition of them as 'unique historical document(s) and social record(s)' that 'capture our ideas and ideals of home'.<sup>21</sup> In presenting updated and alternative versions of the ideal home in his image interventions, de Moiser relies upon a shared cultural memory of the original Semco kit images, intent and reception. While this reliance is somewhat similar to my position, de Moiser's action of presenting homes not normally associated with the surrounding landscape or medium of the craft kits is ultimately subversive. In contrast, I aim to honour the intent behind the original found longstitches and rework the images of the homes to amplify this intent.

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<sup>20</sup> See Peter Haynes, "Thoroughly Modern at Canberra Contemporary Art Space Offers six Views of Modernism," *The Canberra Times*, April 29, 2016, <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/act-news/canberra-life/thoroughly-modern-at-canberra-contemporary-art-space-offers-six-views-of-modernism-20160425-goejwz.html>, accessed July 12, 2016; David Broker, *Thoroughly Modern*, (Canberra: Canberra Contemporary Art Space, 2016), [https://issuu.com/ccas\\_canberra/docs/2016\\_-\\_thoroughly\\_modern\\_ccas](https://issuu.com/ccas_canberra/docs/2016_-_thoroughly_modern_ccas), accessed July 12, 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Noella Lopez, "Matt de Moiser in Conversation with Noella Lopez," Noella Lopez Gallery, <http://noellalopezgallery.com/art-inspiration/matt-de-moiser-interview-noella-lopez-artist-month-may-2015>, accessed July 12, 2016.



Figure 58: Stitcher unknown, Semco kit no. 3081, *Cook's Cottage*  
longstitch embroidery, mount 38 x 38 cm



Figure 59: Matthew de Moiser, *Rose Seidler House*, 2010  
longstitch embroidery, 47 x 47 cm

Madrid-based Australian artist Narelle Jubelin has also created works featuring stitched homes. Her series *Box* (1999) and *Duration Houses* (2003 - ongoing) both present works of petit point, a method of fine embroidery. Jubelin uses this method to represent subject matter not normally associated with this medium. *Box* includes two iconic modernist houses that de Moiser also represented, Farnsworth House in Illinois designed by architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Harry Seidler's Rose Seidler House [figures 60-61]. *Duration Houses* includes a prefabricated suburban house, *H*, (2003) a fibro shack, *J*, (2003) and a small New Zealand holiday home or 'bach' house, *I*, (2003) [figures 62-64]. Jubelin's work plays with ideas of humbleness. The *Box* series, in representing renowned and iconic homes as tiny embroideries, asks that the small in scale and the medium be respected. Similarly, her perfectly stitched representations of humble homes in *Duration Houses* also raise issues of respect. Jubelin's realistic portrayals are based on photographs. Her works' references to actual homes contrast with the idealised images and the DIY aesthetic of my found longstitches. *Home Made* is concerned with the dream of home in an assumptive world rather than lived reality.

The dream of the ideal home sits at the forefront of *Home Made*. Interestingly, the kits I found all depict historical houses and include examples of colonial and Victorian architecture. This relationship between the historical and the aspirational is reflected in contemporary real estate advertising of older houses. Period homes are promoted as offering buyers the opportunity to 'embrace the grandeur from days gone past'<sup>22</sup> and the 'integrity of yesteryear'.<sup>23</sup> Semco draws upon this idea

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<sup>22</sup> Gary Peer advertisement, *The Weekly Review*, Stonnington and Boroondara, June 1 – 7, 2016, (Southbank: Domain Group), 129.

<sup>23</sup> Kay & Burton advertisement, *The Weekly Review*, Stonnington and Boroondara, June 1 – 7, 2016, (Southbank: Domain Group), 53.



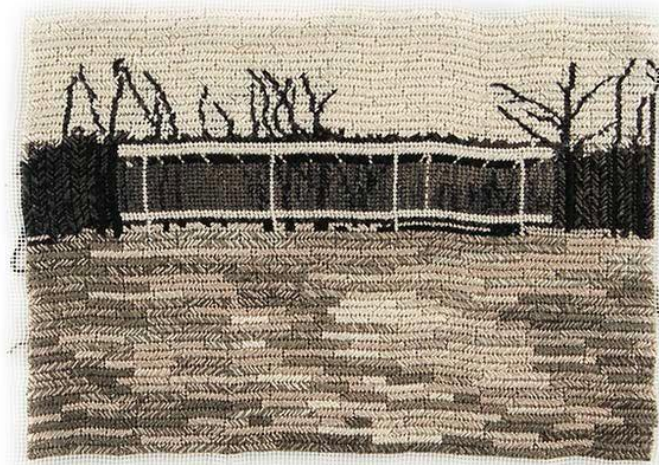


Figure 60: Narelle Jubelin, *Farnsworth House*, 1999 from the series 'Box'  
cotton thread on cotton mesh petit point rendition, 9 x 13.5 cm

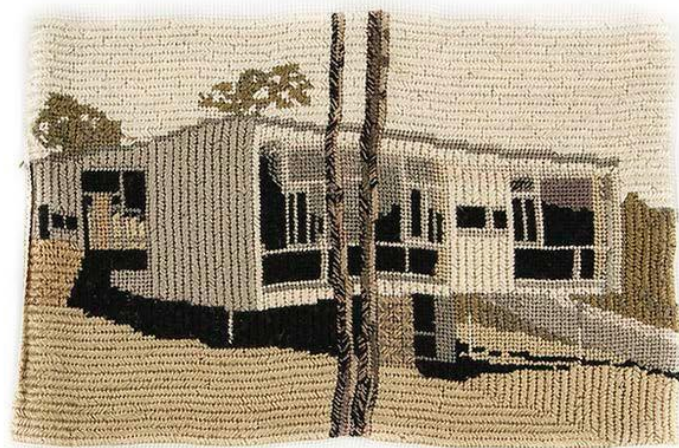


Figure 61: Narelle Jubelin, *Rose Seidler House*, 1999 from the series 'Box'  
cotton thread on cotton mesh petit point rendition, 9 x 13.5 cm



Figure 62: Narelle Jubelin, *H.*, 2003, from the series 'Duration Houses'  
cotton thread on silk mesh petit point rendition, 10.8 x 16.3 cm



Figure 63: Narelle Jubelin, *J.*, 2003, from the series 'Duration Houses'  
cotton thread on silk mesh petit point rendition, 10.8 x 16.3 cm



Figure 64: Narelle Jubelin, *I.*, 2003, from the series 'Duration Houses'  
cotton thread on silk mesh petit point rendition, 10.8 x 16.3 cm

by titling the house patterns after imagined former occupants – such as the Governor’s House. The importance of home and history extends beyond the saleability of architectural features. Notions of a sense of history aligned with the aspirational home are reinforced by contemporary popular culture. Television programmes such as *Who’s Been Sleeping in My House?*<sup>24</sup> exposed the history of everyday Australian homes, unearthing the ‘wealth of information and stories’<sup>25</sup> that were embedded in the walls.

Semco’s idealisation of the historical home recalls Mike Hepworth’s argument that modern-day concepts of an ideal home are directly influenced by Victorian imagery and texts.<sup>26</sup> Following Mallet’s observations about definitions of the good life, Hepworth argues that Victorian images of the ideal are ‘an expression of value: the kind of private life that individuals hope to achieve’.<sup>27</sup> The ideal Victorian-era home, Hepworth claims, was one that represented both private and public success, and a ‘stable and harmonious social environment’.<sup>28</sup> Hepworth’s discussion of the importance of image in relation to the ideal is central to my use of the found longstitches. In their representations of blue skies, symmetrically-balanced houses, picket fences, tended and blooming gardens, these kit longstitches epitomise the ideal home. The homes sit within environments that are

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<sup>24</sup> *Who’s Been Sleeping in My House?* was a three-part series that consisted of six to eight episodes per series. It was first aired in Australia on the 21 November 2011 by the Australian Broadcasting Commission. <http://www.abc.net.au/tv/whosbeensleeping/houses/ashcombe.htm>, accessed June 2, 2016.

<sup>25</sup> Australian Broadcasting Commission, “Research: Who’s Been Sleeping in Your House?” ABC 1, *Who’s Been Sleeping in My House?*, <http://www.abc.net.au/tv/whosbeensleeping/research/>, accessed May 12, 2016; Australian Broadcasting Commission, “Who’s Been Sleeping in My House: About,” ABC 1, <http://www.abc.net.au/tv/whosbeensleeping/about/>, accessed May 12, 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Mike Hepworth, “Privacy, Security and Respectability: The Ideal Victorian Home,” in *Ideal Homes?: Social Change and Domestic Life*, eds., Tony Chapman and Jenny Hockey, (London: Routledge, 1999), 17

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

tidy, and harmonious. There are no piles of shoes on the verandas or bikes left lying on the lawn. There are no electricity poles, dividing fences, or houses repeating into the distance. The absence of references to utilitarian objects such as garbage bins, garden hoses or even taps suggests a life of leisure. The addition of my own house, obviously designed and created by me, alongside these ideals creates a point of contrast [figure 65]. My house is the only house to suggest utilitarianism: a letterbox that links my property to a world outside. In my experience of ambiguous loss my letterbox acted as a portal to a world beyond my control and became a fear-filled feature of my day-to-day existence.

### **Home: Constancy, Permanence and Continuity**

Extending the findings of both P. Saunders and Anthony Giddens, Ann Dupuis and David Thorns address connections between notions of home and ambiguous loss.<sup>29</sup> While admittedly reporting on findings from a narrow section of the New Zealand population, Dupuis and Thorns discuss the notion of home ownership as a method of providing ‘ontological security’.<sup>30</sup> Referencing Giddens, they define ontological security as ‘a sense of confidence and trust in the world as it appears to be.... a security of being’; a definition that echoes the description of an assumptive world in chapter one.<sup>31</sup> Dupuis and Thorns describe specific elements that must be present for the home to provide a sense of ontological security. These include a sense of ‘constancy’ obtained in relation to both the combination of the physical

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<sup>29</sup> Ann Dupuis and David C. Thorns, “Home, Home Ownership and the Search for Ontological Security,” *The Sociological Review* 46, no. 1, (1998): 24 - 47.

<sup>30</sup> Dupuis and Thorns’ survey relates to older people who had inherited a house, in most instances, from their spouse.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 27. See also A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1990)



Figure 65: Michelle Neal, *Home Made* (detail)  
photo: Clare Rae



structure of the home and a sense of ‘permanence and continuity’ that has been created over time.<sup>32</sup>

The elements of ontological security that Dupuis and Thorn describe are evident in the found images in *Home Made*. The homes represent physical security by being constructed from enduring materials; for the most part brick. One home even appears to be made of bluestone blocks, popular in the past for prison construction and buttressing walls. This suggests an impenetrability and an ability to withstand harsh conditions. The Semco houses have a wide footprint with a suggestion of ‘feet’ being planted solidly on the ground. Many are further anchored to the ground by posts that support a wide protective veranda that offers a shield from all weather. The houses metaphorically represent emotional security and permanence by being symmetrical and balanced. Many have central gates or pathways that offer a suggestion of welcome and direct access to the viewer. All the houses have chimneys, some have four, referring to intense warmth at the hearth of these homes.

The gardens in *Home Made* also create a sense of permanence and constancy. Each longstitch house is surrounded by an established garden that suggests an extended length of time and a continuity of care. The majority of trees are slow-growing conifers and palms, whose categorization as evergreens suggests a continuous, unchanging lushness. These are trees that reference other worlds, either ‘the old world’ of the northern hemisphere or the exotic world of the tropics. The trees accordingly represent resilience through their ability to adapt and thrive

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<sup>32</sup> Dupuis and Thorns, “Home, Home Ownership and the Search for Ontological Security,” 30-31.

in a new climate. New life is additionally represented in the gardens' flower beds. Semco has a long history of promoting the value of gardens to well-being and a sense of renewal. When director Charles Mylius moved the business to the Melbourne suburb of Black Rock in 1924 he fulfilled his dream of establishing a 'garden factory' – planting impressive gardens for his largely female workforce to enjoy.<sup>33</sup> Although the flowers in these living gardens were temporary, in the longstitches they are fixed in an eternal Spring. This not only freezes the garden at the time of 'the ideal', it also represents abundance, perpetual renewal, new growth, and new life.

The materiality of the wool used to make the longstitches and the associated themes of warmth play another important role in *Home Made*. Security is connoted through the 'pure wool' promotion on the kits' packaging that proposes quality assurance to the buyer, as well as the associations between knitted wool with 'familiarity and safety'.<sup>34</sup> Wool is a warming element of both the interior of a house and the exterior of a person. As with the flannelette pyjamas used in *Permission to Speak*, wool speaks to night-time care and comfort through the swaddling embrace of woollen blankets. As a crafting medium, wool is associated with knitting; an act frequently done for others as an expression of care. The sense of self-worth obtained through this action is reflected in Fiona Hackney's observation of a knitter whose main pleasure from the pastime came from creating

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<sup>33</sup> Lee, "'Our Fingers Were Never Idle': Women and Domestic Craft in the Geelong Region, 1900-1960," 135.

<sup>34</sup> Kirsty Robertson, "Rebellious Doilies and Subversive Stitches: Writing a Craftivist History" in *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, ed., Maria Elena Buszek, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 196.

items for friends and relatives.<sup>35</sup> It is interesting to note the phrases Hackney uses to write of this knitter and her actions. She describes how knitting ‘tied her into the threads of family life’, ‘cement(ed) relationships’ and ‘establish(ed) her place within her extended family’.<sup>36</sup> Others have similarly commented on needlework and permanence in psychological terms. Buszek has noted: ‘The acts of binding, knitting, and tying are the means of piecing together that which has been broken and cut’.<sup>37</sup>

Longstitching is an expedient form of stitching that alludes to the appearance of embroidery and knitting, but in its hybridity lacks the secure construction of these other mediums – it represents a false sense of security. The wool in the longstitches is not knitted, but after being stitched in place at either end, lays on top of the canvas. Consequently, the longstitches seem less securely constructed than other stitch work; as Waters notes, the background canvas is visible if the work is bent.<sup>38</sup> Haptically, however, the process of making *Home Made* recalls that of making a knitted object. Joining the found longstitches together creates a heaviness, a satisfying weight to the work. With each addition, the work becomes more substantial and blanket-like. This haptic quality and the touch of the wool is a reminder of the physicality of the process of creating an object that ‘exists both outside in the world and inside’ the stitcher’s head.<sup>39</sup> Amanda Bingley claims that

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<sup>35</sup> Hackney, “Use Your Hands for Happiness: Home Craft and Make-do-and-Mend in British Women’s Magazines in the 1920s and 1930s,” 35.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Janis Jefferies, “Loving Attention: An Outburst of Craft in Contemporary Art,” in *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Elena Buszek (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 226. Jefferies cites Siri Hustvedt, *A Plea for Eros* (London: Sceptre, 2006).

<sup>38</sup> Waters, “Inside the Outback: An Exploration of Domesticated Landscapes in Semco’s Long Stitch Originals Series of the 1980s,” 34.

<sup>39</sup> Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, (London: I B Tauris & Co Ltd., 2010), xx.



the physical experience of handling a material can operate as a mediator between our internal and external selves and act as a conduit for ‘finely nuanced reflections’ of experiences.<sup>40</sup> As a primal sensation, Bingley suggests that the tactile ‘connects us with a subjective sense of self’.<sup>41</sup> When, through the experience of a traumatic event, ‘the self is experienced as incoherent and fragmented’,<sup>42</sup> touch in art making can provide a way to ‘reconnect with ... the old self’ and be a conduit for ‘facilitating a sense of healing’ from traumatic experience.<sup>43</sup>

The act of stitching a longstitch house to decorate the home suggests a desire for constancy, permanence and continuity. Commenting on the work of Louise Bourgeois, Parker notes that ‘the stitches themselves convey meaning’.<sup>44</sup> Whereas Bourgeois’ ‘bad sewing’ and ‘awkward stitching’, as described by Linda Nochlin, conveyed a ferocity, the regular, even stitches of the longstitch kits produce a smooth, even surface.<sup>45</sup> In their conformity, the stitches conceal emotive expression. This lack of expression is different to the evenly-sewn stitches that edge Emin’s blankets in works such as *Volcano Closed* (2001) [figure 66]. Each precisely placed blanket-stitch acts as a counterpoint to the highly emotive content of the work and is a way to, metaphorically and practically, keep the interior from

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<sup>40</sup> Amanda Bingley, “Touching Space in Hurt and Healing: Exploring Experiences of Illness and Recovery Through Tactile Art,” in *Touching Space, Placing Touch*, ed. Mark Paterson and Martin Dodge, (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), 71-72.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>44</sup> Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, xviii.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., Parker cites “Interview With Donald Kuspit, 1988,” in Charles Hanson and Paul Wood, *Louise Bourgeois* (Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003).

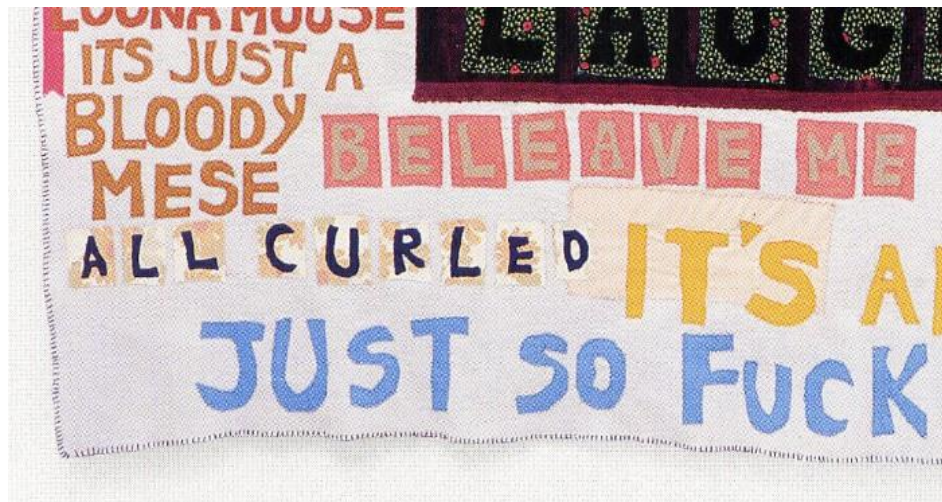


Figure 66: Tracey Emin, *Volcano Closed*, 2001, detail  
appliqué blanket

fraying, to secure it, and hold it all together. For longstitch needleworkers, the repetitive action of conformed stitching not only provides relaxation but results in a permanent handiwork that can be protectively framed, secured on the wall and, as Semco promoted on their kits' packaging, would remain 'yours for ever'.<sup>46</sup>

Conformity, and the associated notions of repetition and patterned predictability, is an element evident not only in the constrained methodology of the longstitch kits but also in their subject matter. This exploration of conformity reflects the discussion raised in chapter one of 'the disconnection from the mainstream' and 'normal human experience' that sufferers of ambiguous loss experience. The images in the kits conform to a set pattern: house, garden, front fence and blue sky. The conformity of these images results in a sense of predictability, a sensation that speaks to the loss of guaranteed 'predictability of life', as raised in chapter two, that sufferers of ambiguous loss claim. In this respect, the kits represent the epitome of security. Notions of conformation also emerged during the construction of *Dreams*. I was surprised by how frequently I cut features from a variety of houses that interchanged easily between the homes. This was no doubt related to building practices and regulations that stipulate a conformity in room and structure size – as well as standardized real estate photographic conventions – but it was this underlying adherence to conformity that contributed to the work's success.

Conversely, successfully completing the longstitches involved following the step-by-step instructions included in the kits, which positioned the manufacturer as the voice of authority with an implied, and aspirational, invitation to share in its

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<sup>46</sup> See longstitch kits 'Governor's Cottage' kit no. 3250-0003 and 'Bush Shadows' kit no. 3255-0010 as example.

expertise. All that a stitcher had to do was obediently fill in the prescribed pattern and she would obtain the ideal promised. The methodology represented a predictable outcome created by constraining an individual's creativity within prescriptive rules. Correspondingly, however, this gave the stitcher a sense of expertise. Even though stitchers may have possessed no acknowledged skill (in creativity or stitching), the kit allowed them to produce an admirable work for their wall. When viewed through the lens of ambiguous loss, these kits consequently had the potential to provide a sense of expertise or mastery within a supportive environment. By following the guiding rules of another's example, the kits offered stitchers the opportunity to feel in control, metaphorically representing a risk-free way to learn to trust in the predictability of the world again.

Reflecting the journey of ambiguous loss, however, I learnt partway through the process of constructing *Home Made* that the kits were not straightforward to use. To experience creating a kit longstitch from scratch I bought an unworked vintage Semco kit on e-Bay. I did not expect to find that the kit's instructions were ambiguous. Details in the photographic image on the packet differed from the instructive diagram inside, and the guiding outline often veered frustratingly between two canvas holes meaning discretion was needed to choose between the two. I unstitched the work many times when subsequent stitching revealed I had initially chosen the wrong hole. As I believed that the work would be simple to create and realised that even with another's guiding rules, personal discretion would still feature; completing the kit became emblematic of navigating life with ambiguous loss. The kit demonstrated that while a prescribed design was provided, when it was accompanied by scant instruction, trial and error played a key role.

## Home: Internal and External Worlds

I argued in chapter one in relation to *Permission to Speak* that dealing with ambiguous loss can involve an accentuation of differences between internal and external realms, public and private domains. Lack of acknowledgment of ambiguous loss by others can mean that it is experienced in private, while the grief associated with overt loss is often more visible in the public domain. When a person's external world is imbued with a sense of having failed them, they often experience a decreased sense of control. As a measure to counteract this, sufferers of ambiguous loss are advised to concentrate on controlling that which can be controlled, their inner world.

Many writers raise the notion of security and home as a haven from public surveillance.<sup>47</sup> Hepworth discusses the ideal home as a retreat. This idea manifests notions of security in two ways: the actual 'bricks and mortar' façade which provides protection and privacy to the house's occupants, and 'the home within'<sup>48</sup> that offers not only an increased opportunity for individual expression, but the living of life in private. This sense of the private life within, Hepworth notes, engenders fascination in those outside.<sup>49</sup> The text in *Permission to Speak* alluded to this view from outside, resulting in a mediated presentation of my neighbours' lives. Before exhibiting the work I sought the consent of all identifiably-named and living neighbours who I wrote about in the text. Knowing they would read

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<sup>47</sup> See Mallett, "Understanding Home: A Critical Review of the Literature," 70 -71.

<sup>48</sup> Hepworth, "Privacy, Security and Respectability: The Ideal Victorian Home," 18. Hepworth references this phrase to J. Marshall and L. Willox, *The Victorian House*, (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1986), 57.

<sup>49</sup> Hepworth, "Privacy, Security and Respectability: The Ideal Victorian Home," 18.

what I wrote influenced the recollections I chose to present, and led me to filter out any unflattering observations. *Home Made* offers no such observations to viewers, who are instead left to speculate on what is going on inside the houses. The generalised design of the houses similarly allows the stitchers to project their own dreams and fantasies into the house, echoing the operation of real estate photographs.

Racz notes the common use of the window by artists wishing to represent a delineation between the external world on one side and the mind's internal world on the other.<sup>50</sup> Echoing the houses in *Permission to Speak*, the windows of the houses in *Home Made* are completely opaque. In both works, not even curtains are visible to indicate life beyond the panes. The opaque windows act as protection from prying eyes. While this was an intentional move in *Permission to Speak*, I held no such creative control in *Home Made*. The occurrence of opaque windows, while possibly designed for ease of stitching or perhaps as an expression of idealized privacy, was simply fortuitous. Either way, in both works opaque windows not only allow viewers to project their own ideas of the home's interior onto the work, they represent a blocked passage between interior and exterior worlds for both viewer and occupant, and thus are reflective of ambiguous loss. As discussed in chapter one, ambiguous loss is often experienced in the private rather than the public domain, not necessarily by choice but because of the difficulty for

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<sup>50</sup> Racz, *Art and the Home: Comfort, Alienation and the Everyday*, 32.

non-sufferers to either recognise or empathise with the experience. The blocked windows also allude to criticism of the idea of home as a retreat or sanctuary.<sup>51</sup> Mallett references Gill Jones and Julia Wardhaugh, claiming that ‘home as haven’ is an ‘idealized’ view that is not reflective of reality.<sup>52</sup> Mallett notes the strong 1970s and 1980s feminist critiques of the home ‘as a site of oppression, tyranny and patriarchal domination of women’.<sup>53</sup> Covered windows, walls and fences that provide security can transform the house into a fortress and cover for domestic violence, power struggles and authoritarian domination.<sup>54</sup>

Other inside-outside dichotomies are at work in the act of stitching. The ‘longstitches’ prescribed pattern, combined with the routine of stitching alluding to an activity performed in rote-mode, offers the opportunity for a stitcher to think about other things whilst stitching. Lee describes handiwork as providing a legitimate opportunity to access ‘private, mental space’.<sup>55</sup> Waters echoes this sentiment in her description of sewing as a way of ‘making time’ to think.<sup>56</sup> The repetitive action also offers creative benefits. Reichek proposes that stitching ‘puts you in a state of free association, at the edge of consciousness’.<sup>57</sup> Artists undertaking works involving repetitive actions to the point of obsession support

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<sup>51</sup> Mallett, “Understanding Home: A Critical Review of the Literature,” 71. Mallett references the work of D. Sibley, *Geographies of Exclusion: Society and Difference in the West*, (London: Routledge, 1995); J. Wardaugh, “The Unaccommodated Woman: Home, Homelessness and Identity,” *Sociological Review*, 47, no. 1, (1999): 91-109.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 72. Mallett also references Gill Jones, “Experimenting with Households and Inventing ‘Home’,” *International Social Science Journal* 52, no. 2, (2000): 183-194; J. Wardaugh, “The Unaccommodated Woman,” 91-109.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>55</sup> Lee, “‘Our Fingers Were Never Idle’: Women and Domestic Craft in the Geelong Region, 1900-1960,” 103.

<sup>56</sup> Sera Waters, “Lecturer Profile: Sera Waters,” <http://www.acsa.sa.edu.au/the-school/staff/academic-staff/sera-waters/>

<sup>57</sup> Elaine Reichek and Sarah G. Sharp, “Oral History Interview with Elaine Reichek, 2008, Feb. 12,” Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution,

this observation, reporting that it is ‘a way of quieting the background noise of the mind, in order to allow it to fly freely into other realms of the imagination’.<sup>58</sup>

Rozsika Parker acknowledges an inside outside construct associated with embroidery, claiming it ‘promotes and reflects a richer, more meaningful internal world, which is in turn substantiated by the reception of the work in the outside world’.<sup>59</sup> This is further illustrated by the response of women who, when asked by Lee what the activity of making meant for them, ‘indicated a range of meanings encompassing creative satisfaction, self expression, the importance of family, the giving of love, a source of self esteem and achievement, a mental challenge, an inner contemplation, and personal agency’.<sup>60</sup>

Notions of inside / outside are also manifest in the use of the circle which recurs in *Home Made*. The kit designs adhered consistently to a circle size of 29cm diameter. Kit frames, also sold by Semco, reinforced the circular motif by providing a mount-board cut with an interior circular frame [figure 67].<sup>61</sup> Traces of the stitched circles remain in *Home Made*, even though the images have been extended beyond those limits [figure 68]. As separate circles the images act as portholes to an idealized view. Stitching these circles together to create *Home Made* nonetheless opens the works beyond the secure circular enclosure, and

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<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-elaine-reichek-13692#transcript>, accessed June 7, 2016.

<sup>58</sup> Stephanie Britton, “The Obsessive Compulsive Worker – Artist,” *Artlink* 27, no. 4, (Dec 2007): 19.

<sup>59</sup> Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, xx.

<sup>60</sup> Lee, ““Our Fingers Were Never Idle’: Women and Domestic Craft in the Geelong Region, 1900-1960,” 162.

<sup>61</sup> Semco marketed frames for the completed works that included mount-boards colour-coded to suit specified longstitch kits.





Figure 67: Semco marketed their frames complete with a list of the longstitch tapestries that the mount colour would suit.



Figure 68: Michelle Neal, *Home Made*, 2016 (detail)  
detail of photo by Clare Rae

presents a slightly more expansive view. Ambiguous loss also defies closure. By referencing the closed entity of the circle as an imprinted memory, *Home Made* represents a negotiation between the longed-for past and the new conditions of a post-assumptive world.

## **Home: Community**

As discussed in chapter one, a belief in the worth and value of the self is a component of the assumptive world. Notions of home can play an influential role in determining self-worth. Gwendolyn Wright accordingly describes the home as a ‘mirror’ that reflects an image of the occupants.<sup>62</sup> Wright’s claim of the potential for middle class homes to be a ‘highly charged symbol of status’<sup>63</sup> is a position that is moderated by Chapman and Hockey’s view that family, friends and neighbourly expectations can play an influential role in tempering displays of wealth in home presentation.<sup>64</sup> Home ownership alone holds status, evident in Dupuis and Thorns’ contention that it is an element of adult identification.<sup>65</sup> Conversely, the loss of home, owned or otherwise, impacts upon identity, as noted by Mallett in relation to refugees and migrants.<sup>66</sup>

In *Home Made* the insertion of my home into the streetscape of idealized homes provides me with an idealized identity. Joining the found longstitches together creates a streetscape of houses that represent a collective ideal. The kit longstitches are no longer isolated works that are joined by conceptual-means only through

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<sup>62</sup> Gwendolyn Wright, “Prescribing the Model Home,” *Social Research* 58, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 215.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>64</sup> Chapman and Hockey, “The Ideal Home as it is Imagined and as it is Lived,” 10.

<sup>65</sup> Dupuis and Thorns, “Home, Home Ownership and the Search for Ontological Security,” 37.

<sup>66</sup> Mallett, “Understanding Home: A Critical Review of the Literature,” 78.

belonging to the Semco series, but are works stitched together to form an imagined community. They represent a new world that I have created, not from scratch, but from facades of others' ideal worlds. This act takes Belk's notion of a collection as creating a world, as examined in chapter one, at its most literal. This work is not a metaphoric world of collected postage stamps or seashells but a representation of the suburban world, filled with houses and gardens, fences and blue skies. It is similarly a visual manifestation of William Davies King's description of middle-class life as a collection. For King, this collection includes 'a spouse, a house, a brace of children, a suitable car, a respectable career, (and) cuddly pets'.<sup>67</sup> My house is nestled in the streetscape of ideal homes without comment, suggesting its inclusion within the neighbourhood's protective bounds is assumed unreservedly. In the process, I am metaphorically positioned inside my house returning the viewer's gaze with a smug security that comes from belonging to an idealised group.

The act of stitching the kits marks a connection to another community – a virtual community of stitchers. As a mass-produced item, the longstitch kits were likewise stitched by a large number of women that potentially stretches Australia-wide and back through history.<sup>68</sup> This community of stitchers is not only literal in its lineage, involving the handing down of skills between generations of family members, but is also reinforced culturally through representation in literature and women's magazines. Connotations surrounding the community of embroiders and their pastime, as Rozsika Parker notes, were not always positive. During the

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<sup>67</sup> William Davies King, *Collections of Nothing*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 2008), 3.

<sup>68</sup> While Parker suggests in her book *The Subversive Stitch* that the visibility of a gender divide in contemporary embroidery exhibited in the artworld has lessened over the years, assuming these stitchers to be female provides me with a source of security. Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, xiii.

1970s, artists making feminist-based works critiqued the medium's associations with domesticity and oppression.<sup>69</sup> While not associating herself as a feminist, Tracey Emin's employment of applique in her blanket works such as 'Pysco Slut' (1999) use the 'cosy',<sup>70</sup> 'comfortable' and 'reassur(ing)',<sup>71</sup> connotations of the technique to present harsh language and thus subvert the medium [figure 69]. Similarly, Elaine Reichek's collection of embroideries shown in her 1994 New York exhibition rely upon the aesthetics and traditional messages of affirmation associated with samplers to create a subversive comment.<sup>72</sup> Reichek's work *Untitled (Laura Engel)* (1993) is a hand-embroidery on linen that presents traditional sampler elements such as the alphabet, house, and garden but in place of an uplifting sentiment Reichek inserts the phrase 'The parents of Jewish boys always love me. I'm the closest to a shiksa without being one' [figure 70]. These works use the links between embroidery and the home, and by extension love and care, to create a rupturing discord.<sup>73</sup>

My project seeks to move beyond this representation of discord, and reclaim the medium and process for acceptance at face value. While I do not wish to disregard the subversive use of the medium by other artists, I remain mindful of Parker's reflection upon the negative connotations attached to 'women's traditional crafts' in 1970s feminism, and how these connotations overshadowed the 'important

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<sup>69</sup> See Parker, "A Naturally Revolutionary Art?" in *The Subversive Stitch*, 205 - 211.

<sup>70</sup> Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, xvi.

<sup>71</sup> Joan Gibbons, *Contemporary Art and Memory : Images of Recollection and Remembrance*, (London and New York: I B Tauris & Co Ltd, 2007), 21.

<sup>72</sup> "A Postcolonial Kinderhood" at The Jewish Museum, New York, (1994).

<sup>73</sup> Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, 2.

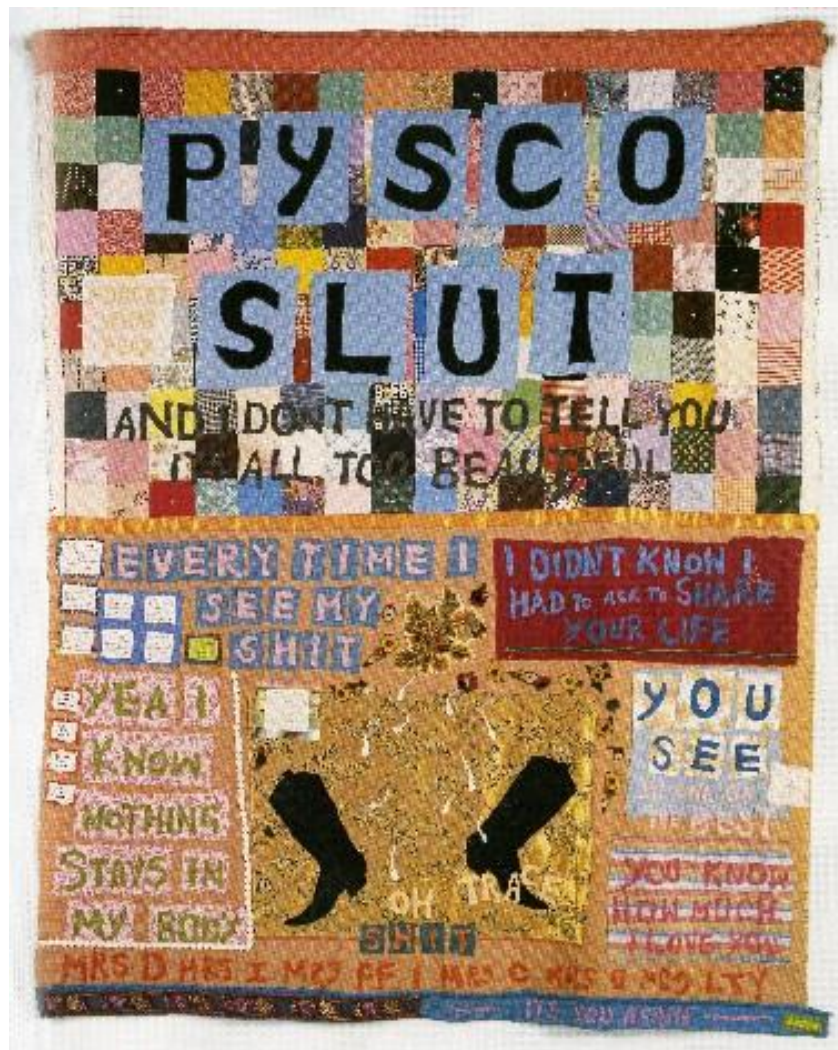


Figure 69: Tracey Emin, *Psycho Slut*, 1999  
 appliquéd blanket, 244 x 193 cm





Figure 70: Elaine Reichek, *Untitled (Laura Engel)*, 1993  
hand embroidery on linen, 41.9 x 45.7 cm

source of creative satisfaction' provided by embroidery.<sup>74</sup> I also challenge Germaine Greer's 2006 description of past women's craft work as 'useless, pointless, unproductive, repetitive work'.<sup>75</sup> In contrast, the process of stitching my own e-Bay-bought longstitch kit highlighted the presence of a virtual community of peers. This was aided by my self-imposed criteria stipulating that my creative interventions must echo the choices made by the kits' designers so as to appear as a form of collaboration with past stitchers. The use of embroidery to forge social collectives 'is evident in the recent world-wide movement of Craftivism'.<sup>76</sup> Often attributed to Betsy Greer, this term describes the use of craft to create works with an activist message that transcends 'yelling or placard waving'.<sup>77</sup> As I stitched, I contemplated how many others had stitched this scene, and I longed to share notes with them to compare the stitching choices they had made.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I discussed my bodies of work, *Dreams* and *Home Made* and their connections to both *Permission to Speak* and ambiguous loss. Through the use of images of ideal homes as representations of the assumptive world, I examined themes of permanence, constancy and continuity, interior and exterior, and community. These themes play key roles in creating and maintaining the sense of an assumptive world by fostering and enabling conditions of harmony and stability that results in a sense of security. The security offered through the softness, warmth and texture of wool was an important haptic element in *Home Made* but

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<sup>74</sup> Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, xii.

<sup>75</sup> Germaine Greer, "Why Women Don't Relax," Life and Style, *The Guardian*, May 4, 2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2006/may/04/gender.consumerandethicalliving>), accessed July 12, 2016.

<sup>76</sup> Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, xvii.

<sup>77</sup> Betsy Greer, "Craftivist History" in *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, ed., Maria Elena Buszek, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 183.



equally important was the activity of stitching the work itself. It provided a method of connection to a virtual community of stitchers that included contemporary and historical companions. This process reflects the way that people can gain a sense of security not only through belonging to a group with a shared interest but through undertaking activities that recognise and encourage similar values and patterns of living.

Through my use of materials, I explored notions of worth, focusing upon assumed and unscrutinised value, which also play a key role in an assumptive world. This investigation of materiality involved choosing materials that represented the differences between ‘the before’ and ‘the after’ in relation to ambiguous loss. The glossy and professional quality images used in *Dreams* were materials with an assumed value, and thus reflected the unquestioned acceptance of the status-quo in an assumptive world. In contrast, the discarded household cardboard used in *Permission to Speak* involved a deliberate and methodical search and recognition of beauty in that which had been discarded and categorised as worthless, and spoke to newly-noticed environments that occur when an assumptive world is lost. *Home Made* combined these two material references and used items that had once held accepted aesthetic value but had since become unfashionable and discarded in opportunity shops. In this reference to a combination of pre- and post-assumptive worlds, *Home Made* represents an acceptance and acknowledgment of both worlds and thus suggests moving on. In the next chapter I explore the role of the suburban garden as a transitional zone between public and private, and as a literal representation of growth.

## Chapter 4

### Growth

In this chapter I focus my research into ambiguous loss, collecting, mastery and security around growth and the development of a new assumptive world. In the previous chapters my work cast an eye to the past and to the desire for an ideal possessed by others. The combination of images and text in *Permission to Speak* gave the work a storybook feel that harkened back to childhood. *Home Made* used discarded, once idealised house embroideries from 1980s craft kits, in which the designs presented historical rather than contemporary homes. *Dreams* used contemporary imagery but close inspection of the collaged homes revealed notions of the ideal to be amiss. Extending this work, the three works presented in this chapter draw upon the past but reference growth and future life more overtly. All works focus upon creating and navigating a new assumptive world following the experience of ambiguous loss, while building on the theme of security. The works use bright colours or actual physical connection to speak of well-being and the promise of care and kindness in an assumptive world. *Collected Todays* uses collected observations to present life being lived while *Ever* uses living flowers as exemplars of the changeable nature of an assumptive world.

### Growth: Ambiguous Loss

While Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun report that the concept of personal growth arising from difficult situations is not new and is evident in a range of religions and philosophies,<sup>1</sup> they use the term ‘posttraumatic growth’ more

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<sup>1</sup> Tedeschi and Calhoun suggest that the concept of growth occurring after suffering was proposed, in varying degrees, in early tenets of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. Richard G.

specifically to describe the ‘positive change that occurs as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life crises’.<sup>2</sup> According to Tedeschi and Calhoun, this change is not one that takes a person back to ‘baseline’ after experiencing trauma but involves a transformative element that results in ‘improvement’ in their life.<sup>3</sup> It is the transformative aspect of posttraumatic growth that differentiates it from ‘resilience, hardiness (and) optimism’,<sup>4</sup> offering people the opportunity to ‘renew themselves and even to flourish’.<sup>5</sup> People frequently express a level of gratitude for the event that initially caused the loss of their assumptive world because of the perceived benefits and insights they acquired in the process of recovery.<sup>6</sup> Tedeschi and Calhoun point out that the gratitude is not for the derailing event itself, but for the subsequent growth that occurs.<sup>7</sup>

Parallels exist between the positive transformation associated with posttraumatic growth and the Japanese custom of *kintsugi*.<sup>8</sup> This artistic practice involves joining broken ceramic pieces with gold. The technique often results in sensitively drawn

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Tedeschi and Lawrence G. Calhoun, “Posttraumatic Growth: Conceptual Foundations and Empirical Evidence,” *Psychological Inquiry* 15, no. 1 (2004): 2.

<sup>2</sup> Tedeschi and Calhoun, “Posttraumatic Growth: Conceptual Foundations and Empirical Evidence,” 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Eunice Gorman, “Adaptation, Resilience, and Growth After Loss,” in *Counting Our Losses, Reflecting on Change, Loss, and Transition in Everyday Life*, ed. Darcy L. Harris (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2011), 227.

<sup>6</sup> See Tedeschi and Calhoun, “Posttraumatic Growth: Conceptual Foundations and Empirical Evidence,” 1; Gorman, “Adaptation, Resilience, and Growth After Loss,” 226; Trevan G. Hatch, Katie E. Cherry, Yaxin Lu and Loren D. Marks, “Seeing Silver Linings After Catastrophic Loss: Personal Growth, Positive Adaption, and Relationships that Matter” in *Traumatic Stress and Long-term Recovery: Coping with Disasters and Other Negative Life Events*, ed. Katie E. Cherry, (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2015) 393 and 396.

<sup>7</sup> Tedeschi and Calhoun, “Posttraumatic Growth: Conceptual Foundations and Empirical Evidence,” 7.

<sup>8</sup> *Kintsugi* means to patch with gold, *kintsukuroi* means to repair with gold. Charly Iten, “Ceramics Mended with Lacquer – Fundamental Aesthetic Principles, Techniques and Artistic Concepts,” in *Flickwerk: The Aesthetics of Mended Japanese Ceramics*, (Munster, Germany: Museum Fur Lackkunst, and Cornell University, Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, 2008), 18.

‘golden veins’<sup>9</sup> that highlight and feature the lines of breakage as a source of beauty that adds value to the object [figure 71].<sup>10</sup> In counselling people dealing with ambiguous loss, Harris claims that many of her clients feel ‘completely “broken”’ and as though ‘something deep inside has been shattered’.<sup>11</sup> Comments made by church minister, Marilyn Sewell, reflect the connection between the metaphorical connotations of positive transformation resulting from emotional breakage and the practice of kintsugi. In speaking of the value to be gained from a broken heart, she proposes that the experience causes people to ‘walk in the world ever after with more depth, more sensitivity, more compassion’.<sup>12</sup> Elements of *Permission to Speak*, *Dreams* and *Home Made* allude to notions of emotional breakage and kintsugi. The collections of cardboard and pyjamas had passed their use-by date yet my use of them ascribed them with beauty and new value. With close inspection, the houses of *Dreams* revealed their collaged joins that together created a new image. Similarly, my additions to the found tapestries of *Home Made* were unhidden; the circular boundary of the originals remain evident and an integral part of the work.

This chapter introduces new works informed more explicitly by aspects of posttraumatic growth and ideas of kintsugi. The first work, *Collected Todays*

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<sup>9</sup>Asian Art Department, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2011, “Sake Cup with Gold Lacquer Mending,” Art Gallery of New South Wales, <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/382.2011/>, accessed November 14, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> See *Flickwerk: The Aesthetics of Mended Japanese Ceramics*.

<sup>11</sup> Darcy L. Harris, “Meaning Making and the Assumptive World in Nondeath Loss,” in *Counting our Losses: Reflecting on Change, Loss, and Transition in Everyday Life*, ed. Darcy L. Harris, (New York: Taylor and Francis Group, 2011), 243.

<sup>12</sup> *Compass*, “Raw Faith,” aired 10 November, 2013 on ABC television. <http://www.abc.net.au/compass/s3867307.htm>, accessed July 6, 2015.



Figure 71: Tea bowl, White Satsuma ware  
Stoneware with crackled glaze, ink, gold lacquer  
10.5 x 12.2 cm

(2013) deviates from the house and garden theme and uses text to explore rituals, being connected, and appreciating the small things in life – activities which often gain importance with posttraumatic growth.<sup>13</sup> This work occupies a pivotal position between previous pieces that looked to past ways of living and dreams of an idealised existence, and the ensuing works that feature flowers and gardens as a metaphor for growth and the future. *Collected Todays* thereby straddles the worlds of ambiguous loss and posttraumatic growth. It is a work mired in ritualised processes grounded in the present, and references acts of searching for and collecting evidence of security in everyday life.

### **Growth: *Collected Todays***

*Collected Todays* consists of thirty-two index cards wrapped in flannelette fabric sourced from second-hand men's pyjamas. On each card is a single sentence constructed from letters cut from a school-aged children's poetry anthology [figure 72].<sup>14</sup> Each of the sentences begins with the word 'today' and relates an observation drawn from my university-based studio environment. My sixth-floor studio overlooks the Caulfield Racecourse and has a view that includes a large area of Melbourne's southern suburbs, Port Phillip Bay and, in the distance, the rises of the You Yangs and the Mornington Peninsula. While this view offers an expansive and impressive vista to draw upon, my collection focuses upon small elements within that scene, or more usually, even smaller elements from my immediate

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<sup>13</sup> Tedeschi and Calhoun, "Posttraumatic Growth: Conceptual Foundations and Empirical Evidence," 6; Gorman, "Adaptation, Resilience, and Growth After Loss," 232.

<sup>14</sup> *Australian Verse for Children*, published in 1946 by the Education Department of Victoria.

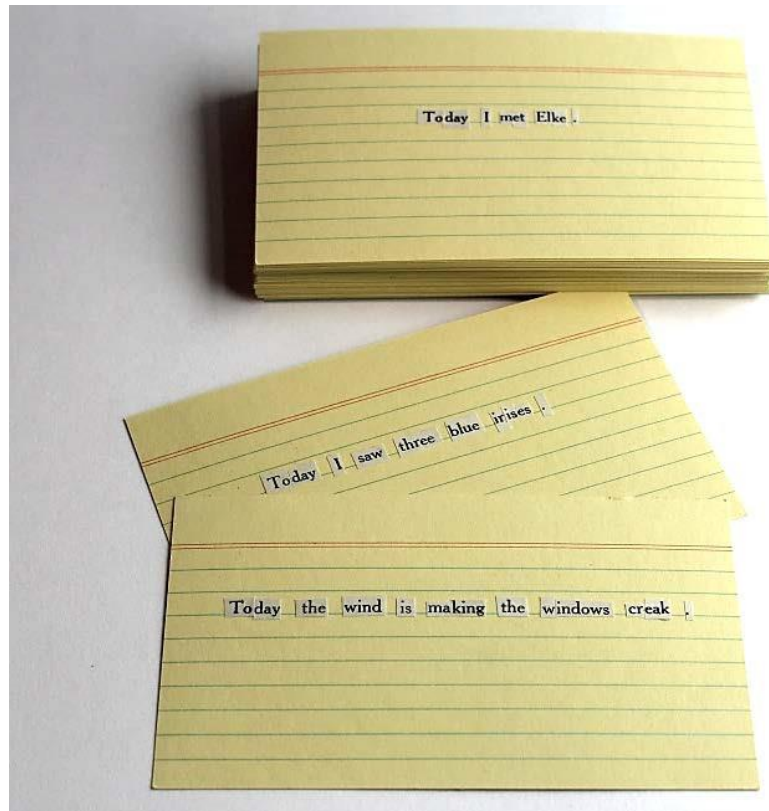


Figure 72: Michelle Neal, *Collected Todays*, 2013  
index cards, collaged found text; 7.6 x 12.7 cm each card

sphere.<sup>15</sup> The cards describe observations that provide me with a sense of security or recognise the beauty of life. For example: ‘Today I saw three blue irises’ acknowledges my recognition of the return of spring and of the domestic garden within the institutional setting. ‘Today there is lemon slice on the table’ – an observation drawn from the communal eating area of the studio – evokes memories of my childhood and my mother’s cooking. In a manner that echoes *Permission to Speak*, *Collected Todays* uses text to describe an environment. But where *Permission to Speak* speaks with the plural voice of ‘us’ and ‘our’ and presents neighbourhood connections, *Collected Todays* speaks with a solitary voice that extolls the heartfelt and the solitarily observed. For example: ‘today I saw the nape of a man’s neck’ and ‘today I can hear the building breathing’. The work offers a glimpse into my inner world and in doing so explores a form of mastery defined by a willingness to allow for vulnerability.

Collecting observations of the everyday is an action that can be understood in philosophical terms. In his book *Philosophy in the Garden*, Damon Young presents a letter in which Jane Austen writes of an apricot growing on one of her trees. Young dismisses notions of triviality in Austen’s recording and instead views it as the author’s ‘nod to the eternal signs of life’.<sup>16</sup> My collected observations are similarly an acknowledgement that life continues. They show appreciation for the small things in life and reference the security of an assumptive world that is filled with uneventful everyday occurrences.

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<sup>15</sup> The ability to see a distant horizon was significant however, it offered a metaphor for the potentiality of growth. Echoing the vacillating nature of emotional transformation, some observations I collected included the horizon while others were collected from an environment closer to a symbolic home.

<sup>16</sup> Damon Young, “Jane Austen: The Consolations of Chawton Cottage,” in *Philosophy in the Garden* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2012), 31.



The act of cutting up poetry to form these observations suggests breaking beauty. However, my intention was not destruction but the opposite: to take something with acknowledged beauty and carefully and lovingly piece it into a new form. In cutting the text from the anthology I worked within self-imposed constraints. These highly ritualised constraints provided methodological security. Rituals are important in posttraumatic growth. Gorman claims that they are not only a way to ‘reestablish order’ but a method of connecting to others and to ‘our deeper selves’.<sup>17</sup> My rules stipulated that to gather the letters I needed to create the text, I must first use the complete word if it existed in the book. If I needed to create a word, I must use the most number of sequential letters I could find rather than build the word from individual letters gathered one at a time.

Complying with these constraints reflected an obsessive adherence to rules regarding the creation of a collection. In line with my research into the subtle gesture, it was important that the constraining rules were not an obvious feature of the work. This differentiates *Collected Todays* from On Kawara’s collections of everyday experiences *I Met* (1968–1979) and *I Went* (1968–1979). *I Met* presents the typed names of everyone Kawara met and spoke with during the course of his day. The names are listed on daily sheets of paper before being bound into yearly volumes [figure 73]. *I Went* presents a red line drawn on readymade maps indicating his daily travels [figure 74].<sup>18</sup> Kawara’s criteria for the work stipulates that everyone the artist met and everywhere he went was recorded. He places no judgement value on this collection and presents the lists without comment. In

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<sup>17</sup> Gorman, “Adaptation, Resilience, and Growth After Loss,” 232-3.

<sup>18</sup> Kawara added to these works every day until 17 September 1979 when his briefcase containing the tools he used to create the works was stolen when he left it unattended while doing his banking, and he deemed the series to be ended.



contrast, *Collected Todays* speaks with a gentle tone and cherry-picks the poetic in the day. Recording that ‘today the wind is making the windows creak’ or ‘today the wind is drawing with raindrops’ are important milestones in mending the ‘psychological numbness’ triggered by the loss of an assumptive world.<sup>19</sup> They also reflect van der Stokker’s deliberate aim of ‘trying to put something soft, sweet and emotional back into the world’.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, in contrast to the information Kawara records in *I Met* and *I Went* and Sophie Calle’s *Suite Vénitienne*, *Collected Todays* does not include the specific dates and times when the observations were collected. My work references the element of time through the slowness of the methodology, which suggests a ‘lived process’ rather than a more clinical diary-style recording of events. Tedeschi and Calhoun claim that time plays an important role in posttraumatic growth. They suggest that a long period of grief and non-acceptance of what has occurred ‘may actually be important for the maximum degree of posttraumatic growth to occur’.<sup>21</sup> *Collected Todays* accordingly represents more than just an acceptance of the world as it is, it represents finding the beauty within a given situation. This quiet measure of growth cultivated security and a desire to move beyond the given and to seek the new.

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<sup>19</sup> Tedeschi and Calhoun, “Posttraumatic Growth: Conceptual Foundations and Empirical Evidence,” 2.

<sup>20</sup> Lily van der Stokker interviewed by Steel Stillman, “Lily van der Stokker: in the Studio,” *Art in America* 102, no. 8 (September 2014): 139.

<sup>21</sup> Tedeschi and Calhoun, “Posttraumatic Growth: Conceptual Foundations and Empirical Evidence,” 8.

## Growth: Gardens, Flowers, Collections

To expand my research environment, I undertook a three month residency at Heritage Hill in central Dandenong. Heritage Hill consists of three historic buildings: two-storey Laurel Lodge, built in 1869; Benga, a family home built in 1936; and the still-operating St James Anglican Church, built in 1864.<sup>22</sup> The buildings are surrounded by almost a hectare of beautifully maintained gardens [figures 75-77]. This residency helped me to recognise the important role the suburban garden plays in my research. With each of the artworks in my project, the presence of the garden has increased. There are no gardens depicted with the houses in *Permission to Speak*; each house sits bereft of floral surrounds. *Dreams* presents gardens in fragments; broken patches of lawn, and pots and plants are positioned in unsustainable or inappropriate places. The gardens of *Home Made* connect the houses and display the beauty and vitality of spring. This subconscious increase in the presence of gardens in my work alludes to a growing sense of enjoyment of living following ambiguous loss.

Gardens have been widely utilised in creative practice as symbolic references to growth, renewal and sanctuary. For Frida Kahlo, the importance of her garden as ‘a source of comfort and an artistic haven’ was inspiration for the 2015 exhibition *FRIDA KAHLO: Art, Garden, Life*.<sup>23</sup> Discussions surrounding this exhibition celebrate not only the artist’s connection between her extensive plant collection

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<sup>22</sup>Benga was the home of Dr Ian Hart, Dorothy Hart, their children Peter and Anne, and a live-in maid. The property is now set up as a museum, gallery and studio space for the artist-in-residence.

<sup>23</sup> Karen Daubmann, “Making Frida Kahlo’s Garden in New York: *The Conservatory Exhibition*,” in *Frida Kahlo’s Garden*, eds. Adriana Zavala, Mia D’Avana, and Joanna Groarke (New York: The New York Botanical Garden and DelMonico Books, 2015), 119. The exhibition *FRIDA KAHLO: Art, Garden, Life* was shown at the New York Botanical Garden, 16 May 2015 to 1 November 2015.





Figure 75: Laurel Lodge, Heritage Hill Museum and Historic Gardens, 2014



Figure 76: Benga House, Heritage Hill Museum and Historic Gardens, 2014



Figure 77: Heritage Hill Museum and Historic Gardens, 2014

and images within her work, but the ‘inextricable’ link between Kahlo’s surroundings and her creative life.<sup>24</sup> Janine Burke writes of Sunday Reed’s heart-shaped planting of Heide’s Heart Garden as being influenced by notions of ‘refuge’ and ‘revivification’ following the end of Reed’s relationship with Sidney Nolan.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, Damon Young, claims that Jane Austen’s garden was ‘vital to her wellbeing’;<sup>26</sup> the cyclic rhythms of the garden and her daily association with it provided a source of security.<sup>27</sup> Beyond creative practice, the idea of gardens having positive benefit is reflected in the increasing popularity of their use in hospital settings as a ‘restorative resource’ for both patients and healthcare professionals.<sup>28</sup>

### **Growth: *My Flower Collection***

The flower-filled gardens of Heritage Hill led to works in which issues of ambiguous loss, security, and collecting became more overt. This shift reflects how the recognition and naming of ambiguous loss facilitated my ability to take a more objective, critical approach. The themes of mastery, connection and security manifested in three-dimensional works that move beyond the flat façade, which was a core element of my early research, to intimate a more embodied existence. As did *Collected Todays*, the title of the next piece overtly heralds the presence of a collection. *My Flower Collection* (2014) consists of small handmade flowers created from materials including wool, upholstery fabric samples, pipe cleaners,

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<sup>24</sup> Adriana Zavala, “Frida Kahlo Art, Garden, Life,” in *Frida Kahlo’s Garden*, eds. Adriana Zavala, Mia D’Avana, and Joanna Groarke (New York: The New York Botanical Garden and DelMonico Books, 2015), 18.

<sup>25</sup> Janine Burke, *The Heart Garden: Sunday Reed and Heide* (Milsons Point: Random House, 2004), 4.

<sup>26</sup> Damon Young, *Philosophy in the Garden* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2012) 19.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>28</sup> Terry Hartig and Clare Cooper Marcus, “Healing Gardens – Places for Nature in Health Care,” *The Lancet: Medicine and Creativity* 368 (December 2006): S37.

paper-covered wire, pyjamas, domestic cardboard and photographic images [figure 78-79]. Each of the flowers in *My Flower Collection* sits on a cardboard plinth; the highest of which measures 2.5 cm. The flowers adopt a simple form, similar to that commonly drawn by young children. That is, they mostly consist of petals, pistil and leafless stems. I acknowledge the rich history of symbolism attached to specific flowers, but this is not a focus of this project. My intent was to reference flowers as markers of goodwill and to symbolise life and growth rather than to present interpretations of specific species.

*My Flower Collection* explores mastery through restraint. In contrast, artists who work with collections commonly establish a sense of mastery through the presentation of large numbers of items or by undertaking long feats of collecting endurance. Susan Hiller's *Dedicated to the Unknown Artists* presents a collection of 305 hand-coloured postcards depicting rough seas. Annette Messenger's *Collection Albums* series contains 56 scrapbooks fat with images, while each of Kawara's works, *I Went* and *I Met*, present recordings he gathered daily for eleven years [figures 80-82]. Amateur collectors gain a similar sense of mastery through volume and extent. Danet and Katriel write of collectors seeking a sense of perfection by aiming 'to fill the space': striving for bookshelves with no gaps or doors entirely covered with stickers.<sup>29</sup> Presenting a restrained number of objects deprives *My Flower Collection* of a sense of mastery generated by expansiveness. In taking this path, the work differs from *Permission to Speak* which presented

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<sup>29</sup> Brenda Danet and Tamar Katriel, "No Two Alike: Play and Aesthetics in Collecting", in *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, ed. Susan Pearce, (New York: Routledge, 1994), 231-2.





Figure 78: Michelle Neal, *My Flower Collection*, 2014  
 wool, felt, upholstery fabric samples, pipe cleaners, paper-covered wire,  
 pyjamas, cardboard, photos;  
 dimensions variable

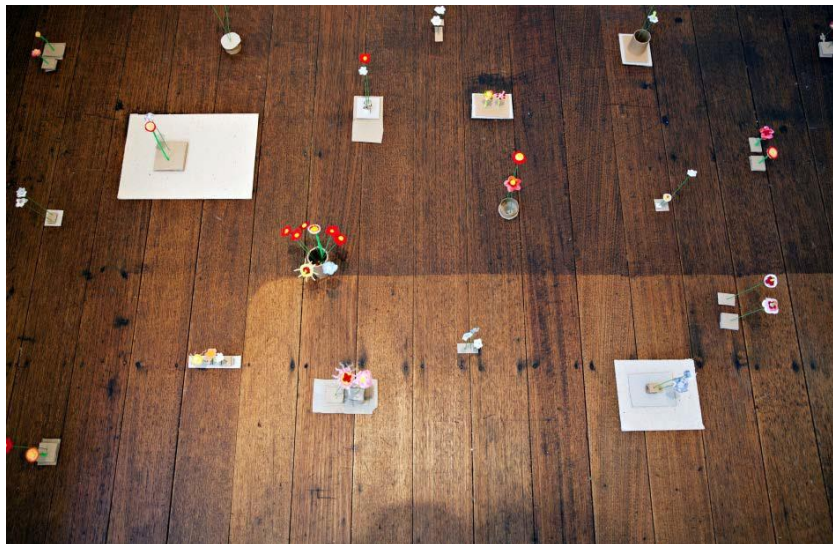


Figure 79: Michelle Neal, *My Flower Collection*, 2014  
 photo: Linda Wachtel





Figure 80: Susan Hiller, *Dedicated to the Unknown Artists*, 1972-6  
305 postcards, sea charts and map mounted on 14 panels,  
books, dossiers, exhibition catalogues, book stand  
dimensions variable

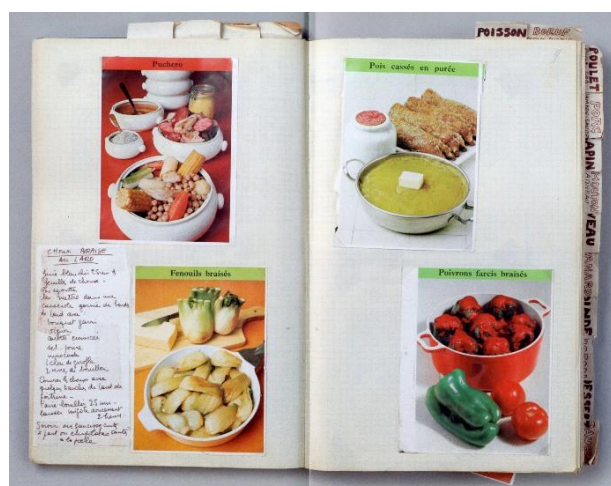


Figure 81: Annette Messager, *My Cookbook, Collection Album no. 9*, 1972  
notebook with graph paper, cardboard  
35 x 22 cm, 168 pages

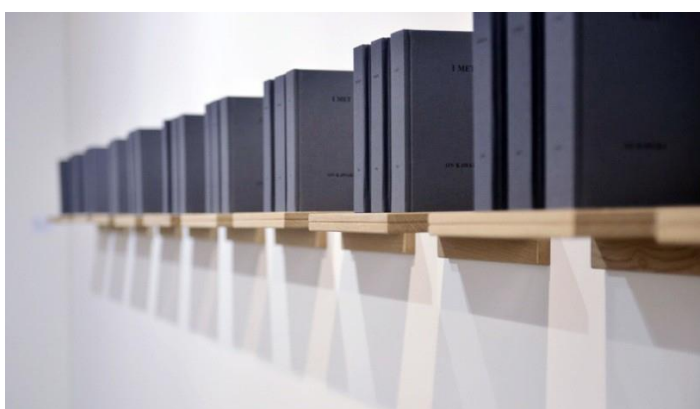


Figure 82: On Kawara, *I Met*, 1968-1979  
12 volumes, 4790 pages total  
each volume 21 x 14.8 cm

every house in my street. It similarly differs from *Collected Todays*, which obtained a sense of mastery through adherence to strict methodological rules. *My Flower Collection* aims to express mastery by exploring more subtle tactics.

These subtle tactics include presenting small-scaled works on the floor of an exhibition space as a method of inviting, rather than demanding, attention. While the size of the exhibition space creates a temptation to read the works as miniature, they are not created with that intent. In contrast to *Collected Todays* which cannot be viewed unless physical connection is made, viewers are not invited to touch *My Flower Collection*. However, the work still provokes physicality. The small size of the flowers means viewers have to lean over or bend down to view the work's details, such as the curving lines of wool or the spiralled cardboard bases [figures 83-87]. The size of the work provides an opportunity to cultivate attuned observation skills, to show appreciation for the small things in life, and is reminiscent of the idea of gardens being places that offer the opportunity to 'slow down (and) look carefully'.<sup>30</sup> By inviting viewers to 'come closer' the work also creates a sense of intimacy and connection. The brightly coloured blooms encourage a sense of joy and optimism, and suggest life in peak condition. They echo the eternal Spring suggested by the gardens of *Home Made* and represent life and growth. When *My Flower Collection* was exhibited at Heritage Hill it was installed where it could be seen through a doorway [figure 88]. The small pops of

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<sup>30</sup> Young, *Philosophy in the Garden*, 9.



Figures 83-87: Michelle Neal, *My Flower Collection*, 2014  
 details of photos by Linda Wachtel



Figure 88: Michelle Neal, *My Flower Collection*, 2014  
installation view, Heritage Hill Museum and Historic Gardens  
photo: Linda Wachtel

colour beckoned to passers-by, enticing them to enter the room and engage with the work.

The flowers' stems also explore notions of mastery. Rather than being ramrod straight, there is a slight wobble to each stem. This alludes to the idea of a new-found and vulnerable claim on mastery. It reflects the occurrence, noted in posttraumatic growth, of people experiencing a 'sense of increased personal strength' in the realization that they can endure difficult situations while simultaneously experiencing a sense of vulnerability resulting from the knowledge that the security of their assumptive world can collapse.<sup>31</sup> Although the stems are thin, they have the strength to hold the flower head aloft. In doing this, each flower seems to proclaim an inner resilience. Each displays a sense of 'I can', 'I am'. This idea is similarly reflected in the title. Use of the pronoun 'my' is central to this work. It conceptually positions the work in the collecting world of the amateur rather than the anonymous authority of the institution. It also inclines the work to ideas of the private rather than the public, reflecting the experience of ambiguous loss and posttraumatic growth. Just as importantly, the simple forms of the flowers continue my exploration of connection through accessibility, which I established in earlier works.

*My Flower Collection* aims to connect with viewers as well as present intimate connections within the subject matter itself. Although not necessarily obvious, each flower has a partner, and the pairs are carefully arranged in a relationship with the other flowers [figure 89]. In finding a partner *My Flower Collection*

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<sup>31</sup> Tedeschi and Calhoun, "Posttraumatic Growth: Conceptual Foundations and Empirical Evidence," 6.





Figure 89: Michelle Neal, *My Flower Collection*, 2014 (detail)  
photo: Linda Wachtel

creates its own sense of an accepted mainstream and of being on the inside. It presents a community of flowers, a neighbourhood of specimens that in its patterned duplicity echoes the Semco longstitches and Rachel Cusk's observation of reflected belonging.<sup>32</sup> The naming of the work as a collection aids in creating this sense of togetherness. It provides a metaphoric umbrella that unites the pockets of happiness with a seamlessness that contrasts to the spliced letters of *Collected Todays* or the visible indents that signal the original boundaries of the circular longstitches. This overlaying seamlessness infers mastery, security and the enveloping existence of an un-fractured assumptive world.

In creating a work featuring simplistic handmade flowers that has associations with loss, reconnection and community, *My Flower Collection* has some similarities with a work made under the direction of Melbourne artist Catherine Bell. *The Flower Tower* (2012 – 2013) is a four metre pillar of paper flowers made by a group of palliative care patients of Caritas Christi Hospice in the Melbourne suburb of Kew, where Bell held a year-long residency [figures 90-91].<sup>33</sup> Each week, patients and their companions would gather with Bell and create the brightly-coloured flowers. The activity spawned a community of amateur makers that traversed 'generations, genders and ethnic backgrounds'.<sup>34</sup> Forming a

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<sup>32</sup> Rachel Cusk, *Aftermath: On Marriage and Separation* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 2012), 27.

<sup>33</sup> *The Flower Tower* was exhibited as part of Bell's exhibition 'The Gathering', Substation Community Access Gallery, Newport, Victoria, Australia, 2 May 2013 to 9 June 2013.

<sup>34</sup> Dr Catherine Bell, *The Gathering*, (Newport: The Substation Community Access Gallery, 2013) unpaginated.



Figure 90: Catherine Bell, *Flower Tower*, 2012-13  
Community Art Project Caritas Christi Day Hospice  
handmade paper flowers, florist wire, florist tape, paint, polystyrene column, 430 x 60 cm



Figure 91: Catherine Bell, *Flower Tower* (detail)



community was central to Bell's aims, and the acknowledgement of the work's creative context was an exhibition requirement.<sup>35</sup> This is a point of difference between our works. My work, like Bell's, recognises the therapeutic value to be gained with the experience of hands-on making. But where the value of Bell's work included the strength drawn from working with others, my work sought value in the company of one. This not only referenced the solitary and unacknowledged struggle of ambiguous loss but was a strategy to provide meditative mental space to facilitate internal mending.

Bell's work also contrasts with my own by promoting notions of strength. *The Flower Tower* consists of more than 100 flowers stacked to four metres high, signalling how the delicate flowers acquire strength through expansiveness and height. In contrast, my work displays a budding personal inner strength that alludes to a subtle sense of mastery. This is more in line with the small and nuanced expressions of mastery experienced with ambiguous loss. Here mastery is presented as an achievable state, rather than an aspiration demonstrated by a display that reaches beyond the scale of the viewer.

Contrasting *My Flower Collection* with a work by Martha McDonald demonstrates our differing approaches to flowers and loss. *The Lost Garden* (2014) is McDonald's performance and installation set in The Woodlands, a historic home and garden in Philadelphia, USA. In the 1700s the property belonged to William Hamilton who established within its grounds 90 acres of 'manicured and

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

landscaped' gardens.<sup>36</sup> These gardens were later transformed into a cemetery as a way to save the property from development.<sup>37</sup> In her work, McDonald sings a lament as she wanders through the cemetery and her installation set inside the home [figures 92-94]. The installation includes a collection of 'botanically-accurate' knitted flowers enclosed beneath glass domes and a colourful garden-bed of knitted blooms presented on a low platform [figures 95-97].<sup>38</sup> As the artist walks through the cemetery and engages with her work, she wears a black Victorian mourning dress and is sometimes veiled [figure 98]. These overt references to mourning ensure that the theme of grief is easily recognisable. *My Flower Collection* does not overtly display themes of loss or grief. The handful of pale blue, flannelette-made flowers in my work and the memorialisation provided by the small plinths provide a clue to the work's origin in the wake of a crumbled assumptive world, but the presentation of grief is not obvious. In reflection of ambiguous loss, viewers must look beyond the familiar iconography of mourning for signs of other forms of bereavement.

The platform garden-bed within McDonald's installation is the main focus for comparison with my work. McDonald's garden is filled with identifiable species including sunflowers, irises, violets, and poppies, reflecting a loss that is known and recognizable [figure 99]. The flowers in *My Flower Collection* are not identifiable. As well as alluding to flowers as symbols of life and goodwill, this

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<sup>36</sup> *Friday Arts*, "Martha and the Lost," produced by Michael O'Reilly, aired January 12, 2015 on WHYY-TV. Episode posted online by Martha L. McDonald, March 27, 2015, "Martha McDonald featured on WHYY-TV's Friday Arts program," <http://marthalmcdonald.blogspot.com.au/2015/03/martha-and-lost.html>, accessed November 1, 2016.

<sup>37</sup> Martha L. McDonald, posted March 27, 2015, "Martha L. McDonald: The Lost Garden," Martha McDonald, <http://marthalmcdonald.blogspot.com.au/2015/03/the-lost-garden.html>, accessed November 1, 2016.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*



Figure 92: Martha McDonald, *The Lost Garden*, 2014  
documentation of site-specific installation and performance



Figure 93: Martha McDonald, *The Lost Garden*, 2014  
documentation of site-specific installation and performance



Figure 94: Martha McDonald, *The Lost Garden*, 2014  
documentation of site-specific installation and performance





Figures 95-96: Martha McDonald, *The Lost Garden*, 2014  
site-specific installation (detail)



Figure 97: Martha McDonald, *The Lost Garden*, 2014  
site-specific installation and performance (detail)



Figure 98: Martha McDonald, *The Lost Garden*, 2014  
documentation of site-specific installation and performance



Figure 99: Martha McDonald, *The Lost Garden*, 2014  
installation (detail)

strategy alludes to that which cannot be named. McDonald's brightly-coloured flowers express joy and happiness, similar to the blooms in *My Flower Collection*. But where my flowers are small and low to the ground, McDonald's flowers include chest-height blooms intimating exuberant and established growth. This showy display featuring annuals at their peak captures a moment of happiness that, like Hamilton's garden, is destined to be short-lived. The work's sense of ethereality is aided by the platform that seemingly floats a few centimetres off the floor, creating an air of dreams or memory. This device, the historical setting, McDonald's dress and the artist's song all serve to frame the work in the past and to activate notions of mourning, sorrow and loss. At the same time, however, McDonald's interaction with the work brings life to the garden, providing a circuitous loop that incorporates the present and the future. Whereas this sense of the relation between the present and future contrasts with *Home Made* and *Dreams*, which are either trapped within perceptions of an idealised world or present movement as difficult, it is a key aspect of my final work, *Ever*.

### **Growth: *Ever***

*Ever* (2014-2015) reflects life in a new assumptive world. This public artwork was made with real flowers in a roadside garden bed situated on the corner of Heatherton Road and Mons Parade, Noble Park within the municipality of Greater Dandenong [figure 100]. Consisting of red and yellow salvias and marigolds, species choice based on the availability of bright primary colours, the flowers were planted to create the word 'ever', condensed from the phrase 'happily ever





Figure 100: Michelle Neal with *Ever*, 2014  
flower-filled garden bed  
approx. 3.5 x 21 m

after', alongside simplistic flower representations.<sup>39</sup> The seedlings were planted in October 2014 and grew until the end of the artwork in February 2015 [figures 101-104]. Planted as an ephemeral work, *Ever* demonstrated the precarious character of security in an assumptive world. By highlighting that nothing lasts forever, the work contrasts with the idea of 'forever-ness' marketed by Semco longstitch kits and the image of eternal spring suggested by the gardens of *Home Made*.

*Ever* referenced the impermanence of the assumptive world and built upon the concept of beauty existing in different forms, formerly established in *Collected Todays* through my reconfiguration of poetry. As the plants in *Ever* grew, the form of the letters was lost, resulting in the garden bed eventually becoming simply a planting of beautiful red and yellow flowers [figure 105]. The short-lived, changing nature of the work suggests that everything is subject to transformation but that there is beauty in alternative narratives. This idea alludes to the transformative aspect of posttraumatic growth, to kintsugi and to recognising the positive elements to be found in a new assumptive world. However, the changes in *Ever* were responses to a natural lifespan of a flower. This differs from the 'life cut short' connotations of cut flowers harvested in their prime or just as they are about to bloom for use in flower arrangements.

Similar to the connections that are formed through people working together in Bell's flower work, *Ever* relied upon actual connections amongst people to be

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<sup>39</sup> While the choice of plants was based on colour, I later learnt that *Salvias* belong to a genus with a common name of sage. It is a fortuitous coincidence that this genus name comes from the Latin 'salvare', which means to heal or save. See Gardening Australia, "Plant Profile: *Salvia*," Australian Broadcasting Commission, <http://www.abc.net.au/gardening/stories/s1866731.htm>, accessed March 1, 2018.





Figure 101: Michelle Neal, documentation of *Ever*  
29 October 2014



Figure 102: Michelle Neal, documentation of *Ever*  
28 November 2014





Figure 103: Michelle Neal, documentation of *Ever*  
27 December 2014



Figure 104: Michelle Neal, documentation of *Ever*  
27 January 2015





Figure 105: Michelle Neal *Ever* (detail)

realized. Yet, while the creation of Bell's community was underpinned with the sense of deep connection forged through the pressures of terminal illness, the community of *Ever* was formed under relaxed circumstances and around planting new life. Planting the flowerbed involved the combined skills and labour of seven gardeners from the City of Greater Dandenong. As the gardeners planted they chatted to each other and to me. They developed a connection with their work, with each other and with me, and at the completion of the planting they asked me to take their photo with their work [figures 106-107]. The work also promoted conversation with members of the local community. In the course of my regular visits to the site over subsequent months to document the work's growth and changes, many passers-by would stop to chat. This actual social connection emulates the 'contact and communication' that is one of van der Stokker's aims in choosing to work on-site.<sup>40</sup> It moves the work beyond a yearning for community that is suggested by summoning the virtual companionship of a group of kit longstitch sewers. And it is far removed from the solitary, meditative letter piecing that *Collected Todays* involved. *Ever* celebrates the joy in sharing an experience with people. It extends explorations of the amateur from the wobbly flower stems in *My Flower Collection* to being part of a professional team with a collaboratively-infused sentiment of 'we are'.

## Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the idea of growth experienced with ambiguous loss. Each artwork progressively referenced notions of ambiguous loss, collecting,

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<sup>40</sup> Mirjam Westen and Annabel Howland, "How Much Nerve Does it Take to Stand up for 'Feminine Stupidity'?", *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry* 4, (2001): 26.





Figure 106: Members of The City of Greater Dandenong gardening team who planted *Ever*, 16 October 2014



Figure 107: Members of The City of Greater Dandenong gardening team who planted *Ever*, 16 October 2014

mastery and security more and more overtly, and themes that recur in my research grew less subtle. The idea of collecting began appearing in the titles of *Collected Todays* and *My Flower Collection* to draw more attention to this activity. This strategy alluded to the ability to recognise, name and speak ambiguous loss; a critical step in the process of understanding and accepting the experience. Naming ambiguous loss provided a sense of mastery, which in turn provided a sense of security and led to the reappearance of an assumptive world. Planted as an ephemeral work, *Ever* nonetheless acknowledged the precariousness of the assumptive world. As a word made from living flowers, *Ever* spoke of a promised permanence that could never be fulfilled, and paid homage to the recognition and acknowledgment of the cyclic pattern of life. The garden bed acted as a metaphor; transitioning through the dreams associated with planning and planting, the sunny growth of an assumptive world and the transformation into a new, but just as joyous, existence. *Ever* is therefore a culmination of the transition from the buoyancy displayed in the text of *Permission to Speak* through to the more subdued and reflective tone that permitted a glimpse into an interior world in the observations of *Collected Todays*. The work moves beyond the distanced viewing of idealised lives as manifested in *Permission to Speak*, *Dreams* and *Home Made* and features the security generated from being part of an actual community. *Ever* references life, exemplified by the use of a living medium, and presents the old and the new as both worthy of celebration.



## Conclusion

*After Ever: A Project* explored how an art practice might help to reflect and acknowledge the experience of ambiguous loss. Rather than borrowing the visual cues associated with bereavement and mourning, my research cultivated the ‘feel good’ qualities of an assumptive world to grapple with the subtleties of ambiguous loss. Discourses on ambiguous loss describe the assumptive world as a framework from which loss has fallen. I proposed that acknowledging this framework can provide a source of understanding and a means of contextualising the depth of the loss. This strategy not only provided a method of focusing attention on the assumptive world, it was a way of presenting a world in which its occupant – in a desperate attempt to feel ‘normal’ – projects the idea that everything is fine.

The idea of an image as an aspiration or a projection rather than a reflection of lived reality manifested in this project in the subtle gesture; the concern driving each work was often not presented as an obvious feature. The subtle gesture reflected the attuned observation required to recognise and acknowledge the cues of ambiguous loss. I explored this theme throughout my project by recognising, acknowledging and valorising objects and events often overlooked, and presenting them without fanfare. Rather than making these objects and events noticeable by elevating them with a grand flourish, subtlety and understatement were employed to reflect the private and unceremonious nature of ambiguous loss. The flowers in *My Flower Collection* were small and set on the floor, requiring viewers to bend close to observe their fine details. The observations and events presented in *Collected Todays* were ones perhaps acknowledged in the course of a day but not

necessarily celebrated: seeing irises, waving to someone, having peaches in the fridge, or noticing birds walking on a window ledge. And the presentation of my house in *Permission to Speak*, labelled only with a textual descriptor to signify my ownership, gave a sense of something inexpressible. In these repeated allusions to the subtle gesture, I asked viewers to respond to the small-sized, the intimate, and the unspoken with the aspiration that this would engender acknowledgment, understanding, and a quiet honouring of that which was presented before them.

My project also examined the diminished sense of security that can occur with ambiguous loss, and demonstrated how mastery and connection can help to create a sense of an assumptive world. My exploration of mastery was not connected to dominant power structures, but to small-scale personal mastery: a sense of being in control of one's own world. The writings of Susan Pearce, Russell Belk, Susan Stewart, John Elsner and Roger Cardinal helped to explicate the relationship between collecting and mastery, focusing upon a resultant sense of security. This involved looking at a collector's sense of creating and controlling a world, their agency in setting the boundaries of the collection's criteria, its display and rules for handling. Also important are the collectors' realisations of goals, ideas of hunting and prowess, and the role of chance in the achievement of their quest.

Through multiple artworks I explored different methods for creating a sense of security in collecting. *Permission to Speak*, *Home Made*, *Collected Todays* and *My Flower Collection* all had collecting at their heart. They involved hunting, finding, obtaining, assessing, categorising, recording, admiring, caring for, and ruminating upon a variety of items that I deemed to be worthy of collection. These included pyjamas, cardboard, wool lengths, kit longstitches, grammatical letter patterns,

interactions, emotions, and the simple observations I made during the course of my day.

Although collecting was a key feature of my project, I avoided employing tropes commonly used by artists as a method to authenticate and validate the collection. *Permission to Speak* was not set in a display cabinet, and the strict rules involved in making *Collected Todays* were not made explicit in the finished work.

Similarly, the quantity of blooms contained in *My Flower Collection* was deliberately limited. These strategies were contrasted with the work of artists who emphasise the expansive, the exhaustive and/or the adherence to self-imposed rules, such as Sophie Calle, Annette Messager, and On Kawara who variously make their work's compliance, or not, to the rules of their collecting an essential feature of the work. However, the activity of collection and the presence of rules was apparent in my work if you knew to look for it. This understated mode of presentation was employed to reflect the close observation required to recognise, and therefore acknowledge, ambiguous loss.

The second major focus of this project concerned the sense of security developed through social or personal connection. This included feeling connected by belonging to a group, either actually or virtually. The concept of the neighbourhood featured in *Permission to Speak*, *Home Made*, and to a less literal extent in *My Flower Collection*, to examine the security to be found in a mirrored identity and a sense of social connection. *Permission to Speak* and *Home Made* involved notions of inside and outside, and with these concepts drew parallels with the desire to feel 'normal' in the experience of ambiguous loss. *Permission to*

*Speak* presented a complicated expression of inside and outside with observations collected from the outside of homes and inside a neighbourhood. In using idealised houses as subjects, *Home Made* spoke to the security promised by the dream of a collective ideal. However, in a manner similar to *Permission to Speak* that ideal was only façade-deep. While this shallowness can be viewed as a criticism of the artificiality of the ideal, the façade is also potent with promise, allowing viewers to project a narrative of their own choice. Methodologically, *Home Made* offered entry into a personal or psychological inside, where the activity of stitching was a means for sewers to access and connect with their inner world. This work also facilitated discussion on connecting figuratively, suggesting the existence of a community of sewers, united virtually by their stitching of identical images from mass-produced craft kits. The artwork *Ever* explored the literal connection, sense of mastery and security that is generated by joining with a team of professionals to realise an artwork.

The physical sensation of touch as a means of connection was invoked throughout my project to examine its relationship with feelings of security. *Permission to Speak* and *Home Made* looked at the haptic comfort provided by the softness of wool and flannelette. This comfort was experienced by me during the making of the works, but was presented to viewers only visually and conceptually by invoking memories of handling wool or flannelette. In contrast, *Collected Todays* required a viewer's touch for activation. *Collected Todays* presented tiny letters of found text carefully collaged into sentences and pasted onto pristine index cards. Allowing the work to be touched encouraged viewers to read the everyday gestures of connection offered in the cards in a more intimate way. Additionally,

granting this permission fostered the idea of trusting that the work would be handled with care.

A sense of emotional buoyancy infused my research as another way of connecting with viewers. This strategy involved the dual aims of creating the ‘life is good’ atmosphere of an assumptive world and of projecting an invitation to ‘feel-good’ and to care. The use of the text in my works was compared to the ‘sweetness’<sup>1</sup> or the ‘secrets and concerns’<sup>2</sup> in Lily van der Stokker’s work. My own work focused upon sentiments and small personal gestures that offered a sense of security often fostered through the idea that somebody cared. *Permission to Speak* included reflections on neighbours who had a new baby, who took dinner to their father each night, who handed out biscuits, and who hid Easter eggs in letterboxes. The recordings in *Collected Todays* demonstrated care for details (noticing spots on socks, a man’s neck, or the scent of shampoo), as well as care through connection with people (holding someone’s hand, sharing a joke, smiling hello). The presentation of optimism and buoyancy in my work differed aesthetically to that of van der Stokker’s. Where van der Stokker employed aesthetics that magnified the work’s optimism, such as giant-sized, exuberant curls and bubble-written text, my work was more understated and less exuberant. A sense of optimism was barely present in the gentle blue-hued tones of *Permission to Speak*, was tightly controlled in the manicured gardens of *Home Made*, was deconstructed and reconstructed in *Dreams*, and manifested as a small-sized and ground-level presence in *My Flower Collection*. In *Ever*, while optimism was writ large, it was

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<sup>1</sup> Lily van der Stokker, “John Waters and Lily van der Stokker Interview,” in *Lily van der Stokker: It Doesn’t Mean Anything but it Looks Good*, (London: Tate Publishing, 2010), 138.

<sup>2</sup> Lily van der Stokker interviewed by Steel Stillman, “Lily van der Stokker: in the Studio,” *Art in America* 102, no. 8 (September 2014): 138.

counter-balanced with the ephemerality of the garden. My more subdued presentation of optimism not only reflected the importance of subtlety in this examination of ambiguous loss, in conveying a slightly melancholic air it reflected the grief-infused origins of my work. These explorations concerning the theme of connection were all aimed at engendering an understanding of the relationship between feeling connected, with others and with the self, metaphorically and literally, and obtaining a sense of security.

Throughout my project I explored the role everyday domestic materials play in relation to mastery, connection and the sense of an assumptive world. Discarded household cardboard was a feature of *Permission to Speak* and *My Flower Collection*; it spoke to the feelings of colourlessness described in experiences of ambiguous loss and to the sense of mastery associated with the ascription of value. As a method of connection, I offered viewers a sense of accessibility to my artworks by relying upon the everyday familiarity and informality that these materials evoked. Additionally, the worn pyjama fabric that appeared in *Permission to Speak* and *My Flower Collection* resonated with the notion of comfort in an assumptive world. Although the flannelette pyjamas have associations with security, intimacy, protectiveness and vulnerability, this fabric choice was at the time made completely intuitively, guided only by a type of visceral hunger for the comforting softness of its touch.

Wool's important associations with care-giving, warmth, and security informed *Home Made*. The kit longstitches were a vehicle to explore the idea of the amateur and of guided, risk-free steps to mastery. Unlike the quest of collecting, the kits'

clearly defined patterns reduced the likelihood of having to negotiate chance.

While this resonated with the security of knowing what to expect and holding a sense of mastery, not having to negotiate chance also spoke to the notion of letting go of control as a symbolic action of trust; an attribute that can be scarred when an assumptive world is damaged. Many of my material choices and techniques also reflected the art-making activities and aesthetics of childhood. Pipe cleaners, felt, cut photos, glued wool and fabric, storybooks, even the cereal boxes – ubiquitous components of kindergarten-made sculptures – all referenced both an assumptive world and that of the amateur.

The notion of time was another thread that ran throughout my work. Time was addressed conceptually, aesthetically, materially and methodologically. The identification of slow-growing trees, gardens fixed in everlasting Spring, and historical homes in *Home Made* spoke of an idealised view of permanency from which I drew an implication of security. The two concepts of impermanence and permanence converged in *Ever*. Encompassing connotations that include times past and future, constancy, permanence and the eternal, the word ‘ever’ was a counterpoint to the limited lifespan of the flowers. The repetitive recording of todays in *Collected Todays*, straddled time both past and present in a subtle way. While the time of ‘today’ was integral to the collection, the day of the week, date and year were not specified nor featured in the visual work. Instead the collection alluded to time by locating the research in daily life.

The passing of time was made evident in other ways throughout my project. The text in *Permission to Speak* was recorded using an out-dated typewriter and

presented in boxes separate from the images, alluding to a storybook aesthetic of childhood. The flannelette pyjamas reverberated with aged fashion rather than with current trends, and the cardboard from discarded food boxes referenced the impermanence of household packaging. The longstitch kits are outmoded, and each collection of an immediate today in *Collected Todays* was recorded in text cut from the yellowing pages of a decades-old poetry book. In referencing the past, these materials alluded to processes of finding security through working with that which is known. Just as significant for this project, however, and in reflection of *kintsugi*, they also reference the value of working with what exists despite its limits.

Responding to ambiguous loss as a process and reflecting the observation that ‘mourning is not something you can do in an afternoon’, time was also referenced through my art-making processes.<sup>3</sup> The slowness inherent in the creation of many of my works, stitch by stitch, letter by letter, and petal by petal, resonates with the process of re-building a sense of an assumptive world. In reflection of the subtle gesture, this slow methodology was not presented as an obsessive trait or an endurance task. This methodology allowed for more than the passive recording of time past and its passing, and demonstrated an active relationship with time-consuming processes through art-making. This move reflected Louise Bourgeois’ fear-negating statement that ‘the goal is to be active and take control’.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Louisa Bufardecì, presentation for MADA Artforum, Monash University Caulfield Campus, 8 September 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Louise Bourgeois, “Self-Expression is Sacred and Fatal Statements,” in *Louise Bourgeois: Designing for Free Fall*, eds. Marie-Luise Flammersfeld und Hans Jürgen Balmes, (Zürich: Ammann, 1992), 195.



The notion of process was pertinent to this project on an all-encompassing and deeply personal level. While *After Ever: A Project* aimed to elucidate aspects of ambiguous loss, the exegesis was written largely with the benefit of hindsight. Struggling for direction and an understanding of what you are doing is not unusual in undertaking a fine art PhD. However, my struggle was reflective of my life. My discovery of the term ambiguous loss was a major turning point. Suddenly my feelings of insecurity, of colourlessness, my inability to see beauty beyond an intellectual level, and my feeling of not being the person I once was, had been named. The naming of what I was experiencing allowed me to not only recognise a 'normal' in my feelings, but provided a way to contextualise my artworks beyond what the artworld currently offered. Previous to learning of ambiguous loss, I could only know how I *didn't* want my work to be contextualised. While my works resonated with the themes of feminism, power, grief, the project, and / or the confessional, this framing was inadequate or inappropriate. Rather, process was the key. The process of the work's creation was an experiment in developing the rules and boundaries with which I was constructing my new assumptive world.

Adapting research on ambiguous loss from the field of psychology to the field of art importantly offers a critical tool that sheds new light on art and art making.

Ambiguous loss provides a means of understanding art concerned with themes of loss, grief and traumatic personal experience beyond notions of the confessional. It negates the need to frame the work's reception with personal detail and potentially opens more points of connection with an audience. The themes that this project explored, including the subtle, the unspoken, collecting, mastery, and connection, are also tools that artists can use in identifying and creating their own responses to

ambiguous loss. The complexity and diversity of many life events that can cause a sense of loss, such as job loss, moving home, addiction, or mental health deterioration cannot be signified by a simple shared visual language like black for mourning or rosemary for remembrance. A more flexible, thematic tool kit is needed. Multiple themes allow artists to respond to ambiguous loss in their own way, and encourage viewers to be sensitive to the many forms that ambiguous loss can take. While I collected pyjamas, household cardboard and longstitch kits, these materials can be substituted with collections of any object or event that holds significance for the artist and provides a sense of security in their terms.

The methodologies I explored in the research, including collecting, invoking touch and their importance to connection, can be further developed through more immersive processes. Presentation of the understated and the subtle can be deepened in relation to works that explore large emotions that are triggered by seemingly small or unknown events. The subtle may be employed to echo the situation of ambiguous loss; to present work that appears as one thing but concerns something else. And representations of the assumptive world and of ordinary happiness could be pursued through seeking and presenting text and images that express emotional buoyancy designed to invite viewers to ‘feel good’. Importantly, by providing a method of engaging with potentiality in difficult circumstances, *After Ever: A Project* represents a way of beginning.

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