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Museum of Brisbane presents

MEZZANINE



ALICE  
LANG  
JUST  
IN  
CASE

26 NOVEMBER 2010 –  
30 JANUARY 2011

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***Just in case:***

*we run out of time, something happens, you change your mind, we can use it, you don't like it, the house burns down, my mum calls, I don't see you, we miss each other, you forget, you run out, you don't make it, it works out, you feel anxious, we need a place to stay, you get lucky, it starts to rain, we get caught, it stops, you know someone who might want it, I can't think of anything, I fall asleep, I'm not there, we miss it, I lose it, I don't know anyone, it floods, you get hungry, it gets cold, you have fun, I have doubts, it goes well, I get a headache, I forget, he's there, I run out of steam, you want it, it goes out of fashion, you get lost, they find you, you get in, you don't know what to do, there's a misunderstanding, you get hurt, it doesn't work out, there's not enough, they don't know what you're talking about, it's the wrong colour, it doesn't fit, you get nervous, they want more, you want to stay, you don't feel like it, it starts without me.*

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# Contingent Strategies

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Alice Lang's materially driven sculptures reference a range of sewing techniques and textile influences including puff paints, second hand fabrics and appliqué to create a tension between the decorative and the grotesque, form and formlessness, allure and repulsion. Lang's new work *Just in case*, investigates the adaptability of sculptural objects as communicative, inhabitable and wearable spaces.

In creating artworks, Lang employs an ever-expanding array of women's craft materials and skills. She fashions lacy, organic patterns, predominately soft sculptures, intestinal pink artworks, a feminine grotesque and abject aesthetic, and a body of work that has more recently been up-scaled to immersive cubbies. *Just in case* further develops this sensorial exploration and extends beyond the body to include social, cultural, architectural and environmental spaces. Consisting of a series of painted, highly decorative and wearable tepees (also tipi and teepee), which may be entered by the viewer or hooded-ponchos that may also become a shelter if you need a place to stay, it starts to rain or if you just run out of steam.

As globalisation is producing new geographies, new kinds of citizenship, *Just in case* imagines a different kind of mobility through perhaps the most democratic artform: craft. Almost everyone has a grandmother who can teach them how to knit or they can download a pattern from the internet and follow a set of instructions. Almost anyone with the inclination can stitch something, create a unique version of a pre-existing pattern through colour and fabric choices or re-invent patterns by incorporating contemporary urban motifs. It's anti-art and arguably, aesthetics can be suspended: it's democratic, poetic, haptic, ugly, practical and dominated by women; versus traditional art that is entrenched in Kantian beauty, simultaneously emotional and intellectual, and dominated by men. The interior and exterior

surfaces of the installation are constructed with and textured by this democratic form.

*Just in case* is both a sculptural object and a sensorial environment: an installation to be viewed from its perimeter, but also something to be experienced from inside its confines. As with much contemporary installation, the work inherits a vocabulary of interactivity that calls for and accommodates active audience participation rather than passive viewing. Creating interactive artworks to wear, enter into and inhabit, Brazilian artist Helio Oiticica (1937–1980, Brazil) initiated this vocabulary of interactivity. Known as one of the most experimental artists of the 1960s, his supra-sensorial installations were among the first examples of installation art.

Oiticica's artwork became increasingly interactive as he moved from object-based to body-centred experiences in which viewer participation became the central focus. Dismissing materials with noble associations, such as marble and bronze, his work explores haptic space, allowing the coexistence of opposites within the same space: internal and external, male and female, subjective and objective, metaphorical and literal, material and immaterial through tactile, auditory, olfactory, kinetic propositions and relational actions.

Oiticica's collaboration with Brazilian filmmaker Neville d'Almeida *CC5 Hendrix War* (1973), exhibited as part of the 2008 Biennale of Sydney, is a typical example of his immersive quasi-cinemas. Upon entering and/or lounging in the hammocks within this installation, viewers are collectively immersed into a world with colourful, fractured, overlapping projected images and audio. Viewers become participants in a playful, enveloping experience, challenging the traditionally passive relationship between the cinematic image and spectator.



Oiticica was interested in syncretic processes that fused two very different traditions: a Western aesthetic canon that privileges vision and metaphysical knowledge and the other, non-Western oral traditions in which histories and knowledge are encoded in ritual and the body's memory. He was interested in breaking down the boundaries between art object and viewer, in favour of participation and pleasure; thereby changing the traditional role of the viewer and the status of art object. Specifically, the disappearance of the art object into life in general.

Like Oiticica, in adopting ordinary, everyday or even poor materials (a term closely associated with Arte Povera, a group of Italian artists of the 1960s), Lang challenges the norm. Lang's material and construction choices are important as they denote quite specific ideas and meaning. Distinctively, Lang deploys these traditionally domestic crafts which have often been perceived as having minimal conceptual and/or aesthetic qualities, into a dominant system of artistic production and reception that has historically marginalised women.

While these traditionally domestic crafts were once required and at least considered useful, knowledge of these skills has slowly declined. Although the internet offers global information, craft is largely felt to be a disappearing and under-appreciated skill at the brink of eradication. Defined against industrialisation, locally produced and handmade has been replaced by generic mass-produced stuff. Consequently, consumers are increasingly alienated from manufacture. As anxiety about globalisation, corporate mega-monopolisation and environmental concerns increases, many young women are reclaiming the domestic crafts that have been considered dowdy domestic hobbies and/or oppressive as a form of subversive resistance and activism.

Rescued from the brink of extinction, craft now rests in unexpected domains including tattooed roller-derby girls and celebrity knitters.

As part of a slow, sustainable, do-it-yourself revolution that enshrines environmentalism's key messages: reduce, recycle and repurpose, this craft revival provides an alternative to mass-production. Moreover, it distances makers and buyers of handmade craft from unethical production practices, such as sweatshop labour, often involving women and children in the developing world and allows for a more fair, equitable and ethical form of capitalism.

Quixotic or idealistic and heterodox, the work resonates with feminist economics. Rather than solely focusing on production for the marketplace, feminist economics reattributes value to unpaid and/or undervalued work. Feminist economics asserts that unpaid work is just as valuable to the economy as paid work, regardless of gender, race, class and caste. Unlike classical economics, it instead attempts to accommodate the heterogeneity of multiple economics, including green economics, and deconstructs an ontological basis for economic discourse. A feminist methodology reconsiders contemporary and historical cultural projects beyond a neoliberal horizon and specifically, in relation to postcapitalist and postidentity politics. Destabilising the patriarchal system remains very much a central cause, but rather than just an intellectual and political movement, many young women are applying multifaceted feminisms as a practice.

The work is also ominous. Reminiscent of 60s sci-fi, of mirrored worlds reflecting a bleak warning; like Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* (2006), although more bright and colourful, the work locates the viewer in proximity to a horizon of some unexplained and foreboding disaster. In many respects Lang utilises these crafts, repetitive patterns, knitting and stitching, as a kind of meditative mantra. The repetitive circular nettings, vaguely based on cutwork embroidery, have gradually emerged in many of Lang's works. Likewise, the extended title is a new version of the meditative



stitch, staving off an impending crisis. *Just in case: something happens, the house burns down, my mum calls, I don't see you, you forget, you feel anxious, we need a place to stay, you get lucky, I fall asleep, I lose it, it floods, it gets cold, I get a headache, it goes out of fashion, you get lost, there's a misunderstanding, you get hurt, it doesn't work out, it's the wrong colour, it doesn't fit, they want more, you don't feel like it.* It anticipates a list of possible scenarios: some frivolous, while others are more sombre and not so fun. And herein lies the real tension of the work; between the frivolous and the sombre or sobering.

*Just in case* poses a threat to dominant systems including capitalism and this kind of transgressive skirmish is reflected in the tepee's decorative potential. Due to its expansionist logic, capitalism is constantly forced to upgrade and change its strategies in order to hypercommodify. As the do-it-yourself movement becomes increasingly popular, imitative mass consumerism generates a backlash of its own by generating rampant profit, passivity and marketing of expensive craft supplies. Essentially kidnapping creativity and forcing this crafting business to become an expensive hobby in the realm of middle-class luxury.

On the exterior surfaces of the tepee skins appears a series of texts or proclamations. These mediative mantras are repeatedly appliquéd, stitched into and painted onto recycled fabrics; or recycled Manchester that can be turned into wearable banners. The text 'Lucky, lucky, lucky' is boldly perceptible on gold fabric. The phrase could conversely be read: Aussie, Aussie, Aussie; we're lucky, lucky, lucky. Within the master narratives of zombie capitalism, crisis and the tyranny of emergency, the work expresses anxiety and attempts to delay an impending crisis. Already situated within a rapidly growing rupture of social cohesion, the collapse of civilisation, *Just in case* bridges intellectual and political, resistance and subversive practices. Ultimately through using puff paints

and making visible frivolous visual pleasure, Lang explores the porousness of these things, these skirmishes and practices.

The edges between feminism, environmentalism, economics, shelter, body and art object, these fabrics, become soft and malleable. Like Oiticica, Lang generates a textured environment that invites viewers to relax, reflect and socialise, while embracing political and subversive possibilities. Reasserting the radical heterogeneity of a sensory experience, the artist rearticulates this new world without borders. Through recycled fabrics and craft, Lang stitches a web of empirical relationships around the body's internal and external spaces. While imagining a different kind of mobile class, *Just in case* considers the paradoxes of democracy across borders, different cities, citizenship and governments.

But never mind if it all becomes too much. If you run out of steam, your hooded-poncho can be transformed into an emergency shelter.

**Louise Rollman**

Curator, Contemporary Projects  
Museum of Brisbane

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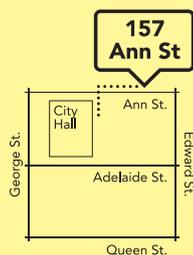
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