

Absence of occupation is not rest

'To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognise it the way it was. It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.'

Walter Benjamin, 1940

For Walter Benjamin, history was a dialogue between present and past. A sense of the past can only be retrieved with empathy, synchronicity or disjuncture for this invokes a brief understanding of the past.¹ Thus history is a dynamic process, fuelled by the element of surprise, open to the unexpected and most likely encountered as a shock or moment of realisation, perhaps a tingle up the spine. Chronology and conventional historical narrative do not create a complete picture. Pointing to the limits of archives, Benjamin in effect conjures an embodied engagement with the past where sensory response is a valued method in the tools of historical methodology.

Ever elusive, traces of the past might best be glimpsed in peripheral vision – by not always looking squarely at the documentary evidence and by using a combination of methods to get you there. Acknowledging that the past is never fixed but created in the present and changing over time helps to give agency to any 'reader' of history who brings their own meanings, memories and bias to bear on historical objects. In the context of museum displays, for instance, Marius Kwent argues that such objects have the capacity to invoke memory and carry meaning and thus create dialogue between the object, the maker and consumer.² Meaning is continually in flux and dependent on the relationship with the viewer and the context in which objects are presented.

Approaching the history of Heathcote through art therefore brings another prism through which to view the past and sets up provocative dialogue between past and present, object and viewer. Paul Caporn plays with the meaning of the place and its history by modifying the space of the gallery, weaving archival voices and juxtaposing objects from the site in a new framework.

Heathcote Reception Home was established with the Mental Treatment Act of 1927 that enabled people with mild mental illness to admit voluntarily rather than being certified insane which carried greater stigma. Heathcote was designed as place of refuge and respite, far from the assault of modernity frequently cited as the cause of declining mental health and increasing anxiety. The healing qualities associated with the natural beauty of the site, fresh sea breezes, and magnificent vistas would provide a setting for patients to recover and rest. The design of Heathcote, with a sense of 'airiness', 'roominess' and 'lofty' ceilings also hoped to support a return to mental health.³

The optimism expressed upon Heathcote's opening is challenged by Caporn's installation that invokes an element of psychological drama – unrest, dis-ease and tension filled presence/absence. Playing with notions of confinement and freedom, through an encased shed within a shed, or a soft but stifling mattress, vistas that drown and cannot be seen, Caporn shapes a view of Heathcote that is at odds with the placid and benign beauty of the place, and apparently progressive approach to mental health treatment.

Heathcote operated as a government mental hospital from 1929 to 1994, before its reinvention as a cultural precinct, museum and gallery. Places and objects change use, function and meaning over time – a shed is not a shed, a mattress not a mattress and this is not an empty room. René Magritte's once radical tactic finds relevance in this 'historic' site. The room holds past actions and past use, is loaded with potential meaning and enlisted as a player in an art installation.

As if a gauge of accuracy or a measure with which to sense the past, spirit levels (degree of haunting?) are poised on the delicate border between precision and imprecision, balance and correction. The language of mental illness routinely uses degrees of balance or imbalance or describes a pendulum in motion.

Chemical intervention seeks to make subtle adjustments to the workings of the mind by modifying the biochemistry of the brain; incremental and gradual or blunt and shocking.

'No one ever knew exactly how it worked' noted Dr A.S. Ellis, Head of Mental Health Services in Western Australia (1963-78), when recounting the experimental use of Cardiazol treatment for depression at Heathcote from 1930. Cardiazol, 'an intravenous injection of powerful heart stimulant...produced a convulsion similar to that produced today by electrical means.'⁴ This treatment provoked anxiety in patients, as did Electric Convulsive Therapy (ECT), also used at Heathcote. In 1958 a Dr Faulkner recommended occupational therapy to help allay apprehension in patients treated with Cardiazol and ECT.⁵

By the 1960s, occupational therapy was integral to treatment and recovery at Heathcote. By keeping occupied, working or creating things, the mentally ill may find balance again. For idle hands, so the proverb goes, are the devil's playground. The notion that salvation (mental health) might be reached through occupation reflects the Protestant work ethic and the disciplinary impulse applied to the body and mind of the mentally unwell in institutional care.

Occupation as a form of treatment in asylums has its origins in the late 18th century with the work of Philippe Pinel. Physical labour was a way of promoting order, encouraging routine and resocialising patients.⁶ Work was a diversion (from madness) and provided positive stimulation, but it was also a form of cheap labour that reinforced a patient's working class role in society.⁷ Even in an asylum, one is not free from the reach of capitalist forces and is only seen to be 'well' if part of a productive workforce. Occupational therapy grew as a method of treatment in Western Australia post WWII.⁸ By early 1947 occupational and art therapy contributed to the rehabilitation of ex-service men under post-war reconstruction used to get servicemen back to work.

Caporn's shed, a space of production, a place to retreat and occupy oneself by making things invokes the use of occupational therapy on the site and much more. But this shed is not any shed; it is a shed within a shed, a ghost and a memory – a doppelganger of itself. Caporn has used a personally significant object – his grandfather's shed, removed from its original location, rebuilt and encased in a transparent shed and given an afterlife in a gallery. In doing so, the artist makes literal the aura of the object – captured in its transparent encasing, holding the original in a state of protection and redescribing an echo of the form. In its rebuilding and reproduction a shift occurs – it is no longer a shed and the object's history becomes a memory.

Theodor W. Adorno's critique of the museum and gallery in the late sixties observed that objects presented in museums undergo a fragmentation of meaning, and are 'in the process of dying' because they have been removed from their original use.⁹ For Adorno, museum objects acquire new meaning in their museological context. Here with Caporn's shed, we have an artefact of post-war suburban culture that once belonged to the artist's grandfather and signifies the masculine domestic domain, entirely vernacular and ordinary. It contains these associations yet is bereft of function, emptied of its original purpose, and gaining new meaning in a complex space – in dialogue with the history of the site as a mental hospital and the space as a contemporary art gallery and heritage precinct.

**Kate Gregory
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¹ W. Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', 1940

² M. Kwint, 'The physical past' in *Material Memories*, Oxford: Berg, 1999

³ *West Australian*, 17 Nov 1928, p 6

⁴ A.S. Ellis, *Eloquent Testimony*, Nedlands, W.A: UWA Press, 1984, p 78

⁵ Occupational Therapists Club, Minutes 16 May 1958, Battye Library

⁶ P. Pinel, *A Treatise on Insanity*, 1806

⁷ L.D. Smith, 'Cure, Comfort and Safe Custody' *Public Lunatic Asylums*, London: Leicester University Press, 1999

⁸ C. Anderson Oral History, Battye Library

⁹ T. W. Adorno, 'Valéry Proust Museum', *Prisms*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1967