



**Cynthia
Schwertsik**
UTE-ilitarian

A catalogue of ideas and chairs



Cynthia Schwertsik's project *UTE-iltarian*, is both a site-specific new body of work responding to the built and physical environment of the Bedford Park campus of Flinders University, as well as an engagement with the back catalogue of what might be called "the forgotten history of South Australian performance art".

Newcomers to South Australia are largely unaware that from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s, Adelaide was one of a handful of global centres for art practices variously termed performance art, live art and post-object art. In form, content, and particularly for its social engagement, the practices of Adelaide's Experimental Art Foundation and the South Australian Women's Art Movement are uncannily aligned with the practices of Southern California artists of the time, particularly those associated with the Woman's Building in Los Angeles, where feminism had opened up the space for urgent and necessary connections with the world outside the gallery. In these practices, the body was often the starting point, situated in time and space and connecting to place and moment in ways that were visceral, unexpected, and necessary.

It was in this environment that visionary academic Professor Donald Brook (1927-2018), foundational chair of Fine Arts at Flinders University, coined the term "post-object art", and began assembling what is quite possibly the world's largest and most delightfully idiosyncratic collection of "objects" connected with a "post-object" artistic practice, held by the Flinders University Art Museum. Brook, whose brilliant conceptualisation of a range of related arts practices much-circulating in Europe, the United States and Australia at the time, observed that, "[w]orks of post-object art are to be understood as actions (or as the evidence of actions) occurring in a complete world in which any aspect or consideration might turn out to be relevant, and from which art is not insulated."

Given the action orientation of "post-object" or performance art, it may seem ironic that the objects created and used in such a practice, including photographs documenting such "actions", were deemed worthy of preservation. But thankfully they were, which leads us to Cynthia Schwertsik's *UTE-iltarian*. Austrian-born Schwertsik was given access to the ephemera associated with the post-object art practices of Australian artists housed in the University's Art Museum, tasked to use the collection as a creative impulse for new work.

Perhaps because she, like so many of us, is a migrant to this ancient and powerful land, Schwertsik's work is supremely receptive and responsive to place. Thus, it is perhaps unsurprising that while looking through the back catalogue she was drawn to Aleks Danko's (1950-) work, in particular his artist book, *The chair is not a tourist* (1975). Danko's gentle, strangely organic but highly unorthodox way of positioning himself on chairs connected to Schwertsik's practice, one in which she has routinely used chairs, this strangely anthropomorphised object, to connect with place. When positioned in the marshy landscape bestriding Port Adelaide's Outer Harbour, as in her past work *Mutton Cove* (2018), they are colonising a place in which they do not belong, forcing the viewer to contemplate place differently. When she uses chairs as walking devices to awkwardly traverse the land, they not only slow down her progress, but show the folly in seeking to assert human mastery over place.

Australian suburbs are characterised by cubes and boxes, by regimented spaces defined by fences, walls, streets, and driveways, and though often lacking in beauty, they are nonetheless the places in which many of us live. Where the artist moves through built and public spaces, as is the case with her new site-specific work, Schwertsik observes, "I'm responsible for that place too as I'm living in it."² Moving through such spaces, ones seemingly devoid of human beings, Schwertsik asserts that when she walks on chairs, as she has done throughout Adelaide, she is looking "...to see if somebody's out there."³

UTE-iltarian is inspired by the artist's engagement with what she calls a "catalogue of ideas"⁴—involving taking threads from the back catalogue of Australian performance and post-object art, from work such as Danko's, and weaving them into the present. In this new body of work, car parks, the necessary but hideous spaces that flatten the steep, wooded terrain on which Flinders University is built, become a site of performance, with chairs used to suggest automobiles in ways immediately recognisable. By viewing them from overhead and at an angle, we see them for what they are, as a disfigurement and colonisation of place, transforming it into a generic space to be temporarily occupied by vehicles of different shapes and sizes. We demand these spaces of convenience, so necessary in bringing us together at public institutions, but ironically, we both arrive and leave alone or in small groups, sitting in chairs in little metal boxes, isolated from others, moving through space on our way to some other place.

As Brook observes, using language relevant to Schwertsik's work, "[p]ost-object artists, generally speaking, have little or no interest in aesthetic goodness conceived of in any way that would not apply equally to the works of Nature or to non-artistic artifacts."⁵ In *UTE-iltarian*, the aesthetic qualities of the work are inextricably connected with the natural world; here "works of nature" employ "non-artistic artifacts"—chairs—positioned in ways that enable us to "see" nature differently and to reassess our position within it.

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¹ Brook, Donald, "Post-object art in Australia and New Zealand", in Britton, Stephanie (ed), *A decade at the EAF: a history of the Experimental Art Foundation, 1974-1984*, Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide, 1984, p25.
² Schwertsik, Cynthia, personal communication, 9 May 2019.
³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Brook, op. cit.

Cynthia Schwertsik

In *UTE-iltarian* I explore nuances of Australian culture within the Post-object and Documentation Collection held at Flinders University Art Museum. Comprising notes, booklets, film reels, black and white photographs, and ephemera, this archive captures the diverse and ground-breaking practices of conceptual artists in the 1960s and 1970s. For me, this material questions where the essence of the art is held: in the object, in the mind, or in-between? Aleks Danko's artist book *The chair is not a tourist* (1975) seems to address all three questions within an Australian context. The work presents Danko and his colleagues seated on chairs in various public and private settings. Through these interventions the artist explores, among other things, Australian suburban loneliness and displacement. Inspired by Danko, in my new work I continue to utilise chairs to explore my status as a visitor to Australia (I insist, I am not a tourist).

Chairs are designed for the average sized person. I am of small stature and find chairs uncomfortable: I feel disconnected from the ground. I also see chairs as a colonial construct – they play a quiet role in the use of power and the evolution of civilisation. British anthropologist Tim Ingold argues that the world is shaped through the choices we make and invites us to consider how we inscribe ourselves onto the world through our actions. In Australia, my ecological footprint as a daily commuter consists of numerous bitumen-laid carparks. In my new work, I reimagine chairs as cars and consider bitumen as an inscription on the earth for societal convenience. *UTE-iltarian* is my absurd, unsustainable grappling of Australian everyday norms.

Biography

Austrian-born, Adelaide Hills-based artist Cynthia Schwertsik holds a Bachelor of Visual Arts (2016) from Adelaide Central School of Art. She also earned a Dance Diploma (1990) from the Centre for Contemporary Dance and Performance, Vienna, and a Diploma of Textile Design (1987) from the Higher Technical College for Art and Design in Graz, Austria.

Schwertsik has exhibited and performed in solo and group exhibitions and interventions throughout Europe and Australia. Key solo projects include *Total recall* (2017), Museum of unheard (of) things, Berlin; *Acute cross reference: I need a change of wallpaper!* (2013), Museum MUSA, Vienna; *Her shadow knows* (2011), Gruene Galerie, Vienna; and *Legends of culture* (2010), Right on the Rim and Project Salon, Johannesburg. Recent group exhibitions and performances include *Landscape stories – Mutton Cove* (2018), Fontanelle in partnership with Open Space Contemporary Arts, Adelaide; *Best after* (2018), praxis ARTSPACE, Adelaide, and *The other (hi)story* (2017), Kuensterhaus, Vienna.

Schwertsik has undertaken numerous commissions in Australia and has participated in residencies in Johannesburg, South Africa; Monthelon, France; Tenerife, Spain; Balchik, Bulgaria; and Adelaide, Broken Hill and Kangaroo Island, Australia. Her work is held in BMUKK - the Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, Arts and Culture - Austria; Land Burgenland, Austria; Trimedia, Austria; Institute of Tropical Medicine and International Health, Australia and private collections nationally and internationally.

Cynthia Schwertsik, *UTE-iltarian*, 2019. Photograph by Jennifer Hofmann



Aleks Danko
Australian (1950 -)
The chair is not a tourist 1975
artist's book, hardcover book, ink on paper,
162 pages, edition 7/10
29.8 x 21.0 x 2.0 cm (closed)
Flinders University Art Museum Collection 686
© the artist
Photograph by Flinders University

Tim Johnson
Australian (1947 -)
Vivien Johnson (collaborating artist)
Australian (1949 -)
Out of the gallery: installation as a conceptual scheme: Installation No. 377 1970-1971
24.9 x 19.7 cm
silver gelatin photograph, ink on paper
Flinders University Art Museum Collection 693
© the artists
Photograph by Flinders University

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The Guildhouse Collections Project delivered in partnership with the Flinders University Art Museum provides extraordinary opportunities for artists to delve into one of the largest and most idiosyncratic university art collections in the nation. Through inviting artists to research, study and collaborate with the Art Museum to create new work, the Collections Project demonstrates the value of creating new and ambitious environments for artists, collections and audiences to coalesce.

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