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I am not awake but I cannot sleep

Toni Bolland November 2003

*In memory of*

Francis Richard Bolland 10.9.1930 – 8.5.2003

## I am not awake but I cannot sleep

Last year my father became very ill. After having a number of strokes, his mental and physical capacity became diminished to the extent that he was no longer able to communicate or move about, and he was hospitalised. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of May this year he died.

My father's inability to communicate had a profound effect on me. It was almost as though communication meant life and I grieved then as if he had died already. When he did die eight months later, I had already begun to use my work to investigate concepts of in-between-ness and paradox. In the personal sense, my father was representative of a known and quantifiable reality – a reference point from which I had developed understandings and meanings about my identity and place in the world. His illness turned my certainties into uncertainties. Trying to find a point of reference in the midst of such an experience was difficult. Relative spaces tended to shift. I likened it to trying to focus my eyes on a blurred image, or listening to tuneless sound and straining to hear a familiar melody.

This experience strongly sharpened my conceptual skills. Dealing with ephemera and uncertainty pushed me to find a focus (locus?) and alongside was an opportunity to really explore materiality and process. In November I presented what I knew was good work but was unable to write about it coherently or articulate it clearly, and I was confused about the issues that had surfaced.



illus.1 *The Space Between* (2002)

That year-end presentation was an installation called *The Space Between (illustration 1)*. It consisted of a large carpet square made of stenciled salt on which stood a single hospital bed with a rolled up, plastic-covered mattress at its foot. Outside the square and against one wall I placed a suitcase. The suitcase was not able to open, or be easily or safely lifted by its handle; it was made of sheet and cast lead, and weighed around 50Kg. The salt acted like a moat. One wondered what the suitcase contained and whether or not the bed was awaiting occupancy, or had just been vacated. There was a vague sense that the bed was not quite full-size, but it was impossible to say, as one could not approach it.

For me, the work emphasised the disconnection between the outside and the inside, the uncertainty of who, what and why, and the burden of one who cannot choose. It was a manifestation of the void of the unknowable – the viewer was involved and could walk around the carpet, touch the suitcase, but at the same time was alienated from it. The aloneness of every person, within his or her individuality of experience, became evident.

For a time after my father's death everything became apparently meaningless and of no value. My understandings were up in the air being juggled in slow motion while I stood dumbly waiting their fall. When they did fall, strangely, everything was the same but different. I was not awake but I could not sleep. I needed to refocus in order to articulate my "definitive uncertainty."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Baudrillard, Jean (2001) *Impossible Exchange* (pg.5) London: Verso

In terms of language *definitive uncertainty* is an oxymoronic statement. In terms of philosophy it is the ontological paradox of being, and the epistemological paradox of knowing. In terms of art, it is for me, the paradoxical space between the real and the virtual, the literal and the ambiguous. "Uncertainty" is that which encompasses the unknowable and infinite space that is outside of, or in between, what are known and quantifiable realities and truths, and that which is felt and understood as real and true but is not provable by rational or scientific means. It is the interface and interstices of the ontological and epistemological aspects of reality, as we know it.

In relation to this body of work, and my rationale for making certain choices in the process of its evolution, one of the most important things to note is that in the context of Western theories and philosophies, discourse on uncertainty has always led to contentious and paradoxical conclusions. Since my work is focused around epistemological and ontological concerns, these are of the greatest interest to me - the first in particular.

Epistemology is the study of the nature and limits of knowledge and truth – the search for certainties. However, there are fundamental divisions within this branch of philosophy to do with perception. Rationalist thinkers, such as Descartes (1596-1650), based their ideas on the belief that knowledge of all existence can be explained through mathematical reasoning and logic, and that ideas exist independently of experience. Perception presents a problem to this mode of thinking because phenomena such as illusion, hallucination and misunderstandings appear to be beyond rationality, indicating that the world is not always as it seems. On the other hand the Empiricists, in particular John Locke (1632-1704), have held the view that concepts do not exist prior to experience. They maintain that at birth the mind is like a blank sheet of paper awaiting inscription via experience. Empirical experience is gained through the exterior senses and by reflection or introspection such as thinking, willing, and believing.

Systems are in place to repress the effects of uncertainty and meaninglessness, but they are becoming ever more ramified in an endless division of categories and hierarchies in order to fend off uncertainty. For me, rather than determining certainties, research and reflection on modes of being and knowing has facilitated an intense and continual refocusing and refinement of my understandings. That life and death are part of our experience but remain beyond our understanding indicates that the concept of reality is subjective and paradoxical – *fundamentally* uncertain.

Utopian Enlightenment ideals and the inclusive Modern art paradigms of permanence, objectivity and beauty, based on binary opposites that represent truth and totality, are predominantly European middle-class ideals which provide no platform from which to speculate on uncertainties. Until recently, it was argued that science could explain everything, leaving nothing to chance and nothing unprovable, but this is no longer the case. However, the influence of Eastern philosophies such as Taoism and Buddhism on Western philosophical and theoretical discourse, has been another important aspect for consideration in my research in that it provides alternative ways of perceiving and articulating uncertainty.

I have always worked in installation as I have found it the most suitable medium with which to fully express such ephemeral concerns. Indeed, the late Juan Muñoz (1953-2001), a Spanish installation artist, art historian and writer, was able to manifest such ephemerality in a conceptual artwork that took the form of an essay. In Segment<sup>2</sup> Muñoz

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<sup>2</sup> Muñoz, J (1990) Segment in Benezra, N & Viso, O M *Juan Muñoz* (pgs.69-75) (2001) Chicago: University of Chicago Press



described a fictional structure so clearly that one could envision it exactly. Its purpose was precisely to articulate the in-between space of uncertainty.

Muñoz wrote of a sparsely woven stick structure, vaguely resembling a hut, but without solid walls or roof, into which people would come to stand for a moment or two. He told of the structure as having a history of being built, burned down, and rebuilt once every year since before living memory. Placed just off centre in the local plaza of a peasant village in Peru, the space represented "a moment in suspension [...] The conjugation of the mysteries of intersecting paths."<sup>3</sup> This uncertain place described by Muñoz, within which the writer, reader or viewer can explore the metaphorical space between reality and the imagination, is what I want my work to articulate.

Australian sculptor Bonita Ely, argues that installation challenges formal relationships between objects and space.<sup>4</sup> Empty space is no longer 'negative'. The artist can construct the scene and set the parameters to direct how the viewer can engage with installation works, and move through a space, in much the same way architectural constructs determine how institutional spaces such as churches or libraries are encountered by their users. Olga M Viso likens the installation space to a theatre, or in Muñoz's words *a common beholding place*; she elaborates:

*"The understanding of theater as a space where individuals gather to temporarily observe fictional narratives and contemplate experience and knowledge has obvious parallels with art in its current installation-based context. [...] The contemporary exhibition site, or temporary environment constructed within the space of the gallery or museum, constitutes a comparable type of "common beholding place" – a*

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid (pg.71)

<sup>4</sup> Ely, B The Ancient History of Installation Art Retrieved August 2003: <http://home.iprimus.com.au/painless/space/bonita.html>

*space the artist can demarcate in the world where the ordinary rules of activity are suspended and replaced by strategies of observation and interpretation. It is a place, like the theater, where the artist can reduce the confusion of phenomena into an ordered whole.”<sup>5</sup>*

Reflection on Eastern philosophies has also brought such abstract concepts as the in-between, the taboo, the mutable, to the fore in art. With the acceptance of new modes of articulation and perception, there is no longer the need for upholding conventional, object-based paradigms for the expression of difference; art that has as its major consideration, spatial relationships with both object and viewer, allows an expression of ‘the irrational, dissent, disjuncture and transgression.’<sup>6</sup>

In her essay The Ancient History of Installation Art, Ely sums up how Enlightenment values have been challenged by the intersection of Western and Eastern philosophies to affect an acknowledgement and articulation of the concept of uncertainty:

*“The study of Eastern philosophies by artists such as Brancusi and Klein, psychologists such as Jung and Antonin Artaud [...] influenced a focus away from concrete materiality, permanence, and preoccupations with aesthetic conventions of beauty aligned with notions of truth, towards an acknowledgement of the ephemeral, the temporal, the embodied, uncertainty, flux, the abject, the void.”<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup> Viso, Olga M Suspicious of the Gaze in Benezra, N & Viso, O M *Juan Muñoz* (pgs.167-181) (2001) Chicago: University of Chicago Press

<sup>6</sup> Ely:op.cit

*I am not awake but I cannot sleep* is not site-specific installation in a strict sense. Response to the space is not the underlying meaning or concept of the work as it is in American artist, Ann Hamilton's installations. This work was conceived with its own particular spatial requirements but unlike Hamilton's, whose site's past history of use, architecture and occupation are researched thoroughly, this work has a discrete concept and motivation at its foundation. Certain architectural and spatial features of the university studio site have been taken into consideration, but only in as much they are necessary or useful elements to my concept. This installation can therefore be installed elsewhere, but with certain conditions. Site specificity generates its own practical problems; the large suitcase in this particular work was designed and built to be dismantlable into ten separate pieces in order to get it into the building.

For me the need for specific environmental requirements to suit particular events and concepts was reinforced at my father's funeral - the chapel space became very small and inadequate when dealing with the immensity of emotion and questions generated surrounding his death.

For this installation presentation I wanted to create a space that was the antithesis of everyday clutter and sensory overload, a place in which the viewer's senses may become more acute and thoughts more focused. Bonita Ely describes the installation artist's integration of conceptual and physical elements as similar to a telephone connection in a building – it allows an extension of the user's body and mind to beyond what is visible. (Ely:op.cit) Within this current work, I am attempting to encourage an *interior* extension rather than, or in addition to, an external one.

The relationship between object, space and viewer are at the heart of installation and illustrate how it is the obvious choice of medium with which to explore the concept of the in-between and “[give] substance to the fragile incongruities between vision, knowledge, thought, and perception.” (Benezra & Viso:op.cit) The focus away from objectivity toward spatiality with installation also allows for the engagement of the imagination and its inherent infinite potentiality for making meaning, or having significance in all dimensions.

The implications of articulating uncertainty in any medium are fraught with contradiction in that one can only understand a concept or thing by first stating and understanding that which it is not. Alexandre Melo has described the paradox of this comparative methodology thus: “What we want to say has to pass through what cannot be said. What has to happen does so by means of what did not. [...] Silence is the condition of speech and communication. Communication passes through incommunicability.”<sup>7</sup>

If all things can only be understood by comparison to that which they are not, then it is important to consider D T Suzuki’s Eastern philosophical view. In his essay *Zen and the Art of Tea*, Suzuki considers the relative importance of tea drinking in comparison to any other experience or phenomenon.<sup>8</sup> Coming at the problem from a different cultural perspective, Suzuki concluded that in order to accept the concept of infinite uncertainty one must first become *indifferent*. This is of particular interest to me in that to treat the familiar with indifference, is an effective way of displacing the familiar, which in turn affects uncertainty in the viewer’s perception.

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<sup>7</sup>Melo, A *The Art of Conversation* in Curiger, B, Rabinowitz, C and Burckhardt, J (Eds.) *Parkett 43* (March 1995) Zurich: Dieter von Graffenried, Parkett Verlag

<sup>8</sup> Suzuki, D T *Zen and the Art of Tea* in Korsmeyer, C (Ed.) *Aesthetics: The Big Questions* (1998) (pgs.55-59) Malden, MA: Blackwell

Indifference in Suzuki's sense is the casting off of all unnecessary; a return to solemnity and simplicity, a return to the 'Original Abode' (Ibid:pg.56). Gaston Bachelard has described a similar place - the felicitous hermit's hut, a place of refuge, isolation and reflection.<sup>9</sup> A place where one can experience altered perceptions. What I understand from this is that both Suzuki and Bachelard's houses are metaphors for the psyche and uncertainty, and as such, directly related to the conceptual stick structure that Muñoz called *la posa*. They are spaces that are moments 'in suspension,' and *indifferent* to realities outside the psychological realm; a vivid example of the notion of an artist-demarcated space in the world where ordinary rules of activity are put aside, as described by Olga Viso. (Benera & Viso:pgs.167-181)

My father taught me to have an appreciation of things well made. He was a talented craftsman and artist who had never been formally trained. Although he would not have recognised, nor acknowledged it, his example, and the environment of my upbringing, were firmly based in the Modernist tradition; minimal, elegant forms, well crafted down to the smallest detail, and made to last. My needing to find the melody amidst the discordance is definitely about structure, harmony and certainty, although more recently my need for the certainty of definitive answers has fallen away, offering greater opportunities and possibilities to explore aspects of other art styles within my practice.

My work is sometimes referenced to the Dada movement, but unlike the Dadaists my aim is not to attack conventional art paradigms. Although they too, were concerned with indifference, meaninglessness and uncertainty,

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<sup>9</sup> Bachelard, Gaston (1994) The Poetics of Space (pg.32) Boston: Beacon Press

the Dadaists employed antagonism and anti-art politics. My desire is to use subtlety, with whatever form or methodology I find useful, to subversively challenge conventional paradigms of perception. I am for a thoughtful and aware *response*, rather than a retaliatory *reaction* and this is where my work is not Dadaist.

Developed out of a nihilism generated by the brutality of war, Dada was about making meaning out of the meaninglessness, the banal and the absurd. The element of *chance* in Dada works acknowledged the power and unlimited potentiality of uncertainty. Dada worked on the premise that people could be jolted into changing their way of thinking by experiencing art that maintained an indifference to conventions that made up the consensus reality of the time. Their point was partly to generate a better world through this new kind of art, but divisions within the group opened up due to opposing philosophies and strategies. Tristan Tzara and Francis Picabia for example, whose strategies were an intentional destruction of existing societal values by mockery were not shared by Hugo Ball and Hans Arp who were looking for a new 'elementary' art style to replace what they deemed an outmoded and irrelevant aesthetic. Ball, one of Dada's original representatives, retired from the group stating "I have examined myself very carefully, and could never bid chaos welcome."<sup>10</sup> Finally, Dada's nihilism caused its own implosion, and as Dawn Ades notes, "Dada, in negating everything, had to end by negating itself." (Stangos:pg.121)

Regardless of its inevitable self-destruction, Dada changed perceptions of art's place in the critique of culture, in ways that are still having an effect. The indifference articulated through their work, toward accepted conventions of what the role and definition of art was, opened art out to include the use of a variety of new processes and materials (for example, ready-mades and non-archival materials) to produce performance, conceptual and installation works.

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<sup>10</sup> Ades, D Dada and Surrealism in Stangos, N (Ed.) *Concepts of Modern Art* (pg.116) (1974) London: Thames & Hudson

As a member of FLUXUS, a movement indebted to Dada, Joseph Beuys is tangentially connected to Dada philosophies. He believed that man is free, but unaware of it, and that art could 'storm the barricades' of awareness.<sup>11</sup> He was of the opinion that an artist's skill can only be measured in terms of the art's power to convey an idea or concept. Beuys' work certainly had power to convey ideas and concepts, although what may have appeared obvious or literal often worked in subversive ways on viewers' perceptions. "Art is not there to provide knowledge in direct ways. It produces deepened perceptions of experience. More must happen than simply logically understandable things."<sup>12</sup>

More did happen with Beuys' weeklong 'action' work, *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me (fig.1)* at the René Bock Gallery in New York in 1974 as he challenged perceptions, beliefs, fears and uncertainties at the very heart of being. (Tisdall:pgs.156-195)

Beuys' action was a repertoire of repeated movements made in the company of a coyote called Little John. The timing and duration of the action sequences was directed by the responses of the coyote. Man and animal were caged together behind a chain-link barrier in one end of the gallery space that seemed to ambiguously cage the audience too. Beuys had chosen to include a number of objects as representative of his ideas and beliefs. The objects, among which were some sheets of thick felt and a walking stick, were items Beuys had used many times in previous works.

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<sup>11</sup> Tisdall, C (1998) *Joseph Beuys We Go This Way* (pg.411) London: Violette Editions

<sup>12</sup> Schellmann, Jörg and Kluser, Bernd. *Biography: Interview with Joseph Beuys*. (no date given) Retrieved from: [www.walkerart.org/beuys/gg3.html](http://www.walkerart.org/beuys/gg3.html)

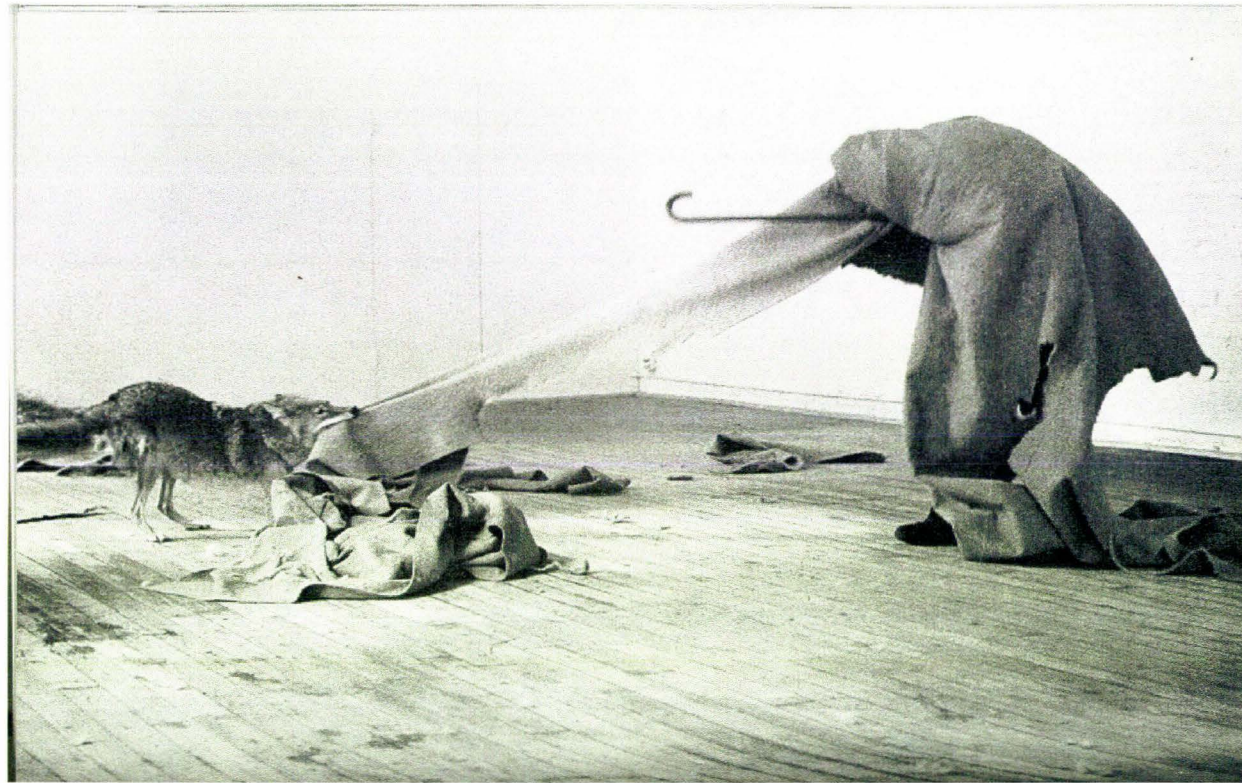


fig.1 Joseph Beuys *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974)



Beuys saw the coyote as an object of persecution, representative of "man's tendency to offload his own sense of inferiority on to an object of hatred or a minority" (Ibid:pg.170), but believed "The spirit of the coyote is so mighty that the human being cannot understand what it is, or what it can do for humankind in the future." (Ibid:pg.156) The power of this work is in the use of the coyote as a metaphor for uncertainty and fear. The action was documented in photographs, and only performed once, accentuating the ephemeral aspects of the concepts the work was addressing.

His *Theory of Social Sculpture* was Beuys' life-long project in which he conceptualised the principle of creativity (the ordering of chaotic or raw material into an ordered state by 'sculptural moulding') as a model for the creation of all social processes.<sup>13</sup> All of Beuys work was toward this ideal and, like the Dadaists, he was convinced art was the key to the healing of all social ills.

Using art as a means of problem solving on either a personal or social level as Beuys did is not an uncommon phenomenon among artists. Often described as referring to war, in particular the holocaust, is the work of French installation artist, Christian Boltanski. He neither denies nor affirms that reading of his work, but instead maintains the images and processes he employs focus on what he terms *vanitas*.<sup>14</sup> The Oxford Latin Dictionary defines *vanitas* as emptiness, untruthfulness, futility, foolishness, empty pride, but Boltanski includes in his definition, the paradox that is the uncertainty and inevitability of death.

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<sup>13</sup> Schellmann, Kluser:op.cit

<sup>14</sup> Semin D, Garb T, Kuspit D, (1997) Christian Boltanski (pg.27) London: Phaidon Press Ltd

Boltanski used images of dead Swiss in his work *Reserve: The Dead Swiss (1989) (fig. 2)*, to express the certainty of every person's death. (Ibid:pg.31) His many hundreds of collected newspaper portrait photos shown edge to edge, row upon row, in a massive wall, gives the impression of his having a certain indifference to so many deceased. In fact Boltanski used the dead Swiss' images for the reason that he believed them to be a people without a history: "they have no reason to die, so they could be anyone and everyone, which is why they're universal." (Ibid:pg.30). In this work, questions arise as to the identities of the dead, how they died and when. The uncertainties generated are overwhelming and amplified due to the artist's apparent indifference to so many images of anonymous dead people. However, he is obviously neither indifferent, nor unaware of the effect his methodology has on the viewer. On the contrary, Boltanski recognises very well the value of trans-personal imagery that allows viewers to consider their own uncertainty, and mortality, by realising *this could be me*.

Christian Boltanski's images of unknown faces imply associations with significant historical events in many people's memories - hence the theme of the holocaust is common in readings of much of his work. Since it is not possible to view artwork from a state of complete indifference to historical constructs, in order to open up a work to multi-level readings the artist must displace the viewer's sense of the everyday, introducing the unexpected or ambiguous. The viewer can be enticed away from trusting the logic of the consensus reality and be forced to use their imagination, making their own meanings and narratives. The work then becomes dense with *possibility* rather than with certain or prescribed *meaning*.



fig.2 Christian Boltanski *Reserve: The Dead Swiss* (1990)

My aim has been to subvert, question or disturb perceptions by creating paradox - the roaring silence, nervous laughter and ambiguous familiarity of uncertainty; theatre and the carnival offer useful directives here. In order to do this I have investigated and employed a number of devices, one of which is a particular aesthetic described as an 'affective' form of Minimalism<sup>15</sup> by Christian Boltanski. Like *definitive uncertainty*, the description is paradoxical in that Minimalism was not originally about self-expression, emotionalism, or expressionism.<sup>16</sup>

Although labeling his particular brand of Minimalism 'affective' may be oxymoronic, Boltanski uses it to describe the paradoxical, ironic, and emotive qualities of his work. Though his work has an intense gravity or weight, it is at the same time seemingly effortless distillations of complex concepts and perceptions. This to me is a powerful and potentially subversive way of working with both concepts and materials and one to which I aspire. An extreme analogy might be that the work becomes like a small cube of matter so dense that the atomic weight cannot be measured, yet appears easy to pick up with finger and thumb.

Along with scale, perspective and humour are other elements of Carnavalesque art that unbutton perceived normality by upsetting the status quo of the consensus reality. Carnival challenges the whole idea of comfort in familiarity through exchanging roles, functions, meanings and values between different strata in society. Carnavalesque art is often bawdy or political, and large in scale. It is a common sight to see carnival parades of people with huge and frightening masks, and Gaston Bachelard mentions an image of giant snail shells (Bachelard:pgs.111-112) with wolf bodies emerging. Bachelard theorises about how the element of uncertainty plays on a viewer's imagination and

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<sup>15</sup> Semin D, Garb T, Kuspit D, (1997) Christian Boltanski (pg.34) London: Phaidon Press Ltd

<sup>16</sup> Gablik, S. (1974) Minimalism in Stangos, N (Ed.) *Concepts of Modern Art* (pgs.244-255) (2001) London: Thames and Hudson

their fear of the unfamiliar, and once again underlines its infinite potentiality by asking '*what can we not expect from the imagination?*' In allowing the imagination free rein, personal readings and connections can be made with the work that are unmediated by the logic of previous understanding and experience.

Oversize scaling of objects does not allow a normal interaction with them, so one has to engage the imagination in order to make sense of the situation. Juan Muñoz claims "any form in space is understood in relation to the dimensions of the human body. Every object around which and within which we move is perceived beginning with the size of our own organism and its limits." (Muñoz: pg.57) Mieke Bal made a similar observation to Muñoz, noting the connection between scale and perception: "Scale as such, not the choice between either huge or tiny, determines the inner sense of bodily scale that shakes up the viewer, accustomed as he is to *be*<sup>\*</sup> the measure of all things."<sup>17</sup> The consideration of scale is a constant issue in determining the manifestation of the artwork.

Many artists have drawn me to investigate my own understandings through their artistic and theoretical engagement with notions of uncertainty, power and paradox. Among them, Doris Salcedo, Mona Hatoum and Annette Messager, along with those already mentioned. All are, or were, installation/sculpture artists from outside New Zealand. Those artists who figure in my research are strong conceptualists whose work is clear, quiet and uncompromising. Their work is only ephemeral materially.

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\* *my emphasis*

<sup>17</sup> Bal, Mieke (2001) *Louise Bourgeois' Spider: the architecture of art-writing* London: University of Chicago Press

I am drawn to minimalist formality and elegance in the work of others. This is due, in part, to the strong Modernist influence in my childhood environment, and my early interests in object-making and Japanese architecture. The aesthetic choices these artists have made – in the form of disarming gravity packaged in minimal beauty, quiet insistence or heavy silence, forces reflection on often ambiguous images and environments.

Juan Muñoz, whom I admire more than any artist, described his artistic language as able to “express without being expressionistic.”<sup>18</sup> Muñoz’ work is especially provocative in that he used simple devices and familiar motifs to create extraordinary beauty and ambiguous plays on perception. One can be seductively drawn in by use of trickery in scale, optical illusion and intrigue only to become disoriented and distanced from the work. He was also able to produce what Artangel\* Director, James Lingwood, described as an emptiness that contains a ‘palpable silence’ – to this Muñoz replied that in order for a space to be empty, it first had to be filled, then things removed. This palpable silence could be compared to the weighty, silent void of grief that remains when a familiar has departed. Memories are paradoxically full, but empty. The remains of what was once a solid reality become hollow and ephemeral.

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<sup>18</sup>Melo, A (1995) The Art of Conversation in Curiger, B, Rabinowitz, C and Burckhardt, J (Eds.) *Parkett 43* (March 1995)  
Zurich: Dieter von Graffenried, Parkett Verlag

\* Artangel is a U.K. based organisation that is dedicated to producing collaborative artworks with artists. The artists are approached by the organisation rather than making an application. The art is often site-specific, film, or performance.

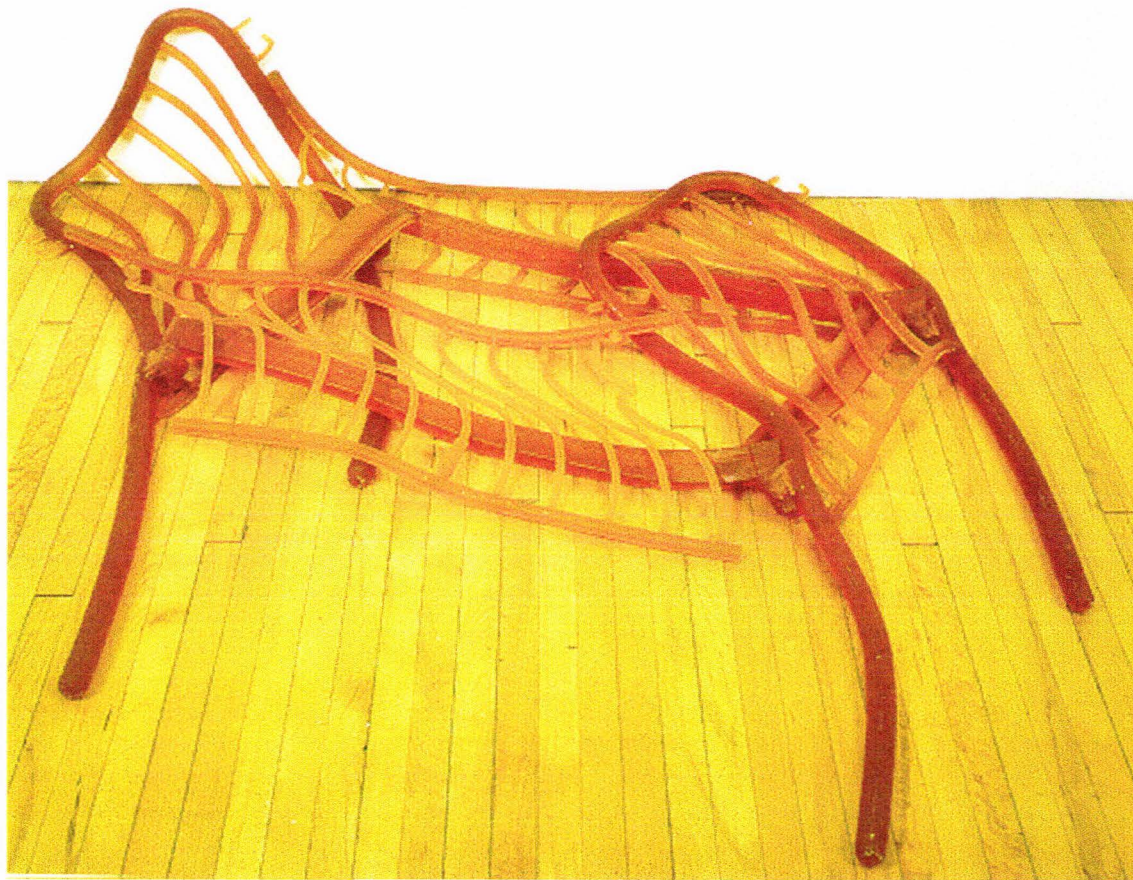


fig.3 Mona Hatoum *Marrow* (1996)

It is my particular interest in the dissonance created when a work is both beautiful and dangerous that draws me to Muñoz and Hatoum before other artists, and shapes my own work. What a beautiful image can do for the viewer is to evoke a sense of comfort and security, a familiarity, but when this is juxtaposed with another, not so comfortable image, or represented in an unconventional or unfamiliar way, the security is threatened. Rather than acknowledge or express their confusion, violence, pain or sadness openly, people very often laugh – involuntarily, hysterically, nervously. Muñoz’s work, according to Michael Brenson is ‘filled with laughter, but it is a hard laughter, uproarious and convulsive and occasionally a bit mad.’ (Benezra & Viso:pg.165)

*Jump!* was a work I produced in 1997 (unfortunately, there are no images of this work). I consider it to be my first successful provocation of what I call the nervous laugh phenomenon. It was an 800mm high red PVC high jump crash pad, cut off at a 45-degree angle close to a high wall. Directly in front of the sides of the pad were two stands that supported a high jump bar six metres off the ground. It was a minimal piece that was an indirect comment on peer pressure, and the value of hindsight. Even if you could jump 6 metres, you would crash into the concrete wall, and the crash pad would be too little, too late. This piece worked for me in that it was an image that people were familiar with as either a participant or spectator of the sport, but the image was out of context and presented with a black humour.

Mona Hatoum is also able to employ the most familiar and literal motifs in disquieting ways: her *Pin Carpet (1995)* is made of steel dressmaker’s pins, and *Marrow (1996) (fig.3)*, is a baby’s cot cast in rubber. The carpet of pins is very seductive with its dissonant quality of beauty overlaid with an inherent danger. Both Muñoz and Hatoum share the



ability to produce a nervous laugh, or physical or emotional discomfort in their audience through uncertainty or irony in the absurdity of the familiar or banal.

Paul Schimmel, in an interview with Juan Muñoz, talked with him of the combination of beauty and muted violence in his work and noted that his "dealing with tough subjects in a very beautiful way somehow made the work tougher."<sup>19</sup> A very good example is Muñoz's *First Banister (1987)* (fig. 4), which has an open switchblade mounted on the inside edge of a banister, offering no possibility of assistance, but rather, added danger.

The same can be said of Hatoum's work. *Crutches (1996)*, another cast rubber work, is quite Dada-esque and humorous until one makes the connection between the uselessness of the crutches and the helplessness of her native country's political situation – ravaged by war and suffering from the inadequacies of what little aid there is available.

Not all viewers will be familiar with the biography of the artist, therefore, I think it is important that the work contain points of access, readable images that provide a place from which the viewer can personalise the meaning of the work. This is where the everyday or banal object or image can work. Through displacement of the familiar the artist provides the viewer with a way into the work. For me, this works well when the artist can create work that is trans-personal. Images and motifs that are familiar, everyday or banal that have been recontextualised or displaced.

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<sup>19</sup> Schimmel, Paul (2000) *An Interview With Juan Muñoz* in Benezra, N & Viso, O M *Juan Muñoz* (Exhibition Catalogue) (2001) Chicago: University of Chicago Press

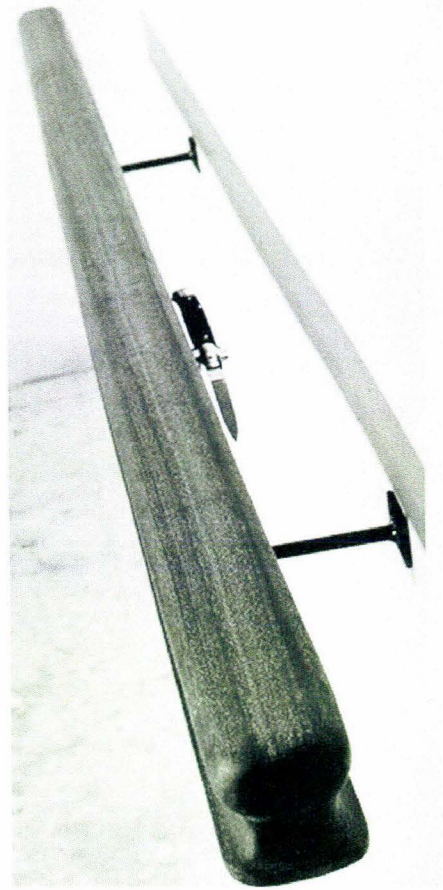


fig.4 Juan Muñoz *First Banister* (1987)

In a sense, this puts the artist in the position of illusionist or trickster. Juan Muñoz, Christian Boltanski and Annette Messager have each described themselves as such on occasion. Susan May noted Muñoz's ability as trickster evoking the in-between or uncertain: "Muñoz's deft sleight of hand paradoxically combined the uncanny with the familiar, absence with occupancy, and charged silence with malevolent tension."<sup>20</sup> And in conversation with James Lingwood before the opening of his *Double Bind* installation at the Tate Modern in 2001, Muñoz stated:

*"awareness of the trick is critical. That is at the core of some of the best art of our time: the awareness of how things are done colliding with the way things appear. The making is fundamental to the illusion it creates. It is very surprising how we want to see something that does not exist."<sup>21</sup>*

This statement highlights that what is important for the artist to understand about the spectator is the paradox, or perhaps perversity, of their wanting to recognise and understand the trick but still be surprised by the illusion.

Games and arenas of action have often been a focus in my work. They offer rich material for social and psychological investigation, and possibilities for exploration into how I can manipulate the relationship between space and objects that imply corporeality, such as the bed and suitcase. In *I am not awake but I cannot sleep*, the orderliness of case neatly under bed is disturbed – something has happened, the stability of certainty and familiarity is replaced with ambiguity and uncertainty, and there is no apparent or immediate resolution.

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<sup>20</sup> May, Susan (2001) Patterns of Behaviour in Muñoz, J and May, S *Juan Muñoz: Double Bind at the Tate Modern* (pg.61) (2001) London:Tate Publishing

<sup>21</sup> Muñoz, J and Lingwood, J (2001) A Conversation, May 2001 in *Juan Muñoz: Double Bind at the Tate Modern* (exhibition catalogue) (pg.71) (2001) London: Tate Publishing

Although narrative was not intentionally part of the concept of this current work, it is narrative, by virtue of the fact that it's scale makes it unable to be viewed in totality, in one instant. Mieke Bal explains how one cannot get the full picture of an artwork, installation in particular, in one view; "Many aspects of the work enforce a viewing that *takes time*, imposing an awareness of the temporality". Consequently she affirms, 'narrative is the medium of temporality.' (Bal:pg.27) If one assumes that *time* is a linear progression, and accepts that *narrative* is defined as relating or telling of the past, then each is implicit in the other. More obvious narrative readings of the work may also be made due to the types of materials the artist uses; familiar motifs, patterns, and processes, and/or the historical constructions and context with which the viewer perceives the work.

A viewer becomes part of an installation because they become involved within the spatio-temporal co-ordinates of the artistic theatre. They become writers, directors, narrators, actors, and critics of the play of art. In an interview with James Lingwood, Juan Muñoz stated "The work is involved in a dramatic relationship with whatever is outside of it." (Parkett 43:pg.43) This ambiguous statement seems to allude to Muñoz's ability to entice viewers into the 'theatre' while at the same time alienating them from it.

Despite much of his work having strong theatrical elements, Muñoz was of the opinion that the best work can exist without a spectator. I have considered this even more ambiguous statement, and I conclude he believes the work to be completely open to the uncertainty of infinite possible meanings when there is no audience, with their historical consciousness, legitimising or rationalising it contextually. Or I might assume that the work he speaks of is a work he has made for his own satisfaction or to solve a particular problem, and having no intention of exhibiting it.

This last assumption is a more conservative one however, and as with the perception of art, no one other than its author can comment on either interpretation of his statement with any authority, or certainty.

Although it cannot be denied that art is self-expression, it is not the same thing as autobiography. On the other hand, neither can it be denied there are not elements of autobiography in any artist's work. Jeannette Winterson writes "The commonest mistake of critics and biographers is to assume that what holds significance for them necessarily held significance for the writer [artist?]."22 She adds that in order to 'contain' the work, making something unique into something standard or common is a way of maintaining a comfortable relationship with it. From the point of view of the artist, however, making something *unique* into something *standard*, works in the reverse way. The viewer/critic *sees* something familiar that doesn't *feel* familiar and the paradox is revealed along with the uncertainty of what to make of it.

*I am not awake but I cannot sleep, (illustration 2)*, is the space with its contents of bed and giant suitcase. The bed appears to be jammed right up under the ceiling of the room as if the suitcase has caused it to stretch upward in order to fit beneath it. The bed is an ex-hospital single bed that has been painted black. It does not have a mattress, or any bedding. Each leg has the addition of a two-metre long extension, also black, but with subtly striped marker bands painted around them at intervals. The legs also sport castors standing in protective rubber cups so that the bed remains stable, though still appearing flimsy.

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<sup>22</sup> Winterson, J (1995) *Art [Objects]: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* (pg.106) New York: Alfred A Knopf Inc.

This particular type of bed was chosen for its caricature form – such as one might see in a child’s drawing of a bed. It is a simple sign for bed. My preference was to use imagery that is not especially dateable to a particular period. Icons, such as the signs for train at a rail crossings (the image used is a steam train) are familiar and everyone knows that it is a train, despite the fact that many people today have never had any experience of steam trains. The drawing-like quality of the bed works in the same way.

Underneath the bed is a suitcase. It doesn’t fit completely under the bed and sits on wheels rather than its base as if awaiting someone to come and take it away. The suitcase is 2.6M high, 3.1M long and 1M deep -so large that the scale does not allow the viewer to perceive the object in totality when standing beside it. It is like being in a small boat on the water just under the bow of a huge ship – you are unable to get the measure of it or make comparisons of size or function. The case is a lightweight wooden construction in 10 pieces (in order for it to be easily transportable and fit up the staircase to the exhibition space.) It is thinly padded and covered in striped mattress ticking, and has castor wheels underneath. It is complete with handle and locks – but does not open or function normally as a suitcase.

On one level, both the bed and the suitcase are metaphors for aspects of the body. I see the body as both subject and object - container and containment, place and interface, inside and outside, real and imagined.



illus.2 *I am not awake but I cannot sleep* (2003)



illus.3 *Flight* (2001)



Materially I am interested in using familiar processes and everyday objects – at least what appear to be everyday objects, but I am using these objects in unexpected ways – rendering them dysfunctional by altering their scale, operation and context. Another example is my lead suitcase *Flight, (illustration 3)*, from last year. It is the size and shape of a standard travelling case. However, it does not function as a suitcase, and presented as an artwork in an art environment, it is out of context. Therefore, it is an image of a suitcase but it is not a suitcase, and one must then question why that is.

The juxtaposition of the large-scale suitcase and bed becomes ambiguous with the case having been covered in a material that would normally have been on the bed as a mattress, or what could have been used as lining inside the case. What was previously unseen is now fully visible and the comfort aspect of the bed is now functioning as padding on the outside of uncertainty. It is a symbolic or metaphoric disembodiment or separation while at the same time an indication of a reintegration of two distinct entities or concepts – ephemeral/corporeal; or familiarity and uncertainty.

Some of my past installation work has included the use of various styles of beds, shelves and tables as perches, meditative platforms, places of confinement and realms of otherness. Doris Salcedo is one of a number of artists who have frequently used beds in their installation work. She describes beds, and cribs as all being objects of protection, care and confinement.<sup>23</sup> One of Muñoz' most important motifs in relation to these ideas is the balcony. It is one that he used repeatedly throughout his career to serve as a contradictory or ambiguous space, neither inside nor outside. It could serve as a stage, a lookout or a place of confinement. It also comments on the gaze –

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<sup>23</sup>Princenthal, N Survey: Silence Seen in Princenthal N, Basualdo C, Huyssen A, *Doris Salcedo* (pg.43) (2000) London: Phaidon Press Limited



fig.5 Doris Salcedo *Untitled* (1997)

who is looking at who? Why? And from where? Alexandre Melo describes his poetic view of Muñoz' sublime balconies...

*"These balconies are the impossible places from which we might be able to see what is on the other side of the visible: the rivers that flow on the other side of the horizon, the subterranean armies that run under our feet. They are places where we can take refuge in order to see everything that is missing and everything that remains, where we can see the void in the crack between things – the empty heart of the world."* <sup>24</sup>

In its present form my bed up on extended legs creates the same kind of ambiguous space and tension. The apparent inaccessibility of both bed and balconies renders them dysfunctional, displacing the viewer. One may be unsure of whether one could be stranded by being *on* or being *off* the structures. As a structure in itself, the bed is also a site for the inviolable state of sleep. We are reluctant to awaken someone who is asleep as if they are in a personal or sacred space. Alternatively, if one thinks of the bed as metaphor for body or subject, then in this context it becomes like an island, a promontory rock, or perhaps a nest or lookout.

It is my intention, as an artist, to challenge the viewer to subversively question their perceptions of truth and reality in a way that is subtle and lasting – until long after they have left the vicinity of the artwork. This is a primary motivation of mine, and is why my medium is installation.

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<sup>24</sup> Melo, A The Art of Conversation in Curiger, Bice et.al. (Eds.) *Parkett 43* (March 1995) (pg.40) Zurich: Parkett Verlag/ Dieter von Graffenried

On one side of the void of in-between-ness is the ongoing discourse of power and knowledge. It includes Michel Foucault's discussion of the development and maintenance of a society of self-regulating individuals.<sup>25</sup> This relates to the suitcase in particular in that it is not only a metaphor for the body or subconscious, but also for all of the power structures and pressures that are exerted (subliminally) on subjects, and that have an effect on their perception (of everything).

Fear of madness and death are the great drivers toward conformity and sameness, and as such are representative of the void of the unknown. But in appealing to an individual's sense of rightness, justice and personal comfort - intellectual, emotional and physical - power systems work subliminally on holding fear at bay. To go against the flow of society, or to succumb to the powers of the imagination, is to introduce the undesirable element of uncertainty. Perhaps what Alexandre Melo was referring to in describing the *subterranean armies on the other side of the visible* are the psychological and societal structures and rules that are in place to minimise the 'void in the crack between things; the imaginings that are our fears and uncertainties.

I am reminded of art's power to convey the positive aspects of the notion of unlimited possibility, to acknowledge and challenge perceptions of truths and experience, and to confront uncertainty, by this excerpt from American writer, Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Gold Bug' as quoted by Gaston Bachelard:

*"The imagination can never say: was that all, for there is always more than meets the eye. [...] an image that issues from the imagination is not subject to verification by reality."*<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Foucault, M (1975) Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison London: Penguin

<sup>26</sup> Bachelard, Gaston (1994) The Poetics of Space (pg.86) Boston: Beacon Press

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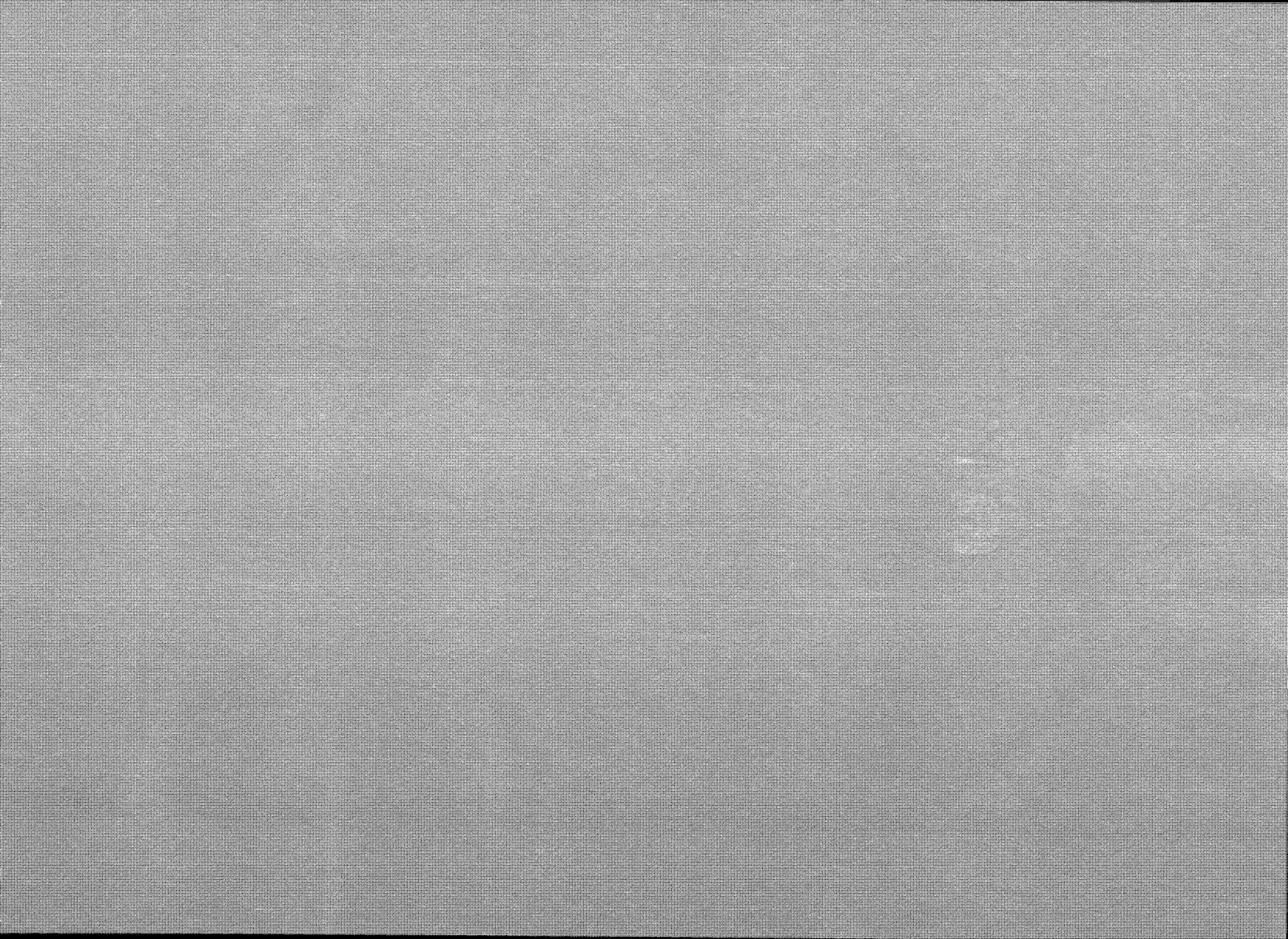
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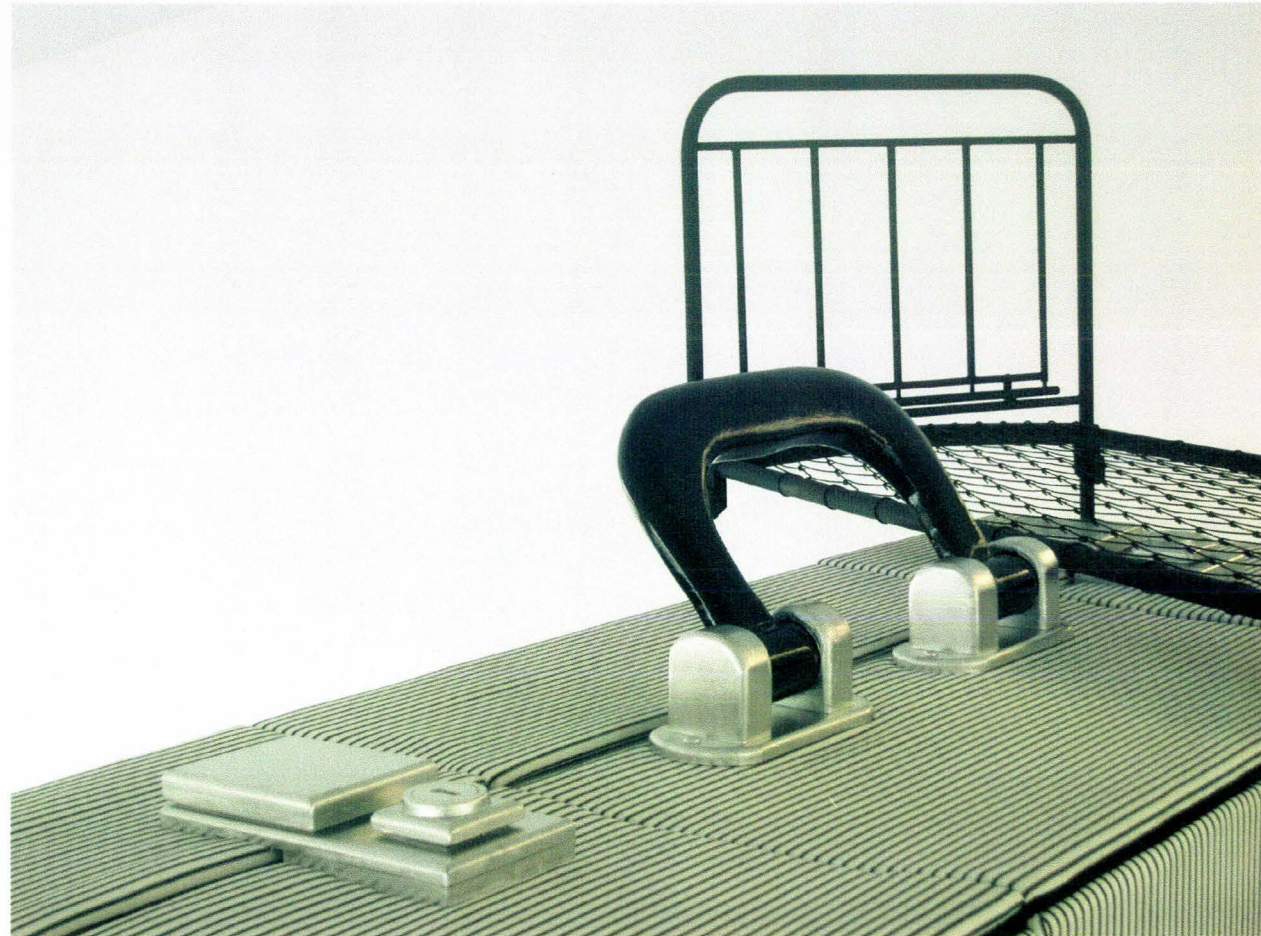
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appendix I *I am not awake but I cannot sleep* (2003)



appendix II *I am not awake but I cannot sleep (detail)* (2003)