

Lost and Found  
Toni Warburton

The second time I visited Toni Warburton's 2003 installation, *Kiosk*, I walked in on two women sitting on stools in the middle of the room conversing, heedless of the work, not in its thrall. The room was full of things, littered with furniture, cupboards, curios and curious wall objects, trestles arranged with objects found and made. It was clearly a studied environment, but it also had something comfortable and natural about it. The two women sitting in the middle of the room were not in rapture of some staged spectacle, they were at home with it. *Kiosk* was no single, large *Gestalt* but a concatenation of fragments of thoughts made concrete in jottings, statuettes and collections begun and then abandoned. The women were sitting there because they intuitively knew that the installation's spaces were neither dictatorial nor numinous. Yet if this sounds weak, or indifferent, we might be reminded that there are few spaces in our lives where we feel free to let be.

The installation operated on multiple registers, but if you didn't want to delve too deep, it just asked you to be at peace with this object-cacophony. *Kiosk* rhymes with 'chaos' (Warburton remarks in conversation). The only rule for chaos is that it doesn't obey rules, yet this is a rule in itself, and recently chaos theory has shown us that the image of chaos resembles a diminishing spiral, or a sea shell. There were many sea shells here.

In the ante-room to the main installation were clear glass tendrils hanging from a supporting line affixed to the wall. Their arabesques turned to wisps in the shadows they cast. Their ethereality contrasted with the earthly opacity and clutter of the other room. In all, the artist had given us both the earth and the sky.

It takes orderliness and patience to make chaos clear.

#### The fate of craft after cybernetics

Warburton is best known as a ceramicist and glass artist, which immediately places her into the craft camp, a designation that sits uncomfortably with those who are still reminded of the art-craft binary. It is an endless and turgid debate

that ends in bitter divisions. Warburton is best thought of as an artist who uses the methods and traditions of craft, as well as a craftswoman who disrupts the simplicities of craft with the self-criticisms of art. Hence what distinguishes her practice from almost all other craftspeople is the way that problems are present or woven around her objects and installations. She is one of the few craft artists continually to question the conditions of craft: skill, making, palpability, utility, decoration, repetition, tradition. Craft is a social ethos as well as a something oriented around skill, but its social function is presently harder to put into definite, hard contours. As this recent magisterial 'chaos' of Warburton's suggests, hers is an ongoing conceptual project that refers endlessly to the limits of 'craftness' as it applies to individuals and groups. For if we are to accept Collingwood's celebrated thesis that in craft, 'The result to be obtained is preconceived or thought out beforehand. The craftsman knows what he wants to do before he makes it', then Warburton's works only belong to the realm of craft when encountered in isolation. The installation *Kiosk*, and all the others that I have seen before it, have nothing predetermined about them. The sculptural *bricolages* proceed through intensive addition and subtraction, they are environments which begin with roundabout intuitions that build up over months prior to the exhibition date and which are finalised *in concreto* in the final days.

The very psychological and physical resonances of Warburton's installations reached a head in *Kiosk*. It explored—and this made it one of the more adventuresome that installations of previous years—what is the only apposite question for a craftsperson to ask (at least to ask, I'm not saying that there could necessarily be answers) in the present moment, namely, 'What is the place of craft in the digital age?'

What we understand as the digital age, or the cybernetic revolution, has only really been with us since the early 90,s when computer literacy became increasingly mandatory and personal computers became more affordable and so a fixture in home activities. Art produced along the lines of digitisation—interactive video and video installation, virtual reality, net art and so on—is intrinsically disembodied. The work is done through an apparatus like the digital camera and then altered again using computer software. There is no immediate touch. If there is anything to do with 'craft' then it is a matter of proficiency with a

program. You can play around with your medium without getting anything under your fingernails and, usually, without having anything explode in your face. The digital 'object' can exist in several places at the same time and it can be reproduced without degradation. All of this is anathema to the crafting hand, and the crafted object whose chief virtues are that it bears the indefinable mark of its maker, and for which reproduction can never compensate for the actual object in lived space. The advantages of digitisation are not only those to do with reproduction, but also transmission. The digital object is weightless and doesn't break. Tangible objects no doubt remain, but digitisation has changed many of our habitual responses and expectations, some dramatically, others only on the most unmeasurable level.

But when I saw two women sitting talking in the midst of Warburton's *Kiosk* installation, they too were experiencing a virtual environment. Its quality was not only spatial-theatrical as the electronic VRs are, but had the atmospheric quality that only the air of temporality could bring, from objects like shells which had been around for hundreds of years, to statuettes which looked like bibelots whose associational importance had all but been forgotten, yet were objects which would never lose the warmth of having been handled and engendered through human touch.

This was Warburton's answer to the challenges of technology: to assemble sundry objects as if to say that these will always be with us. Spaces bear the imprint of lives which accumulate and diminish within them. In the gallery notes to the exhibition, the artist wrote: 'A spot for travelers to rest and see about the ordinary culture of place, a kiosk is symbiotic with the notion of visiting a place that isn't complete wilderness. Space, shelter, conviviality, distraction, maps, images, souvenirs. A place for recapitulation and retreat before venturing further out or returning home.' Our refuges are sometimes the most unusual of places. Sometimes the darkest corners can pulsate with light.

Regardless of the technological changes and pressures upon our lives, we will always be finding ourselves picking up a stone, a piece of bark, a shard of glass, a broken plate left in the sand, a dusty memento from our dead granddad, and examine in, fascinate over this or that physical quality, use it as an associational

reference to a far larger thought, then put it down again, walk away.

For perhaps with all the feats that today's technologies can bring to visual art, craft has been reduced to the state of middle-class artifice. Just as modernist design—clean of line and conscious of its functionality—was hostile to the random decorations which spoke of the a class-driven and pre-industrial age, the hand-made object in the electronic age is dangerously reduced to anachronism. It bears the quaint traces of the leisured classes who are the only ones who can afford to spend time on making objects that are cheaper and more durable when made by machines. We might say that in the electronic age, the role of the hand has two primary functions, first to guide machinery, the other to be idle and perform random functions whose culmination is mechanical. Things made directly from human hands can only be error-ridden.

I am of course being harshly rhetorical in saying this, but I may feasibly be echoing what some have come to believe. After several decades of object-production, and seeing the general public responsiveness to such production qualitatively decrease, Warburton's practice has gradually become more introspective. A simple message that her installations convey is that people are losing the ability to share and communicate over 'made' objects. We walk into an old person's living room, and all the paraphernalia is no longer meaningful, just sinister.

Useful and non-useful decorative objects—a tray of collected cast-off feathers, a fan, a rustic medicine chest—do continue to speak, they always will is what Warburton appears to be telling us, but, in the light of our neglect, or the way we are less able to speak their language, their sounds become thinner and more melancholy.

#### Technology and time

Warburton's peaceful battle with technology takes place in the personal spaces characterised by accumulated objects. The virtue of digitisation, you'll recall, is that it doesn't diminish in quality; infinite copies can be made without losing anything, and a DVD will last for millennia if stored under normal conditions. Implied within the word material, however distantly, is age, alteration and

eventually loss. We respond to an aged object like a tarnished chair or a leaf that has lost its lustre because we see in it a reflection of the changes that time has wrought on us. The visual effects of time are suggestions of an experience. When different objects are brought together, and when arranged with the human spontaneity that affords domestic comfort, then what is created is a web of different temporalities, interlocking and diverging threads. Although these threads are not visible to the eye, they are what make a space thick with the feeling of a person.

Odourless, the virtual spaces of technology have yet to achieve this humanised thickness that needs real time to build, and to dissipate. In the traditional indigenous Australian culture, there was no such thing as an empty space, difficult for us materialists to understand, and particularly hard to grasp when confronted by such an empty country.

### *Genius loci*

*Kiosk's* environment was redolent of an old weekender beach house in one of the townships on the coast south of Sydney. Year-round they are inhabited by retirees, and in the holiday period families with young children come to occupy buildings which have stood empty or semi-occupied for the rest of the year. The older people might resent the intrusion, which brings noise and clatter on the coarse gravel roads, and rock music in night hours when it is normally still, yet they are also relieved at the breath of youth and the energy that it brings. In places which see dramatic influxes and effluxes of people, the seasons are more noticeable.

Houses in these places, if I think about my youth in the holiday bungalows around the Bateman's Bay, Sussex Inlet and Bawley Point, are quite often makeshift affairs, and get only as much work as they need in order to be lived in. They ask for nothing, demand nothing, all the more comfortable because they are free from the anxieties of perfectibility. Renovations are done out of amusement, a holiday diversion after too much lying around, using materials that have been left over from another more serious effort. The plumbing splutters slightly, the water is never hot enough and some of the appliances are antiques. The rooms, which smell of dust and mixed with the salt water air, are a hotchpotch of old

furniture dating back to the 1930s. The old kitchen table has been latterly protected with adhesive vinyl. One of the beds sinks and the shortest straw has to sleep there. There is even a record player with a collection of records: Gustav Mahler, Jethro Tull.

Above the games drawer is a shelf filled with dried and decoloured sea urchins, conches, mother of pearl and pippi shells, gathered by you and your family in seasons past, or by former visitors whom you may or may not know. The house is full of remnants which in other places would have been cast off long ago: the furniture, the cutlery, the linen, the plates—none of it matches. Then you realise that this house of casual discards with its continual sound-track of the sea is a unique mosaic of vestiges of the past, too vast and fractured now to trace. In this respect it mirrors the sea-shore with its millions of powdered and broken shells.

And when you come to leave the house after a week or two weeks of lying around reading, of surf, biking, playing cards and sharing secrets, you are overtaken with sadness because that time was a capsule of experience which you are leaving behind.

### Enclaves

With an overall shape containing discrete units, Warburton's installations are like archipelagos. You enter into them bit by bit, island by island. At the corner of the room in *Kiosk* were torn envelopes on the wall which had be written on the inside, musings about where friends—what are they doing now. The artist is continually looking outwards looking in. The paper forms a rough patchwork which from a distance resembles a torn blanket.

Go nearer the centre of the room an encounter five bowls on a circular table. When you look around, it is maybe the case that they symbolise threes and the other flora around the imaginary house. Flowers are painted within the concave of one and outside on another.

On the wall is a gigantic necklace. Is the shape it describes that of a country or a particular body of land?

Affixed to one of the columns in the room is an open cabinet. It is cluttered with resolved and unresolved ceramic objects and other materials, like yarn, linking them to objects nearby. On the second of the four shelves sleeps a little figure. We are told that the Greek King-God Zeus would play with small clay effigies of men and heroes, manipulating their fate. There is no sense of intervention here, only the opposite, calm retreat.

Another cabinet, again at eye-level, evokes a different mood. To the lower right is a raw terracotta figure with his arms over his head as if in fear or sorrow. The cup next to him and those on the shelves above are hard and still. One of them, the white cup rendered useless by sieve-like punctures throughout its surface, was used a previous installation. A circular object hangs off the side of the cabinet.

Balanced on a slender white ledge against the wall us a vaguely rhomboid piece of wood, gray and dry. It is the picture that has lost its face, like sand awaiting an imprint.

Two of the table-like surfaces are of old doors, one a pale green, the other black. The objects are arranged as if offered for afternoon tea. A collection of gauze shapes—porous receptacles once again—constellate on a raised circular stand that looks like a cake dish. To its left is a glass preserving dome housing a glass cup on a tin tray. Another raised circular stand offers an array of stones.

The other table is its echo with dishes of hard objects, small metal sculptures; another glass vessel this time exposed; on a small white dais is a cerulean blue jug the texture of coral.

Facing these was a free-standing circular cabinet, closed, amuck with tiny figurines.

On the wall nearby a tangle of fishing line that looks almost like a dancing figure. It is a web that has lost its shape, limp but not lifeless.

These objects are not silent. A hubbub of voices hangs in the air, but you can't make out what is being said.

We give dead objects life with our associations and rituals which are used to commemorate the life of objects whose husks or small broken portions are all that remain. The life we give to objects and their combinations surrounds these things like air and water.

#### Air and water

The adjacent room to the main installation of *Kiosk* was empty save for tubular fronds of glass in random curls, slumped loops and gyrations across the wall. There was nothing found and any colour was from refractions off the clear glass surface. They too were delicate and fragile, but different from the more earthen objects of the main installation. But the glass tendrils told you that everything in the exhibition was transient and had to be treated with care. The glass works were the domain of air and water, the solid works, the domain of the earth, parts of it made hard and impenetrable by fire.

Warburton was bringing the two strands of her practice as a ceramicist and as a glass artist together. Both processes use fire and water to achieve their aims. In the dialogue about the beach we see the beach, the sand, distilled in the substance of glass.

#### Individual objects

The Rococo period and style is a fundamental starting point for Warburton's work, and is the easiest way of making the work accessible. The word 'rococo' has several sources, but the one most agreed upon is the French, *rocaille*, used to refer to the globulous stucco, stone and shell surfaces that became a fashionable decorative conceit in Europe by the beginning of the 17th century. Such surfaces were typically an accretion of stones and shells which gave an interior the appearance of a subterranean grotto. Garden design was also a serious business across Europe by this time, and a way of expressing the nobleman's and his garden designer's philosophy of life, civilization, nature and the afterlife. Thus the degree to which one modified nature became important. It is a major period in art and design with respect to the sophistication with which the natural was valorised and even reconceived. In the 18th century, nature as a philosophical concept expanded into more areas of inquiry than ever before, helped along by the developments in scientific discovery. We can see now that the birth of the philosophical concept of 'naturalness', which we commonly



associate with the likes of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, was accompanied by a paradox, evinced in the visual arts. More and more, the 'natural' became reduced to a series of signs of 'naturalness'. Aesthetic rusticity became a popular idea, most famously exploited by Rousseau in his hermitage at Ermenonville and then by Marie Antoinette who played at being a shepherdess her little cottage, the Trianon, on the grounds of the Versailles palace. And the Rococo grotto, with its synthetic incrustations was an encounter between the natural and the aesthetic where the natural and the made lost any distinguishable division. Rococo ceramics, although mostly ornately classical, have a surprisingly wide stylistic range, including—and this is what Warburton draws upon—near amorphous objects which can be highly eccentric and imaginative metaphors for sea life, rock pools the formations within caves.

The strange lumpy, encrusted shapes and turquoise hues of Warburton's ceramic pieces refer to the process of ceramics where the maker, after taking a substance, clay, from the ground, then changes it using two other elements, first water, then fire. Warburton uses the Rococo as a starting point, because the made objects encrusted with shapes evoking moss, snails and barnacles effectively return the material back to the earth whence it came. These semi-sculptural objects of Warburton's are microcosms of the natural universe which is always being reshaped. They are tread mid-way between the world of utility and artificiality and the world of laws which are ignorant of the ways of humans. There is something brutal about their texture, but also serenely gentle.

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