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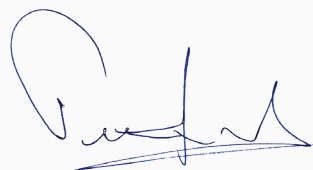
Peter Jenks

Dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art at the University of Cape Town, 2013.

This work has not been submitted previously in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution and quotation in this dissertation, or the work of other people, has been attributed and cited and referenced.

Peter Jenks

Signature:

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Peter Jenks', with a horizontal line underneath.

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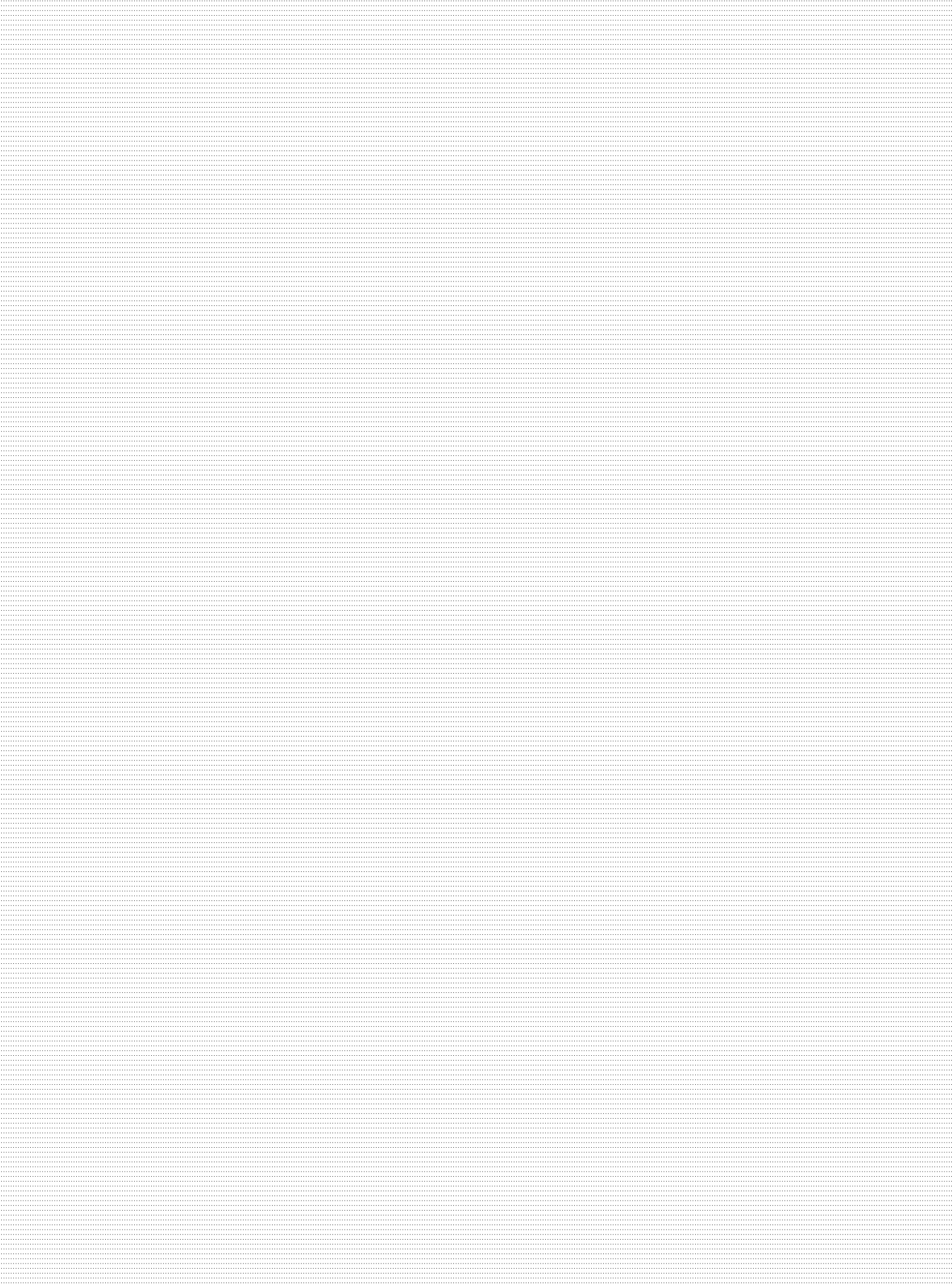
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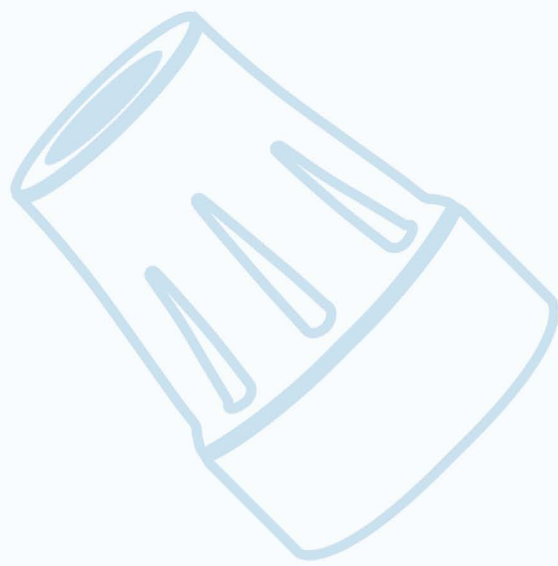
I would like to acknowledge and thank Romano Signs for their help and generous support in printing the jigsaw puzzle.

Lastly, I would like to especially thank my wife for her enduring patience and support, without which none of this would have been possible.



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## Preface

*You would like to hear how it is in old age?  
Certainly, not much is known about that country  
Till we land there ourselves, with no right to return.*

(Milosz, 1991: 25)

In this Master's project, my work has been concerned with a number of ideas associated with old age and ageing, and with the physical, psychological and social conditions and changes that attend this period of human life. The realisation that one is reaching what is commonly understood as old age is a paradoxical one: a sense of change accompanied by wisdom and insight, yet also the recognition of decline and the stasis that accompanies this. In order to discuss old age it is necessary to try to define the term and to identify what the boundaries are between youth, 'middle-age' and old age. In popular culture, at times expressed through poetry, the progression through life is seen in easily identified stages, variously numbered from three (infancy, adulthood, old age) to Shakespeare's classic 'seven ages of man' from his play *As You Like It*. Despite this variety, the 'old age' state is generally accompanied by greying hair, and the noticeable onset of physical and cognitive deterioration. These various stages of human development are all affected by significant life events and crises, in many cases marked or celebrated by rites of passage for events such as leaving school after matriculating, marriage, the birth of a child, or celebration of the first year of a new decade. There is no definitive marker for the onset of old age, but perhaps the closest is that of formal retirement from working life, typically around the age of 65.

Although many transitional events can be uplifting, bringing new gains and insights, they invariably involve some form of loss. In particular, it is the aged and elderly who suffer the greatest sense of loss as theirs are many and varied – children leave home, friends or family members die, the body begins to fail, mental abilities often diminish and social status is lost. More significantly, perhaps, old people often lose opportunities and the promises of the future. Yet despite these negative aspects, old age can also offer its own particular rewards and possibilities for growth, as my own experiences and investigations have shown.

*All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts,  
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,  
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms;  
And then the whining schoolboy, with his satchel  
And shining morning face, creeping like snail  
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,  
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad  
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,  
Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard,  
Jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel,  
Seeking the bubble reputation  
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,  
In fair round belly with good capon lined,  
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,  
Full of wise saws and modern instances;  
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts  
Into the lean and slippered pantaloon,  
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;  
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide  
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,  
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes  
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,  
That ends this strange eventful history,  
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,  
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.*

From: *As You Like It* by William Shakespeare. Act 2, Scene 7, lines 139-166.

(Wilson, 1984: 229).

In 1966 I left university and started work as a trainee computer programmer. This marked the beginning of a long career of some 37 years in information technology, during which I became involved in the management, design, programming and development of computer systems for large commercial organisations. During this time I also married and had children. If I considered anything about my life course in that period, it was probably fairly typical of many of my peers and colleagues: I aspired to become an expert in my chosen field, earn a good salary, improve my lifestyle, provide for my family and educate my children. I expected to retire at age 65 – if not wealthy, at least comfortably, and then, in terms of the oft-repeated cliché, live out my remaining years in ease without the demands of attention to status, money and ‘the daily grind’ weighing on me. The reality was somewhat different. Starting in the mid-1980s, I developed an interest in art; more specifically, I decided I would like to develop some skills, and began attending weekly evening drawing and painting classes. Attendance, however, was sporadic, depending on the pressures of work and other social activities; years went by with no classes at all, and with no output whatsoever beyond work produced in the evening sessions.

It was during this period, aged about 45, that I first became aware of the issues of ageism: I was in the process of changing jobs and having some difficulty in finding new employment. It became apparent after a number of interviews that despite my experience and skills, employers wanted younger people: unbelievably, it seemed I was too old. That memory is still vivid, and has made me very conscious of the prejudice against older people.

In 2002, at the age of 58 and faced with the prospect of another six or seven years in an increasingly boring and meaningless management role, I elected to take early retirement from formal employment and earn a living as an independent consultant, hoping that this would also give me more freedom and an opportunity to learn more about art, and develop my drawing and painting skills. In the following year, our family circumstances at the time were such that I could afford to stop working and, encouraged by my wife, I applied to the Michaelis School of Fine Art with the hope of obtaining some formal training and education in fine art. To my very great surprise, I was accepted into the BAFA course and began my undergraduate studies in 2004. This was a life-changing event that led to my current situation and the project that is the subject of this MFA.

My undergraduate years at Michaelis completely changed my ideas about art. I abandoned the idea of becoming a painter and was drawn very



Peter Jenks, *Transition*, 2007. Installation View. Wooden chairs, glass, fabric, found objects, carpet.

much to sculpture and assemblage, a whole new world of possibilities having been opened up for me. It was a strange but exhilarating experience. In addition to this I was, to all intents and purposes, just another student – I was accepted quite happily by classmates, but on the other hand, I was in my sixties and beginning to understand the pressures and expectations of society regarding ‘old’ people. It was therefore not surprising that the nature of old age and ageing became a subject for my art practice.

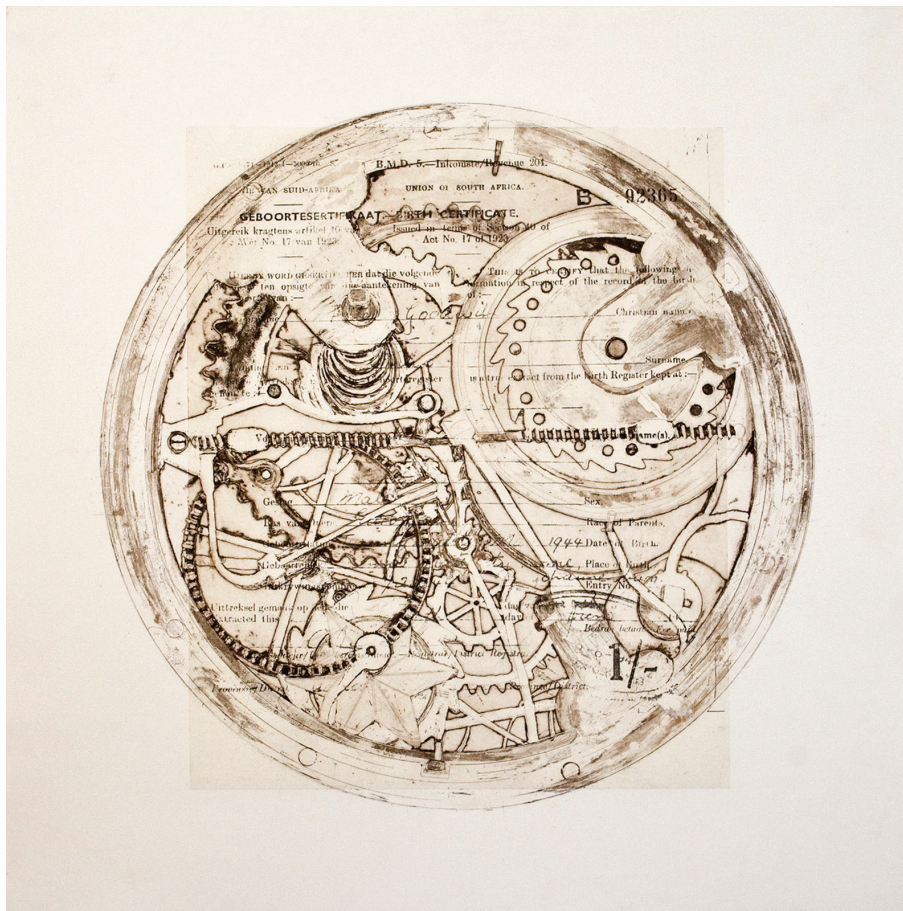
In my final undergraduate year in 2007, I chose to deal with issues of late old age, that is, the last few years in the lives of elderly people, very often those in their 70s, 80s, and even 90s, which, for many, as I saw it, was simply a period of waiting – a condition that is enacted in the day rooms and social centres of retirement villages, old-age homes and hospitals. My final undergraduate work consisted of an installation reminiscent of a waiting room in some institution, populated by a variety of chairs. Each chair was a found object, a wooden chair sourced from a second-hand shop or auctioneer, but modified and adapted to represent some aspect of the degenerations and losses that inevitably occur in old age.

After my graduation in 2008, I spent another year at Michaelis to obtain a Postgraduate Diploma, this time in printmaking. I made reference to my own personal history of ageing as subject matter. Using a single repeatedly modified copper plate, I created a series of prints that

traced significant moments of my own development from birth to my age at that time. I spent the following two years experimenting with some assemblage, as well as painting, did some private lecturing about art and eventually decided to continue my studies, which brought me back to Michaelis.



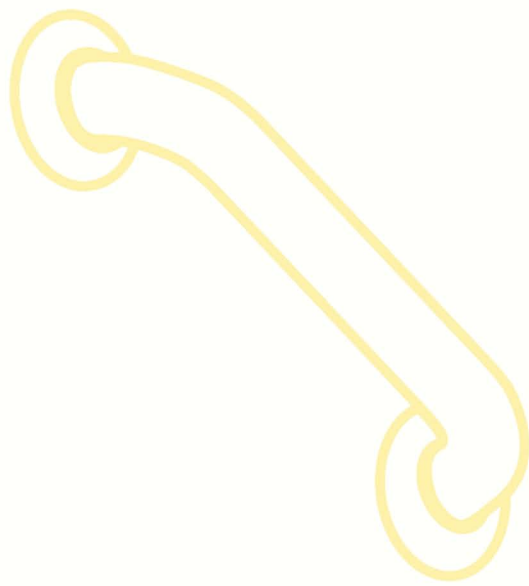
Peter Jenks, *Transition* (detail), 2007.



Peter Jenks, *State I (untitled)*, 2008. Etching, chine collé, 500 x 500 mm.



Peter Jenks, *State VI (untitled)*, 2008. Etching, lithograph, 500 x 500 mm.



## Introduction

In the course of this degree I continued to develop the themes that were at the centre of my fourth year work and postgraduate diploma. I have been interested in both my own sense of ageing and the condition of ageism that seems to thrive in a youth-centred society. I have read much about the conditions attendant on ageing and the lack of insight about old people in the views of those much younger (Bytheway, 1994). I have also immersed myself in a number of books and articles about ageing. Generally, I have focussed on work that deals with ageing from social and psychological perspectives, rather than the clinical focus of gerontology that tends to emphasise the physiological aspects of ageing. I have found the works of Haim Hazan (1994) and Margaret Cruikshank (2009) to be particularly enlightening and useful: Hazan is a specialist on old age in anthropology. His book, while analysing and critiquing current theories and attitudes to old age in western societies, discusses societal attitudes and constructions about ageing and, most importantly, draws on the lived realities of old age as experienced by a number of communities of old people.

Cruikshank deals with American attitudes and conditions about ageing and, although her work is written particularly for women, she challenges general stereotypical attitudes and myths, while at the same time arguing for positive attitudes and ways of ageing comfortably. In addition to these authors, a wide range of papers (in peer-reviewed journals), other books – such as *The Cambridge Handbook of Later Life* (2005) – and novels and poetry have contributed to my understanding and knowledge of the subject.

My researches, coupled with my personal experiences and observations, have led me to understand more about the entrenched attitudes of ageism in society. For myself, one way to deal with this is to make art about ageing, a form of activism inspired by the approach taken by artists in the Dada movement. It was the belief of the Dadaists that the contemporary mores and values of the time led in part to the turmoil and horrors of the First World War. For these artists, modern society was morally bankrupt and barbaric (Williams, 2009: 193). The old ways of capitalist thinking, the formal divisions of class and the ideals of nationalism could not serve as the principles for an enlightened and moral society, and the only course was a direct attack on contemporary social values (Gale, 1997; Williams, 2009). They also questioned existing artistic approaches: “all deliberate and conscious efforts, composition,

logic, are futile” (Brecht, 1957: 275). In turn, my own project and artwork challenges that which is all too often ignored in art and avoided in popular culture. Despite the fact that individual situations and responses of older people to ageing are unique, I consider that it is possible to make art that deals with the more common conditions of ageing in contemporary society, which will both allow me to express my own views, and create work that will hopefully resonate with viewers. There is an element of activism in adopting such an approach, for it seems to me to be outrageous that older people are often stigmatised and shunted into a negative social grouping merely on the basis of chronological age.



Raoul Hausmann, *Mechanical Head (Spirit of the Age)*, c1920. Assemblage, 32.5 x 21 x 20 cm. Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. (Hausmann was a prominent member of the Dadas in Berlin after WW I.)

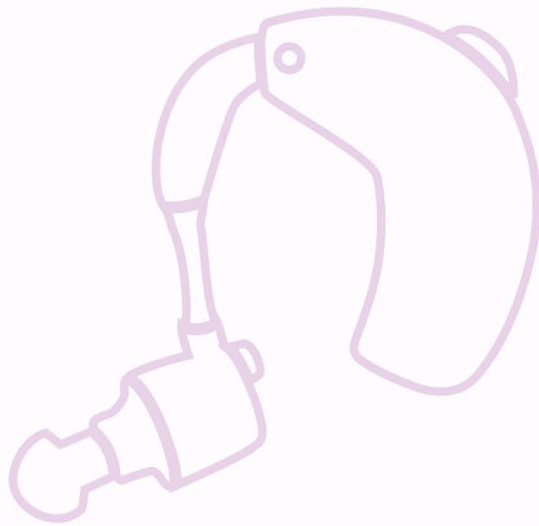
Having chosen this topic, the challenge was then to produce a body of work that would not slip into the stereotypical imagery associated with old age, yet at the same time would not shy away from the specific issues I wanted to address. In short, I wanted to produce work that was interesting and challenging as sculpture, but would also serve my desire to alert my audience to the prejudice against old people that often seems to lie at the heart of the society I live in. In seeking a solution to this, I examined art historical precedents and the work of a number of artists (particularly the work of Edward and Nancy Kienholz) for their approaches to this subject.

At a practical level, I began the project by exploring aspects of memory and loss, constructing small-scale objects with elements of

photographs, trinkets and other memorabilia, but I eventually turned away from this approach. I then resorted to dealing with the myths, stereotypes and the conditions of ageing. My considerations finally focussed on the nature of the work and its affective possibilities and I elected to work with exaggerated scale as my central motif, and I developed a set of objects to be arranged in the form of an installation.

Having adopted this strategy, it became apparent that it would require a considerable amount of craft work and skill (particularly woodwork) and, having no particular skills in this regard, I was obliged to consider to what extent I would be able to physically craft all the pieces myself and the degree to which I might need outside help. I struggled with this and in the end I elected to make everything myself, to learn new skills in the process, to make use of my existing technological skills and take advantage of computer design and manufacturing technologies. This combination also gave me the pleasure of dispelling one of the myths of old age, namely that it is a time of stagnation, not development: it was a counter to the myth of inflexibility as noted by many researchers (Laz, 1998: 97; Mulley, 2007: 70–71). The whole endeavour is therefore in itself a refutation of the cliché that ‘you can’t teach an old dog new tricks’.

The body of work that this project consists of is, then, a personal exploration of and confrontation with selected images of ageing as it relates to my own interpretations, observations and research.



# Old Age and Ageing

## *Context and Terminology*

There is significant variation amongst the status and social conditions of the aged around the world, so that to explore and incorporate them all is beyond the scope of this project. References, and the realm of ageing addressed here, therefore relate primarily to my own experience and understanding, derived as it is from a 'Western' paradigm and contained as it is in contemporary consumer culture.

Since this project deals in part with the stereotypes and myths of old age, the issue of terminology about age arises. Most old people do not view themselves as such – that is, 'old' – or find it extremely difficult to reconcile their chronological age with their internally perceived mental age (Bytheway, 2005a: 472–474). The reality is that everyone is ageing. Clearly, people in their teens are young and those in their eighties are old, but this a relative point of view. Calling someone 'old' is to label them in terms of one's own current age: to a sixteen-year old, a person aged forty is 'old', while for a septuagenarian that same forty-year-old is young. In this paper, the terms 'old', 'aged', and 'elderly' will be used to refer to people whose chronological ages are in the mid-sixties and beyond. As loose as this may seem, a standard form of terminology is necessary in order to form a meaningful basis for discussion concerning both academic and popular attitudes and theories regarding old age and ageing. The terminology as defined here represents those generally in the last 20% or so of their lives, based on life expectancy figures: in 2008 life expectancy at birth in the United States was 78.5 years (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011: 2) and in the UK in 2010 it was 78.2 years for men and 82.3 years for women (United Kingdom Office for National Statistics, 2011: 3).

## *A Brief History of Ageing*

There are a number of myths about the aged in history. For example, there is a common belief that the aged were better off in the past, mainly because there were fewer of them and there was extended family care. However, as Thane describes, "at least 10% of the population of England, France and Spain were aged over 60 even in the 18th century" (Thane, 2005: 9–28); furthermore, many elderly people were not cared for by families as they had no children, either as a consequence of very high child

mortality rates, or because the family had broken up as children moved away in search of work. Without modern communication technologies or high literacy rates, contact with home and family was often lost, and other researchers such as Achenbaum (1982: 249–354) have backed this view. The belief that lives were shorter in the past is based on average life expectancy figures: in the 18th century in Europe it was around 40–45 years (Thane, 2005: 9), while currently it varies in European regions from 78 to 86 (World Health Organisation, 2012). These figures represent life expectancy at birth: the fact that it is higher now is not so much a result of people necessarily living longer as it is a consequence of much higher infant mortality rates in earlier times that grossly skewed the overall figure – as can be seen by a similar effect on South Africa’s own current life expectancy rate of 54 (World Health Organisation, 2012), a distortion caused by the very high AIDS-related deaths amongst the population.

In the past, the issues and problems of the aged were much as they are today. Thane (2005) has extensively reviewed societal attitudes and describes the conditions of the aged from the ancient Greeks through to the 20th century. What emerges is a picture that reveals that despite all the developments of technology, medicine and social structures over the centuries not much has changed for the aged: “the ideal of a healthy, productive and independent long life, followed by a passive, kindly and nostalgic old age culminating in a pain-free, quiet and anticipated natural death, was just that: an ideal” (Thane, 2005: 255).

### ***Ageing in Contemporary Society***

Much literature supports the view that ours is an ageist society, ageism being a form of prejudice loosely defined as “the discrimination and denigration of people based on their chronological age, embodying a set of beliefs founded in ignorance, fear and prejudice” (Bytheway, 1994: 2; Best 2005: 296), much like racism and similar forms of preconception and bias. The term itself is attributed to the gerontologist Robert Butler, who coined it in 1969, and more than three decades later it is still deeply embedded in society (Butler, 2005: 86; Calasanti, 2005). It should be noted that the above definition is a broad one, referring to the effects of biological ageing on people of all ages. In referring to ‘ageism’, however, this paper concerns itself with a narrower and simpler version: “Ageism is discrimination against older people on grounds of age” (Bytheway, 2005b: 361).

Some evidence for ageism is reflected in terminology about older

people: terms such as 'geriatric', 'pensioner', 'fogey', 'dotard' and 'senior citizen' are common. Such epithets stigmatise those to whom they are applied, since they assign the nominee to a class so that they are seen only in those terms, with no differentiation between, for example, a physically active 65-year old and a dementia patient (Hazan, 1994: 13). Given this, the question remains why this should be so. A number of theorists and researchers accept the concept that 'old age' is a social construct: Hazan, for example, discusses (amongst other arguments) that our knowledge about age is shaped by perceptions, beliefs and rationalisations and "this is used wittingly or otherwise, to sustain the social position it reflects", going on to note that "a host of socio-psychological forces operate to remove old people from the rest of society and assign them to a symbolic and physical enclave" (Hazan, 1994: 2-3). Gordon and Longino (2000: 699-703) discuss institutional and social structures and groupings, pointing out that age-homogeneous groupings arise in part through economics and the workplace: there are those who work and those who do not. Categories that define the working population are age-heterogeneous in the main (such as wealth, status or occupation), but the retired and pensioners are considered a single group. Laz points out that old age is seen by sociologists as a construct in the same way that race and gender are: "viewing age and gender as consisting of statuses and



Official traffic warning sign, United Kingdom Department of Transport.

roles to which we are socialized presupposes a set of discrete categories: women, men, the young, the middle aged, the elderly. Such categorization highlights and exaggerates differences and minimizes similarities among groups" (Laz, 1998: 86).

This classification has severe consequences for the old. Once an individual reaches a stage of life in which they have ceased formal employment, they are categorised using (as noted above) terms such as 'senior citizens', 'pensioners' and the like. These classifications are, however, similar to other social categories such as the sick, the displaced, the handicapped, the previously disadvantaged: all terms which imply a form of dependence on others and a lack of capacity to contribute to society. Institutions – such as hospitals – that are structured into departments based on pathology very often have one labelled 'geriatric', along with 'maternity' and 'oncology'. This leads to a powerful sense in society that age is a sickness that requires special handling (Hazan, 1994: 13–27; Laz, 1998). Indeed, one author suggests that “the business of the old is to be sick”, in order to support the profits of the pharmaceutical and biomedical companies (Cruikshank, 2009: 38–42). This attitude is also reflected in the fact that in the so-called developed world, what is now increasingly seen as a 'problem' is the ever-increasing number of the aged relative to the population as a whole. Across the whole of Europe in 2012, for example, 22.5% of the population are over the age of 60, and this figure is expected to increase dramatically to 33.6% by 2050, while the projected percentage of those over the age of 80 in Europe in 2050 will rise from its current 4.4% to 9.3% (World Health Organisation, 2012). This is perceived to be a problem because, despite the recognition that the aged can make a valuable contribution to society in many ways, there is still a view in many countries that the old and elderly are non-productive and a drain on the rest of society (Kelly, c2007).

There is a counter to this negative view, thanks, in some countries, to economic prosperity and the rising values of pensions. There is an emerging group of healthy (and more wealthy) retired individuals who constitute a group recognised as an economic force and are thus attractive to marketers. For example, this trend of post-retirement activity was first noticed in France in the 1960s and eventually became known as *troisième* ('third age') to counter the extant paradigms around disability and degradation (Guillmard & Reim, 1993: 471). The reality, however, is that the nature of ageing for individuals is both shared and unique: the societal aspects and consequences are felt by all, despite the fact that the individual lifestyles, physical states, emotions and methods of coping with the effects of ageing are unique to the individual.

## *Psychological Conditions*

There are a number of formal frameworks, generally known as psychosocial theories, that have been developed in order to understand and analyse the nature and course of individual human development in terms of the cognitive, behavioural and social changes that occur as we grow from birth. These models, however, tend to play down development in old age. There are other specific theories regarding old-age development, such as 'disengagement theory' (Cumming et al., 1960), but due to the complexities of society, differing cultures and the enormous variety of lived experience, it is very difficult, if not impossible (and probably not even desirable), to find any one theory that is adequate to the task of comprehensively understanding old age (Hazan, 1994: 90–102). In many cultures, however, at the social (as opposed to academic) level the progression through life is explained in simpler terms variously labelled 'childhood', 'adolescence', 'youth', 'middle age' and 'old age'. Society expects those in the latter category to behave in a uniform manner, irrespective of actual chronological age: "old age is normative" (Laz, 1998: 85–86). This constitutes a major problem for those in this group, as research evidence suggests that people's mental attitudes and internal image of themselves is often that of a younger person (Bytheway, 2005a: 472–474). People do not feel nor think that they are as old as others may see them. The external appearance is, most often, nothing but a mask that conceals a much younger mind. It is quite logical, then, that the derogatory term 'geezer' (as in 'that old geezer') is a corruption from the old English term 'guiser', meaning "one who guises; a masquerader, a mummer" (Oxford English Dictionary Online, 2011).

The experience of time is of crucial importance for many old people, as it is an underlying cause of many overt behaviours that are often seen as stereotypical of older people. In a complex and detailed analysis, Hazan (1994: 74–89) discusses the issue of the time-universe of the aged. Simplistically put, his prime argument in this regard is that from a social perspective the old are not supposed to change, as they have reached a static period of life – a paradox considering the variety and high number of changes that they undergo in a relatively short period of time. This turmoil has a number of significant psychological effects, as the aged are very often denied the ability to cope with these changes in the way that they might have done when younger. Hazan describes how the social institutions, expectations and conditions of the old are very

different to those in the earlier stages of their lives. For the 'non-old', the nature of the changes and possible responses to these in a normal society provide a measure of meaning and control in individuals' lives, as they can adapt and adjust in ways that are not generally open to the elderly. His analysis explores this subject in some depth, particularly why and how it is important for mental health. The reactions of old people vary, leading to certain behaviours, and he explains and categorises how this comes about. Briefly, these behaviours are: firstly, some disengage from society and become withdrawn, occasionally abandoning all personal control to the point of being labelled 'mentally frail' and becoming institutionalised; secondly, there are those who relinquish ideas of personal control and previously-held values and beliefs, becoming cynical and cantankerous, leading others to believe them irrational; thirdly, there are those who abandon any control or attempt to impose meaning on their lives, to the point of stopping eating or dying very soon after entering an old age home; finally, many people attempt a balance of control and meaning in their lives by attempting new roles: developing new activities, hobbies and domestic routines, or doing volunteer work. In these daily activities the flow of time may become cyclical rather than linear, a way in which the march of time can be halted. Another response is to re-enact the past through repetition, and "cherished memories may become a pivotal time-structuring device" (Hazan, 1994: 79). It is these behaviours that lead in part to the stereotypical view that old people cannot change and are fixated on the past. Of course, many old people do not subscribe to the dictates of societal pressure and expectations, but they are generally considered to be exceptions to the rule of what it means to be aged.



Rita Levi Montalcini at the age of 100. Awarded the Nobel prize for Physiology or Medicine in 1986, at age 75. She was still actively researching and working in her 80's. In 2001, she was appointed as Senator for Life by the President of the Italian Republic. Died aged 102 in 2012.

In terms of individual and personal reactions, there comes a time of acceptance and understanding that despite what the mind might want, or is capable of, in many ways the body simply cannot do what it used to do: a biological reality that gradually overtakes all people and only becomes significant when triggered through some stark reminder. At this point there comes a realisation that because of chronological age, the individual has been placed into a form of social enclave wherein the only commonality across all its members is simply that: age. A strange feeling indeed, evoked by the following quote from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*:

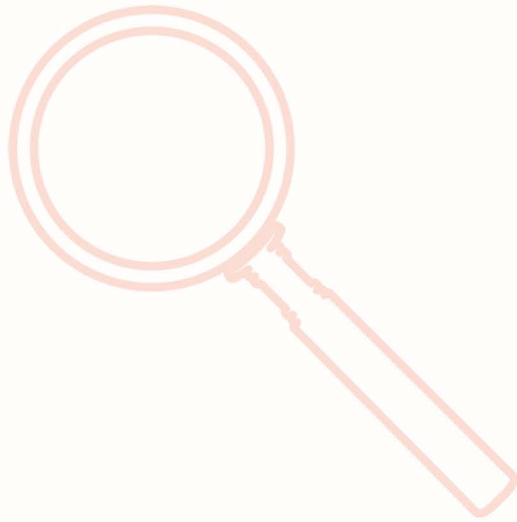
*Dear, dear! How queer is everything today! And yesterday things went on as usual. I wonder if I've been changed in the night? Let me think: was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I'm not the same, the next question is, Who in the world am I? Ah, that's the great puzzle!*

(Carroll, 2007: 24)

This sense of disorientation, the result of being faced with two conflicting conditions – the socially-determined status of old people and the ambitions of the individual – compounded by the very real losses associated with longer lives, leads to existential questions particular to the aged. These struggles and conflicts are rarely adequately acknowledged or understood.

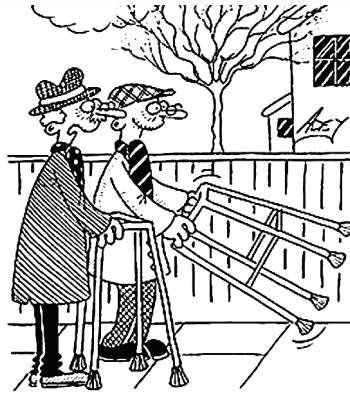
*The great affairs of life are not performed by physical strength, or activity, or nimbleness of body, but by deliberation, character, expression of opinion. Of these old age is not only not deprived, but, as a rule, has them in a greater degree.*

Marcus Tullius Cicero, 106-43 BC.



## Art and the Imagery of Old Age

Ageist attitudes manifest regularly in contemporary popular culture in its portrayal of older people in advertising, television, magazines and entertainment. Depictions and references to older people are usually stereotyped: one sees the wise, healthy and neatly dressed couples/ individuals smiling their way through a comfortable, workless and healthy retirement; yet often one is also confronted with cartoon figures of senility and doddering dementia.



"I didn't know you could  
do wheelies Stan"

As a prime example, consider advertising: researchers Carrigan and Szmigin (2000) point out that in the UK and USA, despite the growing size of the market that is comprised of older people and their wealth (over 45s in the UK in 2000 have nearly 80% of all financial wealth and are responsible for 30% of all spending), much of the advertising promotes the idea that old age is "not a state to be encouraged" (Carrigan & Szmigin, 2000: 43). Marketing in public media tends to avoid the use of older people, but when it does portray them, generally depicts idealised stereotypes.



Illustration on a website  
discussing retirement income  
(Zwecher, 2011).



Valentin de Boulogne, *The Four Ages of Man*, c1629.  
Oil on canvas, 96.5 x 134 cm. National Gallery, London.



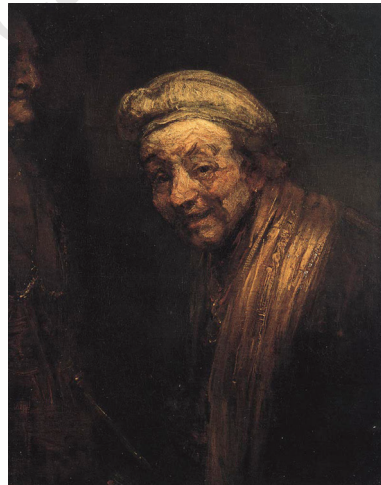
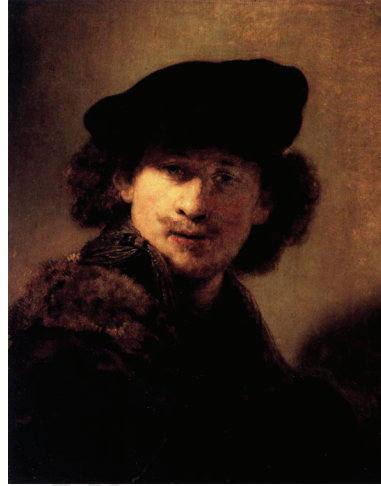
Camille Claudel, *L'Âge mûr*, c1893-1899. Bronze - 114 x 163 x 72 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

A comprehensive analysis of global studies on the portrayal of older adults in advertising confirms the reality of this representation (Harwood et al., 2006). However, the findings also reveal that in the last few years this portrayal has gradually become more positive. Stereotypes of old age are also manifest in other forms of contemporary culture, such as greeting cards, film, music (Aday & Austin, 2000) and even books for young children (Fillmer & Meadows, 1986).

Expressed repugnance at the visual features of age is seldom challenged and there seems to be an assumption that everyone feels that way; recognition of the fate that awaits everyone is part of what lies at the heart of this rejection, for it is not old things per se that are distasteful. Society and individuals value, appreciate and find beautiful many other old things: artefacts, buildings and even animals. Furthermore, the love of aged relatives and appreciation of the wisdom and other qualities of older people continue to play an active part in human relationships. There is, of course, an aversion to the ageing body. The reason for this is in part biological – psychologists and others have researched and identified the drivers of sexual attraction and selection among humans across cultures and, in short, they amount to signs of fertility: youth, physical beauty and other factors appropriate to the protection, maintenance and support of raising a family (Buss, 2004: 105–162; Geary, c1998: 121–157). Most of those features rule out older people and thus make them unattractive to others of the opposite sex. In popular culture, sexual attraction is a powerful force in advertising, television, film and print media, and while the same does not necessarily apply in fine art, there are often equivalent and ambivalent attitudes expressed in this realm too.

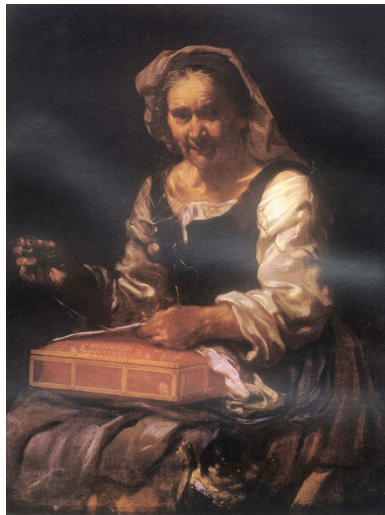
### ***The Aged in Art: Historical Practice in Western Traditions***

Up until the 18th century, artistic representations of old age generally repeated stereotypes (Troyansky, 2005), either focussing on the stages of life – such as Valentin de Boulogne's painting *The Four Ages of Man* (c1629) – and depicting development from childhood through to death, or making use of older figures in allegorical works to depict emotional states such as grief, despair, wisdom and so on. However, a number of artists examined the conditions and passage of age, such as Camille Claudel in her bronze *L'Age mûr* (1893-1899).



Rembrandt van Rijn, Self-portraits (left to-right, top-to bottom):  
1. 1628. Oil on board, 18.6 x 22.5 cm.  
2. 1634. Oil on oak panel, 58.3 x 47.4 cm.  
3. 1659. Oil on oak panel, 84 x 66 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington.  
4. 1669. Oil on canvas. 82.5 cm x 65 cm. Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne.

There are also several examples of work produced in the 17th century that deal with the realities of old age, either in situations where elders and other dignitaries are being honoured, as part of family groups, or working at a trade. Troyansky (2005: 200) notes that artists in the 18th century also began to make use of old people in order to demonstrate their skills of representation. Since the older person presented a challenge, the textures and contours of the aged body were a frequent subject.



Berhard Keil, *Old woman sewing*.  
1650. Oil on Canvas, 97 × 73 cm.  
Serpukhov Historical and Art Museum,  
Russia.

Another development was the practice of self-portraiture, which was rare prior to the 16th century, perhaps due to a piety that prevented artists from glorifying themselves (West, 2004: 163), but the rise of the self-portrait is attributed, in part, to the simple physical fact that flat mirrors became available. A notable example of self-portraiture is to be found in the work of Rembrandt van Rijn: over a span of some 40 years he produced more than 50 self-portraits, ranging from an early etching of himself as young and energetic, to final and poignant paintings of himself as an old, tired man. It is a remarkable record of the chronology of ageing.

In the 19th century there are fewer examples of artworks directly concerned with old age than in the preceding century, and those that I have found tend to have more romanticised approaches, such as the various allegorical paintings about the 'voyage of life' by the American artist, Thomas Cole. Other better-known examples concern individuals, groups, social activities and scenes of family life, as well as satire, such as some of the work of William Hogarth and Louis-Léopold Boilly in the 18th and 19th centuries.



Thomas Cole, *The Voyage of Life: Manhood*, 1840. Oil on canvas, 132 x 198 cm. Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute.



William Hogarth, 1763, *John Wilkes Esq.* Engraving, 35.5 x 22.0 cm. Tate, London.



After L.L. Boilly, *Les époux assortis*, 1825. Lithograph, 25 x 20 cm. Wellcome Library, London.

## ***Contemporary Practice in Art: 20<sup>th</sup> Century and Beyond***

The scope and subject matter of contemporary art is “ungraspably complex and diverse” (Stallabras, 2004: 150). Its concerns are wide and varied, ranging through feminism, politics, identity, mass culture, shopping and the nature of art itself, as well as many other aspects. The body, youth and old age are implicated in many of these themes. In my focus on the conditions of old age and the ageing body, I have looked specifically at those works that seem to have a bearing on the work I have made, including work by John Coplans, Melanie Manchot, Alice Neel, Susie Rea and, more importantly, Edward and Nancy Kienholz, Raoul de Keyser and Ron Mueck. My study has thus been constrained by the issues that I grappled with as I was making the work and by other art that has inspired me and does not attempt, in any way, to be comprehensive.



Melanie Manchot, *The London Eye (Liminal Portraits)*, 2001.  
C-type photographic print on aluminium. Rhodes + Mann Gallery, London.

When it comes to the ageing body, John Coplans was so incensed by the treatment of the aged and the rejection of the old body that he took to photographing his own naked body in a variety of poses and intriguing close-up compositions. Coplans is quoted by Townsend (1998: 97) as saying:

*... you don't exist. If you go out on the streets... and walk around, and you go into stores, if you're an old person you don't exist. They don't want to have anything to do with you, because you're ugly, and old, and you're going to die soon, and they don't want to be like that. So you hardly exist. The time is going to come soon when you're dead and gone... and you're in the way of the worship of youth and beauty...*

As previously noted, evidence in the literature points to perceived



John Coplans, 1994, *Self-portrait (Frieze No. 2, Four Panels)*. 4 photographs on paper.  
Support: 61.9 x 80.0 cm; Frame x 4: 198 x 88 cm.

attitudes of disgust towards the aged body, and these works appear to be an attempt to gain for it an acceptance in society and art: a backlash to the normative ideas of art, beauty and the body.

Another notable exception to the apparent avoidance of ageing in art was a recent exhibition (June 2012) organised by Newcastle University and hosted by the GV Art Gallery in London. Entitled *Coming of Age*, it was intended, as the press release notes, to be “a celebration of the human spirit”. The press release continued, “*Coming of Age* uses art to challenge negative perceptions around ageing. It explores how and why we age and affirms positive responses to the experience, as seen through the eyes of both artists and scientists” (Huxley, 2012). However, of the ten contributing artists, all except two focussed on the biological and medical aspects of the ageing body and mind. Two of the works dealt more with individual concerns: Susie Rea, a photographer, had a series of photographs of old people, which “... ask the viewer to pause, engage, and piece together the story within each frame. Their subject matter is a world often overlooked, where the faces, objects and spaces normally disregarded or ignored are seen and given presence” (Newcastle University, 2012). Martin Smith installed a series of sound and video works that dealt with the state of age, one of which was titled *Age is a state of mind, not a state of body* – a sound installation that consisted of recordings of people speaking key phrases, sayings or advice that parents, grandparents or significant elders had passed on to them.

The exhibition was refreshing in its approach to a subject that very often appears to be taboo in contemporary society. An examination

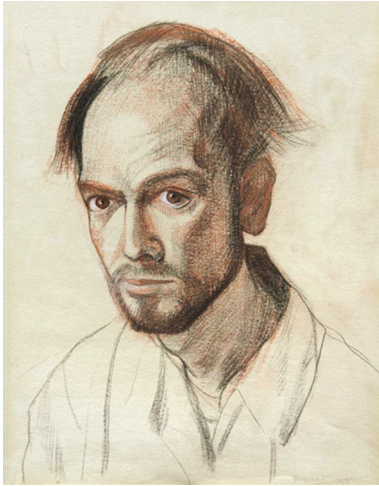
of some of the reviews available on the Internet (Prospero, 2012; Rose & Rose, 2012; Smith, 2012; Zuidijk, 2012) reveals many positive responses to the exhibition and to ageing, despite the focus of a number of the works on the negative aspects of the failing body and mind. One reviewer noted that “using art to challenge and change points of view, *Coming of Age* is



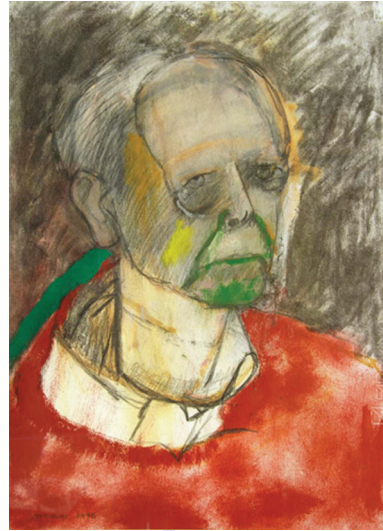
Susie Rea, *Joyce and Thomas*, 2008.  
C-Type Print, 102 x 76cm. Courtesy  
of the artist.

defiantly positive” (Zuidijk, 2012) and the article (as did the others) went on to discuss ageing in a positive light.

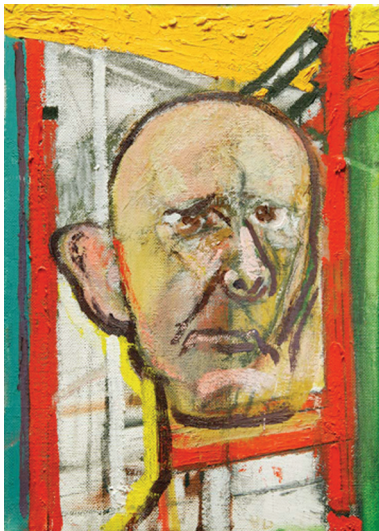
Self-portraiture is a vehicle for some artists, such as Lucien Freud, to explore or reflect on their own ageing. Freud had no qualms about depicting his own and other bodies, aged or otherwise. His focus is on the flesh – harsh, direct, uncompromising statements of the naked body, no matter what age. There is little evidence of the mental state of the sitters, what they feel or know – in many of his portraits the gaze of the sitter is unfocused and facing away from the viewer. Freud was only interested in what truth the body could convey if one is to believe Robert Hughes, who quotes Freud as saying, “I used to leave the face until last. I wanted the expression to be in the body. The head must just be another limb. So I had to play down expression in the nudes” (Hughes, 1989: 20). This even applied to his own self-portraits, including his last at the age of 80, which shows the artist, naked except for boots, holding brush and palette but gazing away from the viewer. There is a significant and important difference in Freud’s attitude compared to many others that deal with the body: he is concerned with the body in all its states, aged or otherwise. There is a sense of equality: old and young are treated alike. His approach and manner of painting, with its uncompromising focus on the body and the subject’s averted gaze, suggests a powerful sense of an inner life, “an inherent strangeness” (Hughes, 1989: 21) that prompts the viewer to



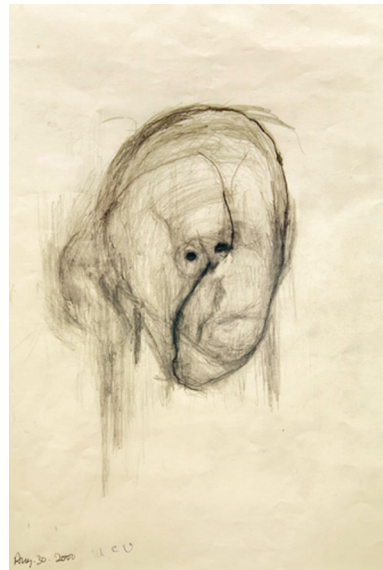
William Utermohlen, *Self-portrait*  
1967. Mixed media on paper,  
26.5 x 20 cm.



William Utermohlen, *Self-portrait*  
(red), 1996. Mixed media on paper,  
46.5 x 33 cm.

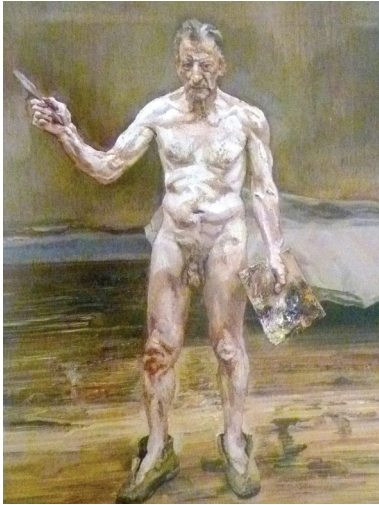


William Utermohlen, *Self-portrait*  
(with easel), 1998. Oil on canvas, 35.5  
x 25 cm.



William Utermohlen, *Self-portrait*  
(head), 2000. Pencil on paper,  
40.5 X 33 cm.

wonder not only about the life of the subject, but about the life of the artist too.



Lucian Freud, *Painter Working, Reflection*, 1993. Oil on canvas, 101.6 x 81.9 cm.

Another, different approach is to be found in the work of William Utermohlen, a painter who died at the age of 74 in 2007 as a consequence of the effects of Alzheimer's disease. He was diagnosed with the illness in 1995 and, according to his wife, immediately began a series of self-portraits in order to understand his condition and express his feelings on the subject (Utermohlen, 2006). These works are particularly interesting in that they go beyond the simple representation of an aged body (as in works by Melanie Manchot), as they are a record of the process of ageing itself: the deterioration of the mind is mirrored by the distortion in the imagery, reflective of an inner state. These works draw me to them as they deal directly with the mental conditions of ageing and reflect something of the life of the subject, going well beyond the simple depiction of ageing flesh.

## *Representations of Old Age: The Conditions of Ageing*

Ed Kienholz was a self-taught American artist whose art first became prominent in the 1950s and 1960s. His work is essentially social criticism and his primary target was the American culture he found himself a part of in the 1950s and 1960s. Examples of his works include *John Doe* (1959) which, as Brooks notes, was a “savage statement about the integrity of the archetypal American male” (Brooks, 1996c: 74); *Five Car Stud* (1969–1972), a horrifying scene of a racial attack by whites on a black man; and *The Portable War Memorial* (1968), made in protest against the Vietnam war.



Edward Kienholz, *John Doe*, 1959. Paint and resin on mannequin parts, perambulator, wood, rubber, plastic toy. 100 x 48 x 79 cm. The Meni Collection, Houston.

He initially began to work with wooden relief paintings, but in 1962 he exhibited his first major work, which consisted of an installation or ‘tableau’ called *Roxy’s* at the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles. It was named after, and represented, a brothel in Los Angeles. It took the form of a domestic room populated by a series of mannequins, one representing the madam, the others the prostitutes. It was constructed from found objects in such a way that the resultant figures were both horrifying and disturbing. This marked the beginning of a series of tableaux by Kienholz, a strategy that enabled him to further his aims of social and political criticism (Grove Art Online, 2007). Much of Kienholz’s work is characterized by the use of scenarios, the settings of which are recognizable, ordinary rooms or environments populated by grotesque and distorted forms. Each tableau is intended to highlight cultural issues and the darker side of American

life, addressing the distasteful realities of subjects such as death, sex and racism (Pincus, 1990: 2–7). From 1972 onwards, Kienholz collaborated with his wife, Nancy Reddin Kienholz, and in 1981 he acknowledged joint authorship of his works with her (Rodgers, 2007).

*The Wait* (1964–1965), one of Kienholz's earlier installations, makes a powerful statement not only about old age, but also about death and dying. Images of this work reveal a tableau of a skeletal but clothed old woman in an armchair, posed against a panelled wall. The figure has a taxidermied cat on her lap, and her arms and legs are made from the bones of a cow, according to the curator of a retrospective exhibition of Kienholz's work (Miller, 2011). The figure also wears a necklace of glass jars ('Mason' or 'Ball' jars), each holding a small unidentifiable item. The head (a slightly larger glass jar) has the face of a much younger woman pasted on it and inside there is the skull of a deer. There are other elements in the tableau: a table with a collection of photographs to the woman's left and a tasselled standing lamp on her right; a sewing basket and footstool are in front of her; a walking stick is propped up on the right side of the figure in the chair. The woman is dressed, but the bones of the arms and legs are visible. A larger oval portrait of a younger man, possibly her husband from some point in the past, hangs on a section of wallpapered wall above and behind her. At the far right there is a birdcage, in a frame, containing a live bird, referred to as a parakeet by the Whitney Museum's curator (Miller, 2011).

The whole scenario attests to a rich and varied life, now a store of memories: there is an assemblage of pictures on the table on the left, and closer inspection reveals typical family photographs – a baby, a couple, and a young man in uniform, amongst others. The jars themselves are of the type used for preserving: in this case they contain richly gilded but unidentifiable mementos and figures relating to the woman's life. The photograph of the younger woman pasted on the front of the jar refers to the paradox of the internal self-image of youth in contrast to the visible appearance of age (in this case a reversal), reinforced by the large and youthful image of the man immediately above her head. The scene foregrounds the last and lonely stages of life: what is relevant and important is the past; current existence is the wait for death, and 'real' life is insignificant. Kienholz emphasises this by contrasting the decaying surroundings with the living bird: small, insignificant but very much alive, even as it is placed well to the side.

There have been a variety of reactions to and interpretations of this work. Pincus refers to it as "a poignant image of living death"



Edward Kienholz, *The Wait*, 1964. Tableau: wood, polyester resin, paint, flock, furniture, bone, clothing, taxidermied cat, photographs, book, glass jars, walking stick, found objects, live parakeet, bird cage. 203 x 375 x 198 cm. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Gift of the Howard and Jean Lipman Foundation.

(Pincus 1990: 44), commenting as well on the isolation that this stage of life brings. Despite the macabre elements of the skull and bones, Brooks describes it as “an extraordinarily beautiful image of death and dying” (Brooks, 1996a: 122), going into some detail about the compositional elements of the ovals and placement of its components, her comments echoed in part by Hughes (1996: 80).

Other recent and more trivial accounts, such as that of Vogel



Edward Kienholz, *The Wait* (detail), 1964.

(2011), seem more concerned with the fate of the parakeet in the installation than the work itself: the Whitney Museum of American Art (who own the work) have gone to great lengths to explain in an interview how well the bird is cared for while it is on (and off) the exhibition (Miller, 2011). This is a response to queries from its viewers: concerns about the parakeet are clearly a reflection of the importance people attach to animals in captivity, but more significantly – given that the subject matter is a serious and relevant topic to every human being – their response may be indicative of their concerns about old age. Everything we value – vitality, life, colour – is trapped in a cage and unable to find expression, much as older people become trapped in a dysfunctional body.

Kienholz has created an installation that appears almost like a three-dimensional portrait, to be viewed from the front. Despite this, one reviewer concluded “nonetheless, this multi-dimensional work can never honestly be reduced to a simple frontal photograph. It must be experienced in person to be fully comprehended. One must move around the work to engage its complex structure” (Clutter, 2011). Another (Pincus, 1990: 49) notes that Kienholz’s use of space is about ‘closedness’ – a condition that



Edward and Nancy Kienholz. *Sollie 17*, 1979-80. Tableau: wood, plexiglass, furniture, sink, lights, photographs, plaster casts, pots, pans, books, cans, boxes, three pairs of underwear, linoleum, leather, wool, cotton, soundtrack, glass, metal, paint, polyester resin, paper, metal coffee can, sand and cigarette butts. 304.8 x 853.4 x 426.7 cm. Private collection.

in this work emphasises the closing down of a life. Given the reality of its evocative elements and its human scale, one is drawn into the space of the room itself and obliged to consider its aspects. The key elements that trigger the understanding that this work is about the last stages of old age and lead one to consider the nature of her life are prominent: the mementos and photographs; the walking stick and seated pose; the reference to needlework as a way of filling time; the implication that all that is important to this woman now are the people that once populated her existence: real life has been sidelined.

Another work by Kienholz in the same vein as *The Wait* is that of *Sollie 17* (1979–1980), made in collaboration with Nancy Reddin Kienholz. In contrast to the theme of approaching death in *The Wait*, *Sollie 17* deals with the restrictions and loneliness that age may bring to those who have moved beyond the mainstream of economic and social life. In this work they constructed another tableau, comprised of a room set in what is intended to be a small, anonymous hotel. The installation consists of two parts: the exterior is a hotel hallway, showing two doors. The left door is closed and the right one is Sollie's door, which is open, enabling viewers to look inside. There is a chair placed against the wall between the two doors and there is a pay-telephone to the left, underneath an illuminated 'Exit' sign. The sense is of something old and tawdry, described by Pincus (1990: 90) as having a patina of age and use (including scribbled graffiti, which has been added to by viewers in the work's many showings). The room itself is the living room of an old man who is depicted in three separate poses: sitting, standing and lying on a bed in a very cramped space. Brooks refers to this room as an "urban cave" (1996b: 184).

The space is filled with all the paraphernalia that a single inhabitant might collect, whose whole life is contained in that space – a bed, lamp, books, a TV set and cooking facilities. Everything is old and worn, the wallpaper is torn, there are makeshift connections for a reading light and there are some posters tacked loosely to the stained and wallpapered wall. The man (in all three poses) is shown dressed only in a pair of shorts.

On the bed, the recumbent figure is reading a book, his hand in his underwear, perhaps playing with himself; the sitting figure, shoulders slumped, has his head bent over, staring down at a game of solitaire, apparently oblivious of the TV in front of him. The standing figure has his back to the door and is gazing out of the window, his arms folded. Significantly, in place of the head on each of the three figures there is a framed photograph, suggestive of both memory and stasis. The whole



Edward and Nancy Kienholz, *Sollie 17*, 1979-80. Exterior.



Edward and Nancy Kienholz, *Sollie 17*, 1979-80. Detail

scene is one of lethargy and loneliness, a man trapped in the situation of poverty and hopelessness. To reinforce the message that the room is like a cell, the title is a reference to Stalag Luft 17B, a notorious prisoner of war camp in Germany during World War II.

Kienholz was associated with the “characteristic California genre of art of light and space” (McEvilley, 1996: 49), yet his tableaux are generally of the indoors, making use of artificial light and enclosed spaces. Like many artists of that period he wished to reference the real world, to subsume it into his art. For Kienholz it was to comment and criticise, as opposed to Claes Oldenburg - another Californian artist at that time - it was to create a new form of sensory experience by transforming the commonplace through the use of scale (Pincus, 1990: 2–4). In Kienholz’s work the scale is life-size, prompting identification with the scene – creating a unique space, yet casting the viewer into the uncomfortable role of voyeur. It is neither possible to escape the message of a tableau by observing it as some other, miniature world, nor by treating it as some gigantic fairytale. Furthermore, the works cannot be disassembled into a collection of objects that would be individually significant: elements in either of the tableaux have resonance, but it is their relationships in the context of the whole work and to each other that provide their meaning regarding lonely old age. In using such elements to signify loneliness, repetition and, in the case of *Sollie 17*, poverty, “once again Kienholz is reminding the viewer of the downside of things” (McEvilley, 1996: 53). In referring to the “downside” here, McEvilley is in fact referring specifically to poverty and social conditions rather than the particular conditions of old age, albeit many old people find themselves in this situation.

At a very different level and approach is Raoul de Keyser’s painting *To Walk* (2012), which was on display in an exhibition with the same name along with a number of his other more abstract works (Galerie Barbara Weiss, 2012). He died aged 82, shortly after this exhibition. The painting itself is a poignant reminder of what a difference small things can make to the quality of life of someone suffering the debilitating effects of age-related decline. It is a simple statement: a small painting on canvas (28.1 x 21.2 cm) of a plain wooden walking stick, part of the edge lightly outlined in blue, with a slightly wavy blue cross drawn behind in wax crayon, as though by a child. The execution of the work is such that one has the sense that an unsteady or shaky hand created it, and the walking stick is clearly one that is associated with old people. It is a stark reminder that for some, the act of standing up and walking around is not simply a natural part of



Raoul de Keyser, *To Walk*, 2012.  
Gesso, Wasco (wax crayon), oil on  
canvas mounted on wood, 281. x 21.2  
cm.



Ron Mueck, *Man in a Boat*, 2002. Mixed media. Man: (height)  
75cm Boat: (length) 427cm.  
© Ron Mueck, courtesy Anthony d'Offay, London.  
Photographer: Mike Bruce, Gate Studios, London.

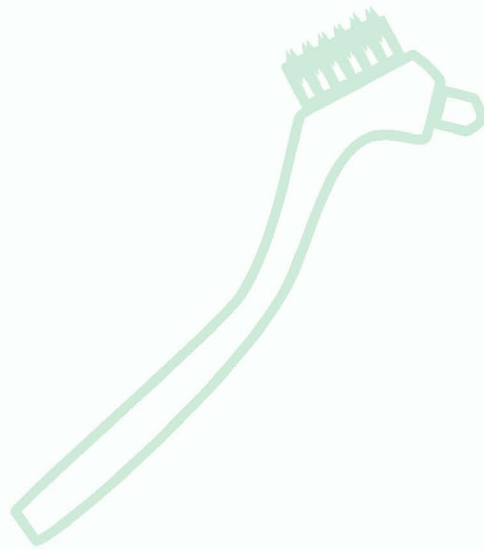
life, but is a major and sometimes painful exercise.

Ron Mueck is an Australian sculptor who works mainly with the human figure and uses both expanded and reduced scale combined with an extraordinary attention to detail to make the figures he creates appear life-like. His work generally concerns itself with various aspects of human development and existence. One of the works that interested me is his *Man in a Boat*. It is a sculpture of a naked middle-aged man seated near the centre of a wooden rowing boat. His arms are folded and his head is tilted slightly to one side, as though looking ahead. The image suggests that the man, unadorned, is being borne to some unknown destination and, significantly, has no control over the direction of his voyage, but is curious as to his journey's course and end. Mueck works in a wide range of scales, but in this particular work the figure in the boat is diminutive, approximately half life-size.

These works by Kienholz, de Keyser and Mueck have all interested me because they address issues of ageing that are often overlooked or ignored – specifically, the social and psychological conditions that accompany ageing. Rather than focussing on the conditions of the body and its deteriorating physical appearance, these works address what it means to age and the effects of it on daily life. They reference what it is to become really old, to face death, and to acknowledge and accept the process of becoming old – an inevitable process that ultimately cannot be altered or delayed in any significant way.

*youth is a flying horse  
age slows to a walk on sand  
now I notice sea shells*

(Wingfield, 2010)



*Determining what size a piece should be is difficult.*

(LeWitt, 1967: 848)

## **Scale and Space**

A characteristic of much of the work that has appealed to me is the manipulation of both scale and space to achieve their effects and messages, even where such effects do not necessarily relate to ageing. A further analysis of these works also raises questions about the nature of the objects chosen by the various artists in the development of their subject matter. Consideration of these aspects was an important part of the process in creating my own works. I considered a number of works by other artists as I formulated my own ideas concerning scale, space and object, as discussed in the following sections.

Scale is not important on its own: the scale of a form must be seen in relation to another before there is any proportional meaning, and it is proportion that we react to emotionally (Feldman, 1992). We unconsciously and automatically evaluate scale; we describe things as 'big' or 'small' in relation to our own bodies. This is explored by both Robert Morris (1966) in his writings on sculpture, and Susan Stewart, (1996) who discusses our relation to the miniature and the gigantic. Morris notes that "In the perception of relative size the human body enters into the total continuum of sizes and establishes itself as a constant on that scale" (Morris, 1966: 831), while Stewart states that the diminutive world is self-enclosed and we therefore stand outside of it, looking in, experiencing a feeling of distance – we are not within the space of the object, it is in ours; with large scale work, we become part of the environment, subsumed in that space. Stewart sums this experience up as "the miniature as contained, the gigantic as container" (1996: 71). Thus it is not simply an issue of size, but also the space containing, contained or observed (such as *Sollie 17*) by the viewer that invokes a particular sense. There is a 'felt' construction of space regarding an observed object: if it is small enough, it is within our space; large enough and we become part of the space of the object itself, raising issues of control. Objects smaller than ourselves tend to engender a sense of control over them, but not so for objects larger than life. Morris describes this effect in terms of monuments: there is a mode of 'private' or 'public' space. The larger scale and space brings about a sense of the public and a lack of intimacy as one moves away from the object (Morris, 1996: 831–832).



David Herbert, *VHS*, 2005-2006. Styrofoam, Plexiglass, latex paint. 244 x 127 x 30.5 cm. Saatchi Gallery.



Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, *Flashlight*, 1981. Steel painted with polyurethane enamel. 11.73 m x 3.2 m. University of Nevada, Las Vegas.



Claes Oldenburg, *Clothespin*, 1976. Steel (Cor-Ten) and stainless steel, 13.7 x 3.7 x 1.4 m. Center Square Building at 15th and Market Streets, Philadelphia.

This private/public sense and monumentality is evident in Claes Oldenburg's large-scale public works. Oldenburg (a contemporary of Kienholz's), in collaboration with Coosje van Bruggen, sought to address a broad spectrum of American culture as it was in the 1960s and 1970s. He attempted to do this through an extraordinary use of multiple techniques. In particular, however, he invoked grand scale – he created “singular, obsessive images of metamorphosis” (Hughes, 1991: 356-359). Most of his large-scale works, however, are conceived of and implemented as public sculpture, very often as a complement to urban development projects. They are generally planned from an architectural and spatial point of view and often take as subject matter objects that are typical of American and consumer culture. One example is *Flashlight* (1981), an 11.7m high replica of a conventional handheld torch, situated in a plaza at the University of Nevada in Las Vegas. In discussing the work, Oldenburg writes “... the squat column of the flashlight related to the low scale of the surrounding buildings on the campus. Moreover, its form would mediate between the angular appearance of the concert hall and the curvilinear elements of the theatre” (1995: 192). He has made a number of works in a similar vein, all sharing the goal of integrating public sculpture with the surrounding architecture, while at the same time transforming and reflecting the artefacts of American life. Another example of this is *Clothespin* (1976). These particular works are examples of the power of scale in sculpture, as they transform the banal into objects of wonder, using the simple tactic of enlarging them to an enormous size.

While Oldenburg deals with spaces of public sculpture, other artists have effectively used scale in the gallery to reflect on questions of consumer culture. For example, David Herbert's 2006 work *VHS*, a 2.4 m high replica of a VHS cartridge that comments ironically not only on the essentially intangible nature of film and the ephemeral nature of its storage media, but also on the specific film it contains – 2001: A Space Odyssey. It is self-referential, suggesting as it does the black obelisk that appears at various points in the film, charting the development of mankind. This monolith is grand in scale, mysterious and seemingly indestructible over the course of time. The work plays on the fact that increasing the scale of common and domestic objects stimulates our interest, but unlike much of Oldenburg's work, it raises deeper questions about the passage of time and the nature of material objects, while it “also reclaims the power of the monumental form in its own terms” (Dailey, 2009: 11). Herbert has taken something from popular culture and used it to question our assumptions and understanding of things we often take for granted.

Richard Serra has created some extraordinary large and non-representational works that make use of gravity, space and scale to provide a unique experience for viewers. Working with a particular form of weather-resistant steel ('Cor-Ten steel'), he has created enormous structures made of sheets of this material, which are curved to enable viewers to walk around and through them. They dramatically alter the space they are placed in and are "quite disorientating and destabilizing for the viewer" (Collins, 2007: 377). They are prime exemplars of the effects that can be achieved through the distortion and manipulation of the elements of space and scale.



Richard Serra, *Torqued Ellipse*, 1999. Installation view, Guggenheim Bilbao.

*The artwork is, to be sure, a thing that is made, but it says something other than what the mere thing itself is, allo agoreui. The work makes public something other than itself; it manifests something other; it is an allegory. In the work of art something other is brought together with the thing that is made. To bring together is, in Greek, symballein. The work is a symbol.*

(Heidegger, 1935: 145-146).



## Creative Practice

In my own project, *An Unknown Country*, considerations of both scale and space are central. Using diminutive or life-sized objects, it seemed to me, would serve to bolster the myths of old age, thus potentially reinforcing the attitudes of society to old people. In particular, I was keen to avoid the analogy of the contained: the larger world of mainstream society observes the smaller domain of the old and elderly, but stands outside it. For me, there seemed to be merit in making large-scale objects as a statement about ageing and, literally, the large and persistent presence of old people in the world, as well as a personal statement of my own about age. Working at a much larger scale is a refutation of the 'shrinking' paradigm of old age that seems so prevalent.

The creation of larger-than-life work placed within the confines of the gallery has a dual purpose in drawing attention to ageing: on the one hand, there is the nature of the individual pieces as they stand, generating their own presence and space, but there is also the relationship of the objects to each other within the confined space that also contains the viewer – thereby preventing the public distancing that Morris (1966: 831) refers to. I also deliberately avoid any consistent relationships of scale among the works. Each is scaled up, but on its own terms. This speaks to the strange conditions of becoming old, a time when the relative importance and values of objects, status and ideas undergo changes to a degree that would seem very strange to a younger self. In addition to this, however, the creation of the various relationships between the works themselves and their distorted scale is intended to avoid the deliberate simulation of a living room, for the intention was not to create a form of film set, which would perhaps dwarf the viewer and allow it to be viewed as such, but rather to draw attention to individual items and the resonance they generate. There was also no wish to evoke the hyperreal – “reality for its own sake” (Baudrillard, 2003:1018) – which might also have had the effect of diverting attention from contemplation and interrogation of the individual items.

When it came to the choice of specific objects for this body of work, I was faced with the dilemma of how to use familiar items and yet render them unfamiliar enough to make my viewer think about them differently. In making the selections that I did, I was mindful of the discussion by Lamarque (2010: 153–187) on the nature of interpretation: “how we interpret is determined by what we interpret”, which in turn is governed by the form of the object to be interpreted. This interpretation

“will only take place when what is observed is unclear or obscure...” (2010: 154). In other words, in observing something easily recognisable with no ambiguous treatment or setting, no interpretation is required; modification of the nature of the object or its placement might render its meaning unclear, thus requiring analysis by the viewer to make sense of that which is being observed. Objects were therefore chosen for their familiarity and lack of ambiguity, but it was the modifications of scale and the relationships between the works that I hoped would initially render their meaning unclear and raise questions in the viewers’ minds as to what was being represented, and why. Of course, it is not certain that viewers’ interpretations will mirror my intentions, thus risking the possibility of generating entirely the wrong responses, and I therefore chose to use common, easily recognisable objects from the lives of old people. I also included playthings from childhood in the hope that their mundane character would be transformed primarily through scale and juxtaposition. The particular elements I chose to focus on included references to physical infirmities, memory issues, medication and the experience and wisdom of old age.

### *The Process*

Using scale in the gallery space has transformed what in other circumstances would be intensely private objects to ‘public’ proportions, while at the same time requiring the viewer to enter into the space of those objects and confront the reality to which they refer.

The development of the individual works was not a strictly formal and refined process: new ideas were triggered by chance encounters, thoughts arising from reading about age, personal experiences and random ideas that appeared seemingly from nowhere. Of course, the ‘nowhere’ is not strictly true and I have been persuaded by the Surrealists’ ideas that the imagination draws unknowingly on a vast store of memory and knowledge in the unconscious, which influences every decision and idea we have. This concept is the foundation of the prime manifestos of the Surrealists, premised on the notion of the freedom of the unconscious and the influence of chance. The production of an artwork and its ultimate form arises from both events outside of the control of the artist as well as from events that occur through processes initiated by the artist (Brecht, 2006). When ideas were ‘delivered’ from my unconscious, I jotted and sketched them into a notebook, often to be discarded and never revisited. Those that remained were refined through discussions with colleagues

and supervisors, which continued during the process of design (at times on a computer) and construction, experimentation with maquettes and the occasional need to completely rework objects or items that failed either technically or visually.

Access to the Michaelis laser-cutter provided me with some modern technological facilities to assist in the design and construction of the works: in some cases the creation of templates and tools, and in other cases actual construction of parts (such as the jigsaw). It was a fascinating exercise in the meld of handcraft and sophisticated computer technology, something I had not necessarily thought about in depth when I began. My expertise in computer software and laser operations proved to be an enormous boon during the development of this work. This also gave me pause to reflect on the issue of what constitutes skill in the construction process and to what degree hand-crafted objects are valued more than those crafted with computer technology and sophisticated machinery such as laser-cutters. In traditional terms, for example, cutting a pattern in wood using a jigsaw is considered skilled; however, the same can be achieved without that level of manual dexterity by using computer design and laser-cutting or routing equipment, but this requires other skills. “New skills emerge from the precise control by the fingers of processes outside the body. Facility is downloaded to the manipulation of technology” (Roberts, 2007: 98). In this case, the technology is modern 21st century equipment and the latest in sophisticated graphic design software. My use is ironic, a challenge to the young who imagine that the old are helplessly lost when it comes to computers and digital media.

All the work, with few exceptions, was executed at Michaelis, either in my studio or in the woodwork and laser facilities of the school.



Work in progress - Peter Jenks's studio, 2012.

*I am nervous about belittling the idea in advance. And also the idea of what one thinks one is doing is often very different from what one does. Sometimes one has a great idea, but you carry out that idea and when it's made there is a huge difference between how you thought it was going to work and how it actually does work. And at the same time there are other things for which you don't have great expectations as to what they will be or how they will work. These can be kind of revelations, which one can recognise, but not predict.*

(Kentrige, 2006: 85)

## *The Installation and Objects*

As discussed, the particular format of the installation as laid out has been carefully considered to suggest a living room without actually replicating one, nor indicating precisely what sort of room it is. Apart from the desire to create a non-realistic room, another rationale for inconsistent scaling between the objects was to enhance the slightly unreal and bizarre scenario, reminiscent of *Alice in Wonderland*, as a comment on the strange and at times almost surreal existence experienced by many of the aged.

The objects were all created on a large scale, except for the very tiny photographs. Reducing their scale served two purposes, the one being to make use of the unsettling effects of altered scale, the other to make reference to the long-held and cherished memories that people often have about individuals and situations long past. The fragmentary nature of many of these recollections is suggested by the size of the photographs – their vastly diminished scale in relation to the other objects mirrors the nature of vanishing memories. The table has been cut off and placed as though emerging from the wall, so as to suggest a much larger space. In keeping with this, the white block with the support handle is just outside of the main room, suggestive of being in another, adjoining area such as a bathroom. The blocks, puzzle and skipping ropes have been left scattered about, as though recently used. Individually, the objects address various aspects of ageing and were selected for their particular and specific references. The walking stick was chosen as the main element as I believe it is the ubiquitous signifier of old age, its concrete base signifying both its power (belying the frailty of its user) and at the same time suggestive of the burden it may well be. The pillbox is a common feature in the lives of many elderly and has great significance for physical wellbeing: in some cases use of its contents can make the difference between life and death, and it is thus treated to highlight its importance. The alphabet blocks were chosen for their reference to the stereotypical view of ‘second childhood’, but the irony, of course, is that they are actually aimed at youth as a lesson in the conditions of old age, directly addressing what infirmities it can bring and what is needed to sustain a reasonable life: every day is a red-letter day. The skipping ropes were a response to a pernicious myth about ageing, which is that there is a loss of energy, activity and the potential to form relationships - this is also as a counter to the belief that one loses the ability to play as one ages.

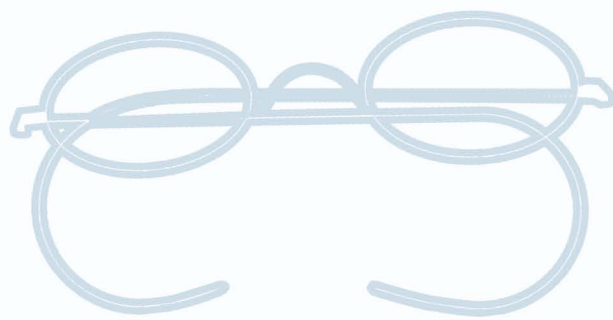
In considering aspects of time and memory, the puzzle and the nature of its image seemed to be the best vehicle for foregrounding these



Work in progress - Peter Jenks's studio, 2012.

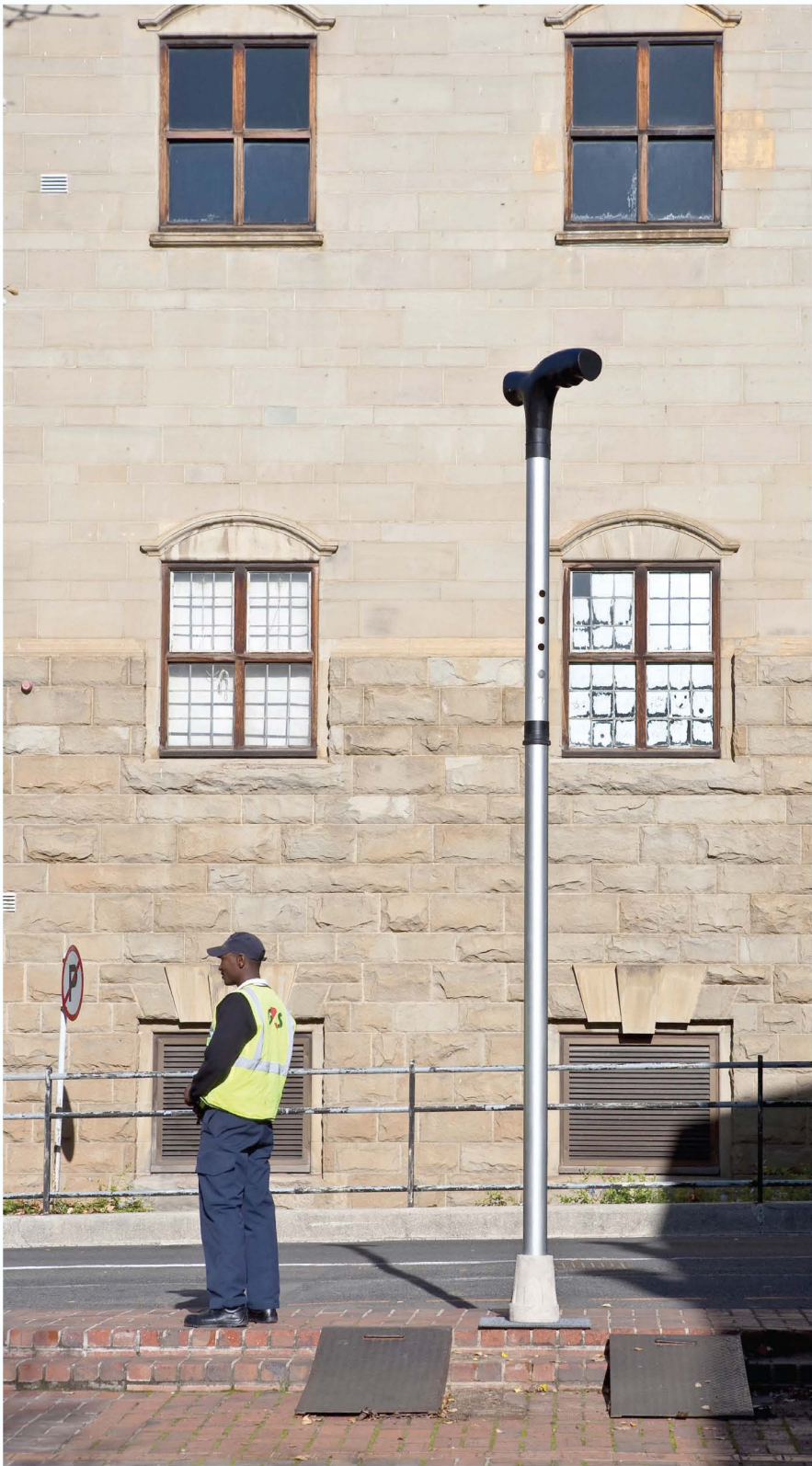
aspects. It is also a coded statement on the creation of meaning and construction of identity which is central in the lives of many of the old. A preoccupation with the expression of memory prompted the creation of the empty photograph frame, placed as it is to suggest some unbearable loss and expression of anger and/or grief. In contrast to this empty frame, the small photographs and their diminutive scale are poignant reminders of youth long gone.

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## **Individual Works**



### ***The Walking Stick***

The base of *Walking Stick* is made of concrete, cast from a mould made from a hand-carved polystyrene model. The shaft was constructed from standard PVC plumbing fixtures, and painted to resemble aluminium and rubber. The 'adjustment button' is a modified chrome bathroom fitting and the handle was constructed from polystyrene overlaid with Crestone for strength, then painted.

Dimensions:        base 240 mm diameter; handle 320 x 640 x 140 mm;  
                          full height: 4180 cm.



### ***Alphabet Blocks***

The *Alphabet Blocks* were constructed from MDF (Medium Density Fibreboard): the basic box shape was made from 6mm panels glued and screwed together, then overlaid with 3mm laser-cut shapes to form the edges, pictures and lettering, then painted.

Dimensions: each 435 x 435 x 435 mm.



### ***Support Block***

The *Support Block* was constructed in a similar fashion to Alphabet Blocks. The handle is a standard wall-mount grip obtained from a pharmacy specialising in old-age support and equipment.

Dimensions: 435 x 435 x 435 mm.



### ***Pillbox***

The *Pillbox* was made from African mahogany with an internal base of marine plywood, and the lids have standard brass hinges. The inlaid letters are made from a white maple veneer and the whole is finished with a specially formulated furniture wax for antique furniture.

Dimensions: 190 x 1270 x 270 mm.



### ***Table Section***

The top and sides of *Table Section* were constructed from meranti planks of various sizes and thicknesses joined together. The leg was constructed from solid blocks of meranti, made by laminating smaller pieces and then turning the sections on a lathe.

Dimensions: top surface 2430 x 2100 x 1190 mm. (triangle sides);  
height 1410 mm.; projection from wall 1040 mm.



### ***Skipping Ropes***

The larger handles of *Skipping Ropes* are made of ash, the smaller of Oregon pine. For both sets of handles, the larger section is made of laminated sections. The individual components were turned on a lathe and then joined together. The ropes are made of cotton, commercially sourced.

Dimensions: length x maximum diameter x minimum diameter

Large handles: 570 x 130 x 50 mm. Rope 6m.

Small handles: 540 x 105 x 35 mm. Rope 6m.



### ***Picture Frame***

The frame of *Picture Frame* is made of old Oregon pine floorboards. The backboard is made of Masonite, covered with a faded cloth. The support is made from MDF and has a leather cover over a brass hinge. The whole has been trimmed with 'floorboard nails' and gummed brown paper.

Dimensions: 1515 x 1060 x 13 mm



### ***Jigsaw Puzzle***

The puzzle pieces of *Jigsaw Puzzle* were laser-cut from 6mm MDF and painted white on one side. The image on the puzzle was constructed from a personal collection of trinkets, formed into a collage and photographed at Michaelis. The puzzle pieces were placed white side up on the bed of a large industrial flatbed printer, and the image was then printed onto the assembled shape. This process had to be repeated twice, with two sets of pieces and two parts of the image, in order to achieve the necessary scale and quantity of pieces.

Dimensions: variable by installation, about 4 x 5 m.



### ***Small Pictures***

The photographs in *Small Pictures* are extracts from real photographs of unknown origin that were found in a charity store in Cape Town. They were scanned, then processed in Photoshop and printed on Canon glossy photographic paper. The frames were laser-cut from 3mm MDF and fitted with 2mm thick glass.

Dimensions:	Oval:	28 x 23 x 3 mm.
	Rectangle:	27 x 20 x 3 mm.



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*Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

(Thomas: 1952, 1-3)