

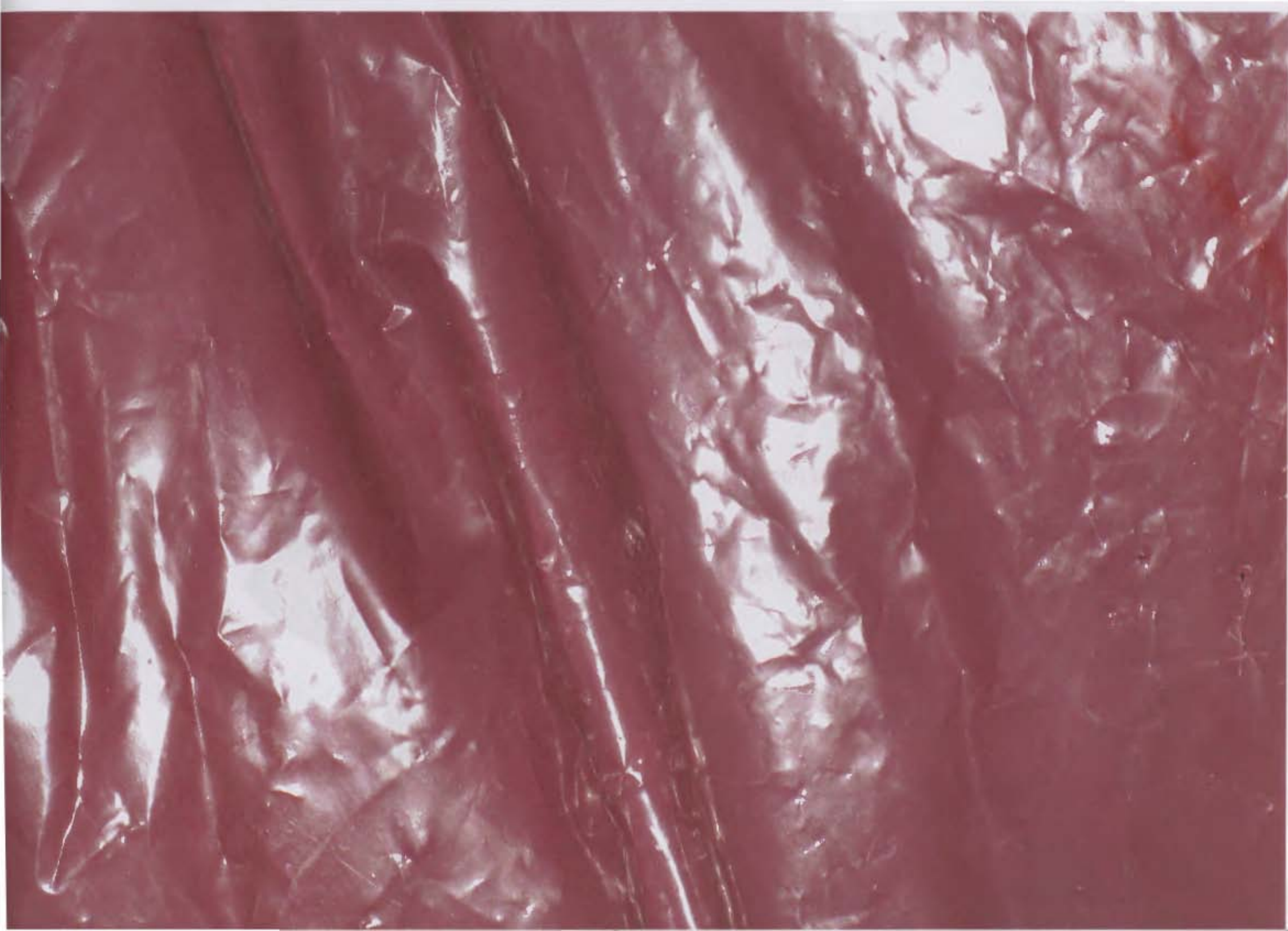
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Salvaging Meaning:
Exploring the language of inflatable kinetic
sculptures and the materiality of plastic

Catherine Dickerson



Salvaging Meaning: exploring the language of inflatable kinetic sculptures and the materiality of plastic
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Declaration

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

Signature: Signed by candidate Date: 9 December 2010

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
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Rabbit (2007) Jeff Koons (Figure 1)

Abstract

Inflatable sculpture is often seen as absurd, comic or light-hearted, but it can also convey a darker, more serious tone. Many contemporary artists refer to children's blow-up toys as their initial reference. Jeff Koons' dominating 15 metre long inflatable *Rabbit* (2007) (Figure 1), and his better known stainless steel version *Rabbit*(1986) (Figure 2) is a case in point. Inflatable, kinetic sculptures have an ability to captivate the viewer through their unique expressive movement as well as by evoking childhood memories associated with inflatable playthings. Indeed, the playfulness associated with inflatables is often exploited by artists whose artworks nevertheless comment on the environment, consumerism, and 'throw-away' culture.

Artists using discarded materials who engage with issues of consumerism, recycling and environmental degradation are selected and discussed with reference to the term 'refabrication'. This is a process of creatively re-using discarded mass-produced consumer products to produce objects incorporating industrial qualities with a handmade aesthetic and signification different to their earlier incarnation.

The inflatable sculptures created in part fulfilment for this degree explore refabrication through the use of discarded plastic. This body of work highlights the relationship between industrialisation, plastic goods and nature. The insubstantial, flimsy qualities of the inflatable are an extended metaphor for the fragility of ecologies and the impact of plastic pollution on the environment.



Rabbit (1986) Jeff Koons (Figure 2)

Introduction

I propose that inflatable sculpture is an appropriate medium for exploring concerns of industrial production, pollution and waste, specifically relating to plastic. The inflatables presented here are made with plastic and, like so many plastic products, are flimsy unenduring forms, designed for limited use only. In my own inflatable sculpture I have produced distorted zoomorphic forms that convey a sense of plastic's impact on the environment.

In the first chapter of my dissertation I position my inflatable sculptures within the context of what is known as inflatable art and discuss its historical and theoretical precedence. I explore how inflatable artworks — despite their inevitable association with toys — are able to articulate more serious concerns. I contextualise my inflatable sculpture art-historically, and discuss certain installation art practices. I argue that although an inflatable art object is often accepted as being synonymous with toys and advertising, it also offers the potential to be extraordinary and evocative. I investigate inflatable sculptures that use playful humour and evoke empathy as a tactic for engaging the viewer with serious issues. I discuss inflatable sculptures which, though superficially amusing, have an underlying content of some gravitas.

In the second chapter I look at artists who have used plastic to make inflatable sculptures. I consider the strategies of kineticism, scale and form that each artist uses. It is these tactics that have informed the selection of artworks described in this dissertation. I discuss Jeff Koons' *Rabbit* series in relation to popular culture and contemporary art.

Selected works by Max Streicher, Claes Oldenburg and Chico MacMurtrie are explored in terms of the particular relationship between air, form and movement. Joshua Allen Harris is focused on for his choice of materials, as well as for his selection of public spaces in which to display inflatable forms. I establish that through the use of second-hand plastic to make inflatable sculpture, the works become imbued with a layering of suggested meanings.

I briefly discuss plastic in the third chapter: its materiality, infiltration into consumer culture and the gradual plasticising of the world. The replacement of natural materials in favour of plastic has led to an increasing reliance on this man-made substance. Plastic cannot be broken down by bio-degradable processes, even though it is a petroleum by-product. In nature, the cyclical patterns of renewal and decay repeat perpetually, as organisms grow and die. Recycling is an attempt to channel industrial waste into a cyclical system, echoing that of nature. Alternative use through the process of refabrication is discussed, investigating how to make a creative or functional object from discarded material.

In Chapter 4 I discuss selected works by El Anatsui, Romuald Hazoumè, Willie Bester and Moshekwa Langa. These African-based artists have influenced my work through their re-use of industrial materials. I discuss the significance of the artwork both in terms of the provenance of the salvaged material and the resonances generated by their refabricated form. Cultural, political and social associations are retained in a community's discarded objects. The artists discussed here use these resonances expressively in their work.

The fifth chapter is a discussion of my creative work and my developing awareness of discarded plastic and its potential for further expressive use. Its movement and the development of forms are discussed with reference to kinetic elements, as emotions potentially evoked in the viewer by the movement of the sculptures are vital to the reading of the work. Centrifugal fans, materiality and timer boards are included in the discussion. The second section of Chapter 5 begins with an analysis of the installation as a whole and ends with a discussion of each work in detail.

1. Inflatable sculpture in contemporary art practice

1.1 Broader context

Inflatable plastic devices have many applications, among others as structures for temporary shelter, safety devices, paddling pools and even catwalk clothing. Many individuals are familiar with the basic concept, through childhood toys, of jumping castles or pool accessories. Inflatables are also becoming prevalent in outdoor advertising, due to their eye-catching large scale, limited weight and ease of installation. The history of inflatables is closely linked to commerce and industrialisation. Advances in industry have made plastic a cheap and widely used material. Because of the low cost and availability of sheet plastic, inflatables are relatively inexpensive to make. Like the jettisoned remains of the childhood toy, my own work and the work of other artists in the field of inflatables remains short-lived and even fleeting, only sometimes captured on film or revisited in memory.

From the 1960s onwards inflatables became popular modes of artistic expression. They became an alternative to traditional sculpting materials such as bronze, wood and marble. A new material for the making of art had emerged that suitably demonstrated the changing times and remained temporary and transient (Topham 2002:80). The first well-documented art exhibition to exhibit inflatable art was called *Air Art* and took place in 1966. Participating artists were Andy Warhol, Les Levine and Hans Haacke, who all used public space to exhibit air-filled shapes. This was part of a move to get art out of the gallery, and increased awareness of new, different, lightweight, and everyday materials that could be used in the making of art.

1.2 Playful versus Serious

Inflatable toys, jumping castles and balloons in bright colours and fantastical shapes dominate our notions about inflatables; we associate them with childish things like birthday parties and cheap Chinese polyvinyl chloride (PVC) imports. An inflatables' inevitable tendency to deflate gives it a pathetic, pitiable quality. Topham describes the



Blockhead (2003) Paul McCarthy (Figure 3)

inflatable as an extension of the mind or body through associations of dreams and ideas, visualised well by the comic strip thought-bubble (2002:7).

The 'pick-me-up-and-squeeze-me quality' attracts children, captivated by the abnormally light weight the form possesses (Topham 2002:8). In addition to this, some items have added to the playful and humorous, if sometimes darker, aspect of inflatable forms for adults in the form of sex toys and blow-up dolls and the questionably useful inflatable bra. Sealed inflatable forms have a lightness, and ability to float lend them to a range of uses, from entertainment to saving lives.

A less frivolous aspect to inflatable technology is found, inter alia, in its ability to be deployed to create a quick structure: experimental and temporary architecture, or as a means of transport — dirigibles and hot air balloons. The overwhelming scale these structures present can be awe-inspiring. Extremely large inflatables catch the attention of the viewer, and can be intimidating when viewed at close range, despite their often comic-like appearance. One such example is the inflatable sculpture *Blockhead* (2003) (Figure 3) by Paul McCarthy, installed outside the Tate Modern.

1.3 Moving elements of inflatable sculpture

Advertising inflatables are seldom particularly expressive or interesting in form. They only need to be noticed to convey their message. They did, however capture my attention and imagination, inspiring me to explore the medium further. I have been further inspired by other artists who have pushed the boundaries of commercial inflatable technology, exploring the extraordinary expressive techniques and potential of the medium in areas where commerce fears to tread.

There are two ways of sustaining inflatable forms. The first is by sealing the plastic shape and making it airtight, and filling it with pressurised air (higher than ambient air pressure). Another method is pneumatic: the skin of the inflatable is permeable, or has openings/vents, requiring a constant supply of pressurised air to keep it inflated. This is the more dynamic method, as the constant flow of air, or the manipulation of the air flow, allows for some control over the object's movement.

Inflatables are hollow and relatively structure-less. They have no 'bone' structure and no 'meat', they are a 'skin', a membrane, a 'shell', a pliable surface that relies only on pressure imbalances to sustain them and keep

them in existence. There is no visible framework that holds and keep them in existence. There is no visible framework that holds them up. The membrane that describes form, that encases the figure, is fragile. Initially it is flimsy, floppy and weightless, only becoming firm, turgid and tight when inflated.

The form of an inflatable, even when smaller than the viewer, seems to have an emotive force, a presence. It seems to absorb power from its surroundings, stuffing itself with air, waiting to use it. When the air supply is cut off it simply wilts and become formless again. It is like a riot of angry people gathering force and power only to be diffused by sudden apathy and lack of interest.

The air inside inflatable structures, once they are inflated fully, is surprisingly calm. If one were to step inside the cavity of a large inflatable, one would find that there is no wind, just an eerie hum from the fan. Tension is of course found on the skin and in the seams – the seam lines wheeze and whistle as air escapes through the needle holes. The skin is tight and rigid with pressure, like a balloon. Turmoil only occurs when there is an exchange of air between the inside and the outside of the

inflatable: a natural balance is subverted when the air of the room is forced into the inflated cavity by the fan. Air seeping out of the seams performs a simple form of osmosis – air moving from a high-pressure zone to a low-pressure zone. The plastic sheeting is like a pathetic barrier, a condom against contamination, keeping the inside within and the outside without. If the fan stops, there is a brief moment when the air inside and outside have the same pressure, but then gravity begins to call the plastic back to the ground and pushes the air from the cavity.

The nature of air is such that it conforms. It invisibly wraps itself around and within the viewer's figure as he/she moves. 'Laminar air' is a term used to describe air that flows smoothly and regularly; turbulent air is gusty and irregular. Both are a result of pressure differences triggered (in the case of inflatables) by the kinetic action of the fan. The initial moment of inflation is characterised by turbulent air as it is pushed into and around the expanding cavity. Once the inside has been filled with air, the fan continues to blow air in, creating pressure.

Kinetic inflatables have an innate ability to change quickly. They appear and disappear, form and reform, shape shifters that move through a

cyclical process of constant change. The pathetic quality of the deflating material evokes pity, but the emotional response to the work is fleeting. Figurative inflatables become recognisable gradually; from a pile of shapeless plastic, an indistinct presence grows, unevenly distributing itself until it achieves its fully inflated, final form. Kinetic inflatables appear to breathe, constantly moving air in and out, exchanging gasses. They vibrate with the exchange of air, in and out of the skin. Air allows for existence, the fundamental necessity for life. An inflatable is an object that shares and uses the same air as the spectator in the gallery. It seems to be living and breathing. It has an animated appearance. An exploration of this particular element of an inflatable is found in a work by Dennis Oppenheim entitled '*Above the Wall of Electrocutation*' (1989) (Figure 4). In this work the sewn forms of animals are breathing life back into themselves as the animals' 'skins have literally been pulled through their mouths, even though they are hanging from a meat rack' (<http://www.dennis-oppenheim.com/>). This visualisation implies a 'control' over their own form, rather than being 'controlled' by the whim of a hidden fan. Alluding to the lack of control animals have in comparison to humans.

Inflatables are simple in design. Their light-hearted frivolity makes for easy reception. They rely on air to make their shapes rigid and tumescent, while loss of air results in formlessness. Inflatables can be used as effective metaphors for the transience of life. One could say that they sculpt the air, absorbing and expelling the present. In an inflatable it appears as a material of breath, even though one is mindful that it is just mechanical (Hatt 1999). Air also passes from the viewer into the room and from the inflatable to the viewer. The feeble and subversive facsimile of human emotion and sensitivity evoked by the sculptural form of an inflatable cannot be as elegantly achieved, nor as successfully, with another form. The breath, the skin and the transience of life are echoed in the inflatable.

Potts discusses the 'looping' of an artwork as opposed to repetition (2000:197). He explains that looping creates subtle variations, similar to a musical recital or choreographed dance, which is repeated but never exactly the same as before, while repetition is the exact same thing, again and again (and again). Walking around a sculpture could be considered looping too, as the experience and perspective of the form changes every time (Potts 2000:197). The looping effect highlights the passing of time. It replicates a continual system of beginning and ending and, by extension, the cycle

of life is mirrored in this repetitive action. Breaking down and wearing away are also inherent in a repetitive movement. A plastic inflatable's form inevitably weakens, tears and frays with continuous cycles of inflation and deflation. Movement and sound draw the viewer into a work's spatial aura, making the viewer a performer in the artwork (Potts 2000:197). Looped and time-based artworks highlight the passage of movement, as well as the moments between the recurring action. Potts suggests that the viewer is kept in constant frustration, feeling locked into the cycle (2000:198). In the case of inflatables it is the effects of inflation and deflation which are most often felt by the viewer.



Above the Wall of Electrocution (1989)
Dennis Oppenheim (Figure 4)

1.4 Materials

My exploration began with ordinary, everyday materials which have surrounded me all my life. We have become 'naturalized' to plastic and it now invades all aspects of social life from food wrapping to clothing and even inserted surgically as a replacement of weakening aortic valves in the heart (Meikle 1997:278). The inflatable medium does well to highlight plastic's materiality, yet makes it strange and foreign at the same time. I began making inflatable forms, observing *how* they inflated, altering them but letting them form unpredictably and spontaneously — experimenting, improvising. The forms began evolving, bulging and wrinkling in particular ways. I began to interpret the shapes in the formal language of pattern-making, in which sharp, straight edges distort into swollen organic surfaces once inflated.

Inflatables are predominantly made up of sheet plastic. There are varying thicknesses and colours available, of which the ubiquitous black plastic rubbish bag is the most prevalent. While plastic in general may be one of the most versatile and flexible materials to have been invented, its very slow decomposition rate has caused it to have a heavily negative environmental impact. Barthes terms it 'miraculous and alchemical'

due to its ability to replace natural materials (like wood and metals) and serve as a measure of mankind's power (1983:97). He mentions that it is a 'shaped' substance that surrenders itself to be altered by a 'godlike-robot' attending the production line (1983:97-98).



Soft Bathub (1966) Claes Oldenburg (Figure 5)

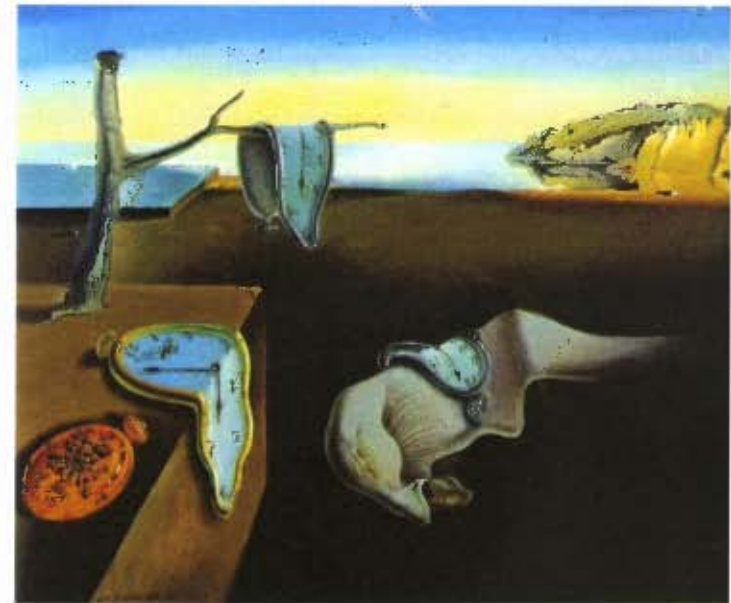
2 Discussion of selected artists working in the field of inflatables

2.1 Claes Oldenburg

Claes Oldenburg popularised soft sculpture in the 1970s. He is most famous for his giant sculptures that replicate mundane household objects such as an ice bag, a bath and a lipstick. He metamorphosed these everyday objects into strange objects by changing their perceived density and enlarging them to a gargantuan scale.

He used pattern pieces of canvas material, sewn and stuffed, to achieve the desired shape. Later he turned to vinyl and explored inflating the form. His choice for using soft material contradicted the hard material used in the form of the original item. The change in tactility and density made the object foreign, distorted and exciting. In *Soft Bathtub* (1966) (Figure 5) Oldenburg presumably copied an existing bathtub with sewn vinyl and white paint. The way *Soft Bathtub* is displayed, hung on the wall rather than placed on the floor, is crucial to its reception. It ceases to be a useful bath if it is hung on the wall

and cannot retain water. He re-examined the objects and reformed the shapes when they were placed in a hanging position. The pathetic and flimsy nature of this bath is more like a melting memory of a bath. It is in sharp contrast to the cold hard rigidity of the cast iron or enamel bath. Reference is made to Salvador Dali's soft watches, oozing floppily, in his surrealist landscape *The Persistence of Memory* (1931) (Figure 6).



The Persistence of Memory (1931) Salvador Dali (Figure 6)

After the initial stuffed soft sculptures series Oldenburg began making *Giant Ice Bag*. The bag was created on a large scale with hydraulic controls regulating inflation and deflation inside the form. *Giant Ice Bag* (1969-1970) (Figure 7) is motorized to rise and fall while simultaneously inflating and deflating. *Giant Ice Bag* is a large amorphous form containing mechanical parts that make it rotate, wind and unwind slowly, mechanising the classic 'headache remedy' (Rosenberg 2009).

Varnedoe and Gopnik identify Oldenburg's metamorphic theme as imagining the ordinary, emotional life of inanimate things, animated by replicating it as 'soft or big or seductive' (1990:395). The larger scale gives it an intensity of character and presence that is absent in smaller form. *Giant Ice Bag* is a kinetic inflatable sculpture. The material of which it is made is of importance in that it questions the composition and tactility of the copied objects in comparison to its pre-conceived familiar form. Interestingly, none of his inflatable sculptures inflate fully. They inflate slightly, bulge, and deflate just enough to allude to movement or growth of something within. Oldenburg's work has relevance because of his emphasis on materiality and movement as well as his pioneering venture into sewn forms of soft sculpture.



Giant Ice Bag (1969-1970) Claes Oldenburg (Figure 7)

2.2 Jeff Koons

Jeff Koons takes mundane objects (a vacuum cleaner and a basketball come to mind) from everyday pop culture. He references pop culture as being charmless and empty of emotion (Varnedoe and Gopnik 1990:395). 'Koons's subject was the murder of feeling by selling, and his metaphor was paralysis' and the visualisation of the 'dead zone of consumerism' (Varnedoe and Gopnik 1990:395). The artwork I focus on first is *Rabbit* (Figure 2), made in stainless steel, idolising and memorialising the blow-up bunny aesthetic. Koons refers to a children's blow-up toy as an initial reference point.

This *Rabbit* plays on the comic and the kitsch. Harrison and Wood (1993:533) explain that the word 'kitsch' can refer to any form of popular, commercial art or entertainment that is usually cheap, crude, and taken for granted; a product of the industrial revolution. It is turned out mechanically, unlike an artisan's work (1993:534). Today this mass production is evident in the large number of commercially available inflated toys. *Rabbit* (1986) by Koons, is almost identical to the ready-made inflatable rabbit of 1979 (Figure 8). Its form is copied from an inflated toy and reproduced in stainless steel. The mirror like surface

of *Rabbit* is more inclined to reflect the viewer's face than the friendly cartoon face of a rabbit. Although the viewer may want to touch the shiny surface, touch is denied within the gallery context. The actual weight of the work increased dramatically, since it is far removed from its origin as an inflatable object, and the weight makes it seem more valuable.



Inflatable flower and bunny (Tall white, Pink bunny)
(1979) Jeff Koons (Figure 8)

Although this essay is concerned with inflatable sculptures, *Rabbit* (1986) is relevant in terms of its origins as an inflatable object. Koons took a flimsy, cheap, and mass-produced inflatable toy and made it into a tough, beautiful and now very valuable artwork. Varnedoe and Gopnick, the authors of *High and Low Art*, propose that Koons' works discovered 'Ur-kitsch', 'an even lower form of kitsch – a pop culture that had never been anathematized' (Varnedoe and Gopnick 1990:396).

Rabbit (1986) appeals to the adult through the aesthetic shiny and polished reflection of the metal and references the form of the original, actual toy. However, it is only through the replacement of plastic as a material, which is cheap and disposable, that the work is freed from the mundane. The initial association is broken down by the change in material, rather than by the subject. This suggests that the childlike and toy-like qualities of inflatables are constructed through the use of a specific plastic. Although this artwork is not an inflatable sculpture it does depict an inflatable object and is therefore still anchored in the pop culture association despite its non-toy materials (Varnedoe and Gopnick 1990:395).



Deflating sculpture - No 2 and No 4 (2009) Jonathan Monk
(Figure 9 and 10)

Interestingly, Jonathan Monk did a responsive piece to Koons' stainless steel *Rabbit* (1986), aptly called *Deflated Sculpture –No 2* (2009) (Figure 9 and 10) and No 4 in stainless steel (a remarkable likeness to *Rabbit* of 1986) the same form as Koons' but caught in the process of deflation.¹ The stainless steel rabbit now seems to be wilting or melting, showing that it can be transferred to different materials, but retaining the same kitsch qualities of cheap popular culture. It also comments on the unreality of the art market, suggesting that Koons' value is artificially exaggerated and that values ascribed to works and artists in the art market are not cast in steel and can lose their form.

For Macy's Thanksgiving Day *Rabbit* in 2007, Koons enlarged the stainless steel version of *Rabbit* (1986) to enormous proportions, literally blowing it up into a parade balloon with helium gas, thereby reinstating it as an inflatable like the original form, yet monumentalising it in the process.² It is perhaps more reminiscent of the Hindenburg than the child's toy it stems from.

1 There are 5 in the *Deflated Sculpture* series, all in various stages of deflation.

2 A festive parade celebrating the day of Thanksgiving in America since 1924.

2.3 Max Streicher

Max Streicher's breathing human forms in *Sleeping Giants* (1998) (Figure 9) perhaps involve the viewer through the kinetic aspect, by extending long white limbs with welcoming fingers towards the viewer, enticing them to weave in and around the sleepers. The immense figures, made of white tyvek plastic, rise and fall slowly as they inflate and deflate. The action is repetitive and imitates deep breathing, as in sleep. The bodies consist only of their skins. There is no bone structure, no muscular framework or organs within. The figures in *Sleeping Giants* are empty plastic forms that merely separate the air from the inside and outside of the sculpture, moving as if with the viewer's breath, creating a sense of calm and serenity.

They are like soft, hairless and show no wrinkles, unthreatening in this light, like watching babies sleep. The viewers are inclined to watch them, assured that the unsettlingly large figures are asleep, but we also want to wake them to interact with them and find out if they are as gentle as they appear. Their 'sleep' creates a tension between our security and our curiosity.



Sleeping Giants (1998) Max Streicher (Figure 11)

Jones (1998:206) discusses the skin as a transforming membrane. She explains that the skin or flesh of a form is permeable and subject to change. It 'sheds and reconstitutes itself' continually, the flesh is never always the same material but always a contour in process: the flesh exists provisionally both as a permeable, shifting physical parameter, a limbic surround of virtual containment, and the visible trace of the human body' (1998: 206). She mentions this in relation to body and performance art with a particular relationship between the permeable/impermeable and visible/invisible qualities of the artist and the viewer. She goes on to describe the flesh as an 'envelope', maintaining distinction 'between inside and outside but also the *site of their joining*' (1998:207).

Jones' description resonates with Streicher's *Sleeping Giants* (1998), perhaps because the large volume of air within the void of the figure is only delineated by the thin tyvek material. Fingers and toes, ears and nose all swell and shrink according to the breath. The transparency of some parts and these details make this 'skin' appear visible and invisible at the same time, and the breathing movements create an illusion of life. On another level the large figures become a landscape of recognisable undulations in the white, and heavenly atmosphere.

Dung Beetle, (2005) (Figure 12) is made out of recycled billboard vinyl that evokes childhood fascination and interest within the gallery space. The work depicts an intriguing giant beetle lying on its back, presumably stuck. The beetle's legs struggle pathetically against the inner currents and the air around the room. The confined space doesn't allow it to right itself and walk away free. In this position it is helpless – suggestive perhaps of cruelty on the part of the artist. Streicher is possibly exploring the instinctive thoughtless explorations of cruelty, and curiosity about pain and power, that a child displays when playing with a beetle. He also chooses to convey the [beetle's] helplessness with a sense of comic satire (Frasier 2006).

The beetle's scale instills fear, yet because it is on its back gesturing feebly, it evokes feelings of sympathy and pity in the viewer. Streicher's sculptures are presented this way because he wants us, the viewers to feel that tension of wanting to help the beetle, but prompt us to question what might happen afterwards – will the creature be grateful? Or just see us as something to be crushed (which we sometimes do with bugs)?



Dung Beetle (2005) Max Streicher (Figure 12)

2.4 Chico MacMurtrie

Amorphic Robot Works (ARW) is a collaborative team investigating the potential of interactive robotic sculpture, inspired and guided artistically by the artist Chico MacMurtrie. *The Forest of Telescoping Totem Poles* (2005) (Figure 13) is an interactive kinetic sculpture made of latex and rip-stop nylon. The forms are not transparent and appear to emerge from a long period of time in the earth – because of the variegated, yellowed brown colour of the latex. The ten metre, arterial-root-like appendages on the floor pulsate with air, sending pressurised air to various totem poles around the room. The fans react to hidden triggers activated by the viewer's movements. 'The artery begins to push air into the Totems, causing them to tumesce with a pulsing rhythm', MacMurtrie explains.³ The totem poles begin to seem human-like. These 'inflatable bodies' question the associations between human actions and the machine's ability to depict human actions as real or mechanical.

The totems give an impression, through their movement, of being lifelike forms. ARW's main exploration is kinetics and the creation of movement in all their mechanical sculptures. The constant flux and dynamism of

their sculptures add to the viewer's level of engagement.⁴ The roots and totem poles move in a quick staccato, evoking a sense of excitement or intrigue (as opposed to Streichers' slow-breathing *Sleeping Giants*). The unpredictable convulsing movements give life to the totem poles, causing them to rise and perform. These forms are an amalgamation of human appendages, organs and plant forms. They may suggest to the viewer that they belong in the 'natural world', that it is a part of them, and that, thereby, they are a part of the viewer, too.



The Forest of Telescoping Totem Poles (2005)
Chico MacMurtrie (Figure 13)

³ (www.amorphicrobotworks.org)

⁴ (www.anthropomorphicrobotworks.com)

Watching a shapeless heap slowly inflate into an identifiable form can be an exciting spectacle, as one witnesses the triumphant rise of an object take recognisable form as it comes to life. The inflatable skin is authoritatively rigid against the pressurised air within. Conversely, deflation evokes pathos and a sense of giving up. *Sixteen Birds* (2006) (Figure 14) consists of sixteen large shapes that 'recall the simplest line drawing of a bird'.⁵ They hang limply from the ceiling at eye level, only inflating with sensed activity in the room 'as human presence gives them life'.⁶ Their wings inflate and they begin to flap slowly on a stationary flight path. The relationship between the viewer and the birds determines the extent of inflation. Crowding the birds' space results in deflation, whilst stepping back allows a complete performance. The life cycle of the work is interrupted by the viewers' presence, thereby disrupting and prematurely ending the looping effect. The external and internal sensors enable a kinetic conversation between the birds and the viewer. Computer-aided surveillance monitors the number of people in the room and triggers the slowing down, and gradual 'death' of the birds if there are too many people.⁷

5 (<http://amorphicrobotworks.org/works/birds/index.htm>)

6 (<http://amorphicrobotworks.org/works/birds/index.htm>).

7 (<http://amorphicrobotworks.org/works/birds/fabrication.htm>)

The flaccid wings on these forms resonate with those of my own *Vultures* (2010) (Figure 27). The *Sixteen Birds* hang midway between the roof and the floor. This distance allows the viewer to walk close to the birds, possibly weaving in and out between them. One wants to see them fly, to make them inflate, because it seems natural. MacMurtrie's birds are positioned in a shape that echoes the River Murray, in Adelaide, Australia, which is now 'dying because of the over-development surrounding it', 'allowing the river to serve as metaphor for the foundation of the Birds' lives'.⁸



Sixteen Birds (2006) Chico MacMurtrie (Figure 14)

8 (www.amorphicrobotworks.org).

2.5 Joshua Allen Harris

Joshua Allen Harris is a street artist in New York who makes inflatable figures out of plastic trash bags and inflates them using the ventilation ducts of the subway system. The figures he creates are animal forms, enhanced by their kinetic mobility. Extended limbs and elongated bodies make for interesting and engaging motion. The success of this application lies in the air pressure escaping from the subway vents as a train passes through below. The air blows through, in and past the plastic bag sculptures (taped to the metal grates) enough to inflate them, as well as to continue the air flow past the figures. As the wind rushes past the inflated figure it tangles it up, like Marilyn Monroe's white dress, making it vibrate and shake violently against the wind. Once the train passes it leaves a void of low pressure that sucks the air back through the vent and causes the plastic inflatables to collapse, flat and empty, against the grate.

As site-specific works, his inflatable sculptures appear as trash lying over an air vent, until an underground train forces them into action. They emerge from the subway, and surprise people walking past, as well as the rubbish collectors who attempt to pick them up. Poignantly, his sculptures exist momentarily and then disappear, like something imagined, or dreamed.

The artist has used this 'appear and disappear' ability cleverly to depict animals that are under environmental threat. *Air Bear* (2008) (Figure 15) is a small white plastic figure that inflates and deflates. It seems to comment on, or imply, something about the ease with which they could become extinct due to their shrinking arctic habitat (www.inhabitat.com). His work also poses questions about plastic litter and the throw-away culture like 'can plastic sustain consumerism even though plastic has a transient purpose? Or 'what do the plastic bags become once they are used and then discarded- maleficent figures of our conscience?' (As in *Centuars* (2008) Figure 16).



Air Bear (2008) Joshua Allen Harris (Figure 15)

The inflatables Harris designs are made out of plastic, a familiar everyday material that infiltrates most spheres of life. He uses a specific type of plastic that is considered the lowest, the cheapest and the most transient. The simple black refuse bag is something we are all familiar with as a bag we fill with things we don't want, things that are a by-product of our daily lives as consumers in a predominantly wasteful society. They are the bags we send away to be dumped by the municipality. An interesting angle on this timeline of events is depicted in a video, *Plastic Bag* (2009), by Ramin Bahrani.⁹ The lifespan and uses of a simple plastic bag are anthropomorphised through the narration of Werner Herzog. Bahrani animates the floating qualities of the bag in the wind, and in the sea, whilst emphasising that nothing nature attempts can destroy it, without leaving harmful traces of its existence. The plastic bag character navigates towards the vortex, a decades-old floating island of plastic circulating in the Pacific Ocean. 'I wish you had created me so that I could die' laments the bag (Bahrani 2009), struggling with its immortality, as it spirals around in currents of plastic for eternity.



Centaurus (2008) Joshua Allen Harris (Figure 16)

⁹ (available at <http://www.futurestates.tv/>)

3 Plastic

3.1 Plastic Production

'Plastic' refers to a variety of synthetic polymers that can be given any shape due to their pliable properties (Swannell 1992:818). It is an umbrella term for various types of diverse, malleable man-made substances. In the manufacturing process these polymers can be cast, pressed, or extruded into an array of shapes. 'Machine A always yields product B, and product B, once used, is cast away, having no further meaning for the machine' (Commoner 1979:5). This process in the age of technology is linear. Ecological cycles are hard to fit into industrial systems (Commoner 1979:5). Recycling is a valiant attempt to introduce some form of a cyclical process, even though it is small scale and selective.

Plastic has surpassed natural materials, defying them insuperably, by infinite transformations and resisting degradation (Meikle 1997:280). Humans have broken out of the circle of life into man-made events of linear time (Commoner 1979:5). Industrial chemistry has altered nature to create an artificial flux that has submerged or poisoned nature. 'The world *can* be plasticised', comments Roland Barthes, who views plastic

as being more than just a substance, rather, 'plastic is the very idea of its [plastic's] infinite transformation' (1983:99).

Plastic film is produced to protect and to preserve. Its airtight qualities make it a good wrapper for fresh foods. It seals to keep the moisture out of biscuits and prevents the air from oxidising packaged meat. Once the contents of the packaging are consumed, the protective plastic has served its purpose. Having nothing more to protect, and being awkward to re-use, it is thrown away. In inflated form, plastic can also be used to protect in the form of neck braces, air bags and leg splints. In all these instances plastic, whether covering or inflated, is temporary, intended for single, or limited use.

Planned obsolescence, according to Giles Slade, is a 'catch-all phrase used to describe the assortment of techniques artificially limiting the durability of a manufactured good in order to simulate repetitive consumption' (2006:5). It ensures redundancy and promotes a disposable and throw-away cultural ethic (particularly manifested and developed in America.)

Reduce, Re-use and Recycle — the slogan used around the world in an attempt to combat waste and create awareness of how to manage waste. The slogan is written on dustbins, in public places, and instilled in the minds of learners. Plastic bags under 30 milligrams thick are now illegal in South Africa. Plastic shopping bags, with an increased thickness, are bought for about 30 cents — no longer given to the consumer for free. It is intended to encourage the purchaser to take responsibility for their waste, trying to curb the spread of our ‘national flower’— the scraps of plastic litter which cover the landscape in many parts of the country.

3.2 Refabrication

The term ‘fabricate’ means the construction and manufacturing of components or parts (Swannell 1992:375). ‘Refabrication’ therefore implies that a manufactured object is taken and altered, changed or remade. It is a term that applies only to industrially produced materials (Cerny and Ceriff 1996:11). They use the term refabrication in relation to craft workers around the world who use post-consumer discarded items. Refabrication is a process through which waste is beneficiated — used to create craft products as a source of income.

Once the intended function of many industrially produced products has passed, they are discarded. It is most often from the discarded state that these materials are sourced by refabricators, or waste beneficiators. It is a creative process that people engage in, transforming an obsolete, discarded object from its original form and function into something new, changing its value and meaning. Refabrication allows the fusion of materials and technologies that were once incongruent. Each refabricated object ultimately contains within itself ‘visual, material, and conceptual reference to multiple technologies, histories, and temporalities’ (Cerny and Seriff 1996:10).

According to Cerny and Seriff (1996:11) there is a difference between recycling and refabrication. Recycling is most often undertaken in huge industrial plants and involves, for instance, processing waste Polyethylene Terephthalate (PeT) plastic into melted plastic to be re-cast as new plastic products. Recycling is often associated with attempts to preserve the environment. Refabrication on the other hand is most often small scale and is undertaken by individuals for personal gain.

4 Artists exploring refabrication

4.1 El Anatsui

Anatsui is a contemporary African artist and lecturer in Nigeria. He was born in 1944 in Ghana and his work deals with cultural and socio-political concerns. He recently made a series of metallic 'cloth' pieces. *Sasa* (2004) (Figure 17) is a wall-sized 'cloth' or tapestry that reflects light, giving off a rich, luxurious quality. On closer inspection the material used to make the cloth is found to be the metal from cans and bottle tops, all wired together. Okwui Enwezor identifies Anatsui's choice of materials as being important in the context of the local culture (in Worth 2009). *Sasa* takes inspiration from the traditional Kente or Adinkra fabric from Ghana. These traditional cloths have cultural significance for the people of Ghana; a pattern of specific colours contains a culturally significant message. For instance, gold symbolises chieftaincy and longevity and also refers to the precious metal mined on the coast of Ghana. Each pattern has symbolic or iconographic relevance alluding to historical events or people. In the past, West Africa's only access to strip woven textiles was through trade with Europe. West African weavers then unraveled these imports so that they could reweave them according to their local designs and colour combinations (LaGamma 2008:68).



Sasa (2004) El Anatsui (Figure 17)



Sasa (detail)

Anatsui's works explore the histories of West Africa, engaging with such subjects as ritual libations, traditional textiles and slavery. His 'bottle tops encapsulate the essence of the alcoholic drinks that were brought to Africa by Europeans as trade items from the time of the earliest contact between the two peoples', explains Anatsui (www.ethnicarts.org). These alcoholic liquids became extremely popular, enough for a culture of alcohol dependency to emerge. It was a dependency that replaced money and formed a currency between the locals and the colonisers. This gave the colonisers the upper hand, until decolonisation in 1960. Local distilleries began to distil their own brews, like whiskey, rum, vodka and brandy, a practice which is still current. The bottle tops Anatsui used in *Sasa* originate from these distilleries.

Provenance is intrinsic to the idea of refabrication, where the value placed on the object exploits the cultural or historical provenance of the object or material. Anatsui originated from a community historically affected by colonialism. In Olu Oguibe's book *The Culture Game*, he finds that artists from cultures who suffered repression in any way attempted to engage with the nature of memory. Their community's

collective memory has failed in the past, and they show strong desires to retain the tradition of storytelling and ritual objects (2004:92). This is evident in the culturally aware works of Anatsui and of Hazoumè who both explore aspects of cultural history and identity.

Anatsui intends to evoke particular cultural associations through the artwork by using a combination of discarded material (bottle tops), cultural practices (Adinkra textile weaving) and historical context (colonisation and its effects on contemporary culture in Nigeria). History, popular memory and craft are woven into these artworks. The materials used to make *Sasa* retain a visual mnemonic of their former purpose, in that they are still recognisable as former bottle-tops. A mnemonic which can be read as signifier of a deeper cultural history, a history not only of the bottle tops but of the people who used them, the formation of the people and the culture, and simultaneously a reference to the culturally relevant Kente cloth. These associations and resonances reach beyond the physical characteristics of the materials he chooses (www.nmafa.com).

In an on-line article by Anderson-Spivy (2010), Anatsui is called an 'African Alchemist'. She acknowledges his skill in transmuting 'dross

metals' into a cloth of gold, using refuse to create beauty. Anderson-Spivy comments that the 'alchemical transformation of discarded metal fragments into art provides a sobering reminder of the mixed consequences of former colonialism, current globalisation, rampant consumerism and waste' (www.artnet.com). Objects associated with devastating alcoholism and alcohol abuse in Nigeria are transformed into a vision of grandeur. Just as Anatsui's art deals with imparting new meaning to and transforming detritus, his artworks themselves are continuously evolving and undergoing transformation, according to the location in which they are presented.

Anatsui once remarked that '[a]rtists are better off working with whatever their environment throws up' (Anatsui 2003). Resourcefulness is the ability to make the most of materials available to one at the time, materials that could be part of the social life and culture in which one lives and works. Anatsui claims to be inspired by the huge piles of detritus leftover as a byproduct of consumption, like the mountains of milk tins and bottle tops that have been growing throughout West Africa due to limited recycling facilities and waste retrieval. This artwork was inspired by Anatsui's discovery of a bag of used bottle tops near

a local road. Each bottle top's history in a production line of machines that press, cut, crimp and then print on the tops is long forgotten. The bottle tops are functionless without a bottle, and the value of the bottle is nothing without its contents. Excited by their number and their status as discarded items, Anatsui flattened each one of them, stitched them together in a labour intensive weaving process and created *Sasa*, of which more versions followed.

The cloth is displayed as a wall hanging that is draped from the top of the gallery wall and gradually incorporates more undulations as the weight of the fabric causes it to distort near the bottom and extend in ripples over the floor, creating hills and valleys of reflective, colourful metals. The fact that the work is made of metal also subverts the very notion of cloth as soft and pliable and capable of retaining warmth. Its ineffective functional value as a cloth, however, is overridden by its stimulating visual and seemingly tactile quality. It is a combination of history and craft that left many viewers, including Kwame Anthony Appiah feeling nothing less than 'enraptured' (Worth 2009). Some parts rusted while other parts, retaining the original painted colourful surface, still shone. Then, stepping back, the illusion of a 'sumptuous cloth returns' (Hynes 2007:134).

4.2 Romuald Hazoumè

Romuald Hazoumè speaks of his artworks as masks that evoke questioning. He states that the art he makes comes from and is for his community, having a long history of mask making, and ceremonial adornment of these masks. He references the old masks and their role of questioning. Nieuwenhuysen (2010) explains that African masks often represent a spirit or ancestor, who is able to possess the wearer of the mask. In producing a mask, a traditional carver's aim is to depict a person's psychological and moral characteristics, rather than provide a portrait. Most of Hazoumè's sculptures are 'masks' made from plastic containers, used and re-used by petrol or oil transporters, until they eventually break. Plastic — infiltrating even the remotest parts of the world — could be seen as an emissary of modern industrialisation.

Hazoumè is influenced by the indigenous religion's oracles, evoked within each mask. These faiths are all referenced in his works, sometimes only implicitly. 'There can be no masks without the oracle' explains Hazoumè. The message and meaning conveyed through the mask is attributed to a specific indigenous oracle, made reference to in the work by signifiers such as specific feathers, beads or knives. He

resists signing these masks, firstly because he views them as collective cultural objects and secondly because he 'cannot write on a god' (Golt 2010). Hazoumè's creations are therefore tied to his worldview (The Contemporary African Art Collection). A gradual succumbing to the lightweight material that replaces traditional ones like ceramic or leather. The link with my own work lies in his choice of materials and the environmental statements he makes with his work.

If the mask represents a specific individual's moral character and it was made using plastic and not wood, then Hazoumè is perhaps suggesting that the material is intrinsic to the person's lifestyle or commercial choices made or left behind. His use of plastic instead of wood blatantly states that, through industrialization, the individuals in his community are more familiar with plastic than wood. The fundamental purpose of a mask is to conceal the identity of the wearer while evoking an entity from the spirit world. Hazoumè recognises the ubiquity of plastic permeating all aspects of society, including religion. He explains that 'we in Africa are losing our culture and if we lose it, we're dead. We think your culture is better than ours, but our culture is so rich' (www.theartsdeck.com). He laments the fact that most of the old masks are



Wax Lolo (2009) Romuald Hazoumè (Figure 18)

found in European galleries and he feels that by making new ones with modern materials imbued with contemporary culture, the art of mask-making will not die out as a tradition.

Wax Lolo (2009) (Figure 18) is a sculpture, a mask, representing the head of a woman. It is made from a yellow plastic petrol container. Her mouth is the opening of the container, her nose is the handle, and her closed eyes are suggested by the shadow of the handle. Her head cloth is made of a collection of coloured, locally-produced cloth. It bears the same characteristics as a traditional mask — simplified facial features and a cut away section at the back so that it can be worn as a mask. He was inspired by the masks seen on men during secret initiation ceremonies in his youth, and feels that today those traditions are fading. 'If I don't make masks, the tradition will disappear' explains Hazoumè (<http://www.theartsdesk.com>).

Most of Hazoumè's masks are ascribed a personality. They are, for him, a sculptural repository that retains something of the spirit of the long line of people who handled them before. The plastic container transcends its mundane functionality and becomes an embodiment of the people who used it when it was a mere petrol can.

Large plastic containers are a familiar sight in Benin as they are used for transporting illegal petrol from Nigeria. These underground petrol dealings account for 90 per cent of the country's use (Golt 2010). Hazoumè used the containers as a potent metaphor for 'all forms of slavery' (Tate Modern 2007) and as reference to the liquids it used to contain and the commercial systems it sustains, as well as the corrupt political system that necessitates this smuggling. The canisters wear down and break, only to be discarded by the users and the system itself. Hazoumè's masks, like *Wax Lolo* (2009), are intended to evoke the wearer's true character and can be understood as a 'contemporary reinterpretation of the phenomena of trances, revealing without reserve the madness of current events' (The Contemporary African Art Collection).

Hazoumè's critical vision is of modernity replacing tradition, as well as a concern about dependence on western goods, such as petrol. He does not actively associate himself with the western idea of recycling as a means to ease the impact on the environment, nor does he directly associate himself with environmental concerns. The plastic containers he uses are a readily available material, with cultural and historical resonance, which he exploits to make incisive observations about life in West Africa.

4.3 Willie Bester

Bester is a South African painter and sculptor. In his work he often engages with issues relating to race, violence, aggression and poverty. He examines broader issues of nationhood, displacement, and other socio-political issues as a type of protest art that originates from his experiences of apartheid. Bester's steel sculptures are assembled in a rough and raw manner that does not conceal the original form of the component parts. His point of view is articulated in the nature of his heavy figures, his satire and particularly in his recurring image of the dog.

Bester's assemblages consist almost entirely of refabricated scrap metal. He cleverly exploits the forms and textures of discarded machine parts, off-cuts and other waste metal to expressively and gesturally render his animal and human figures. For example *Teef* (1995) (Figure 19), one of his many canine sculptures, is of a scrawny female dog set in a pose that is neither friendly nor aggressive. Her nipples appear to be made of spark plugs and suggest that she is pregnant. Cogs around the body conjure up the mechanical movements of a robot or machine, and the smooth metal describing the face appears to have the strength of battle armour. Oppenheimer, a reviewer for *Artthrob*,



(2005) Wilkie Bester / Figure 25



Head On (2006) Cai Guo-Qiang (Figure 26)

is in awe of an 'artist that can perform an act of modern day alchemy by transforming a pile of seemingly incompatible machine parts into an artwork, that is not only anatomically convincing, but on the verge of springing to life' (www.artthrob.com). This 'performance' is refabrication and Oppenheimer has succinctly pinpointed its essence from start to hybridised finish.

The rubbish dump is a layered landscape of history, a midden of things that were. Bester's excavations into these scrap heaps make him a kind of archaeologist who reconstructs the 'connective tissue of history' within current issues of political injustices and human rights (Fiz 1999). Although he is generally termed a 'struggle' artist, he produced the greater part of his sculpture after the end of apartheid. Yet Bester remains critical and refuses the temptation to make 'nice' art. Rather, he scrutinises those who remain unwilling or unable to adapt to the transformations of the country.¹⁰ His dogs are meant as metaphors for some of the more base aspects of human nature and instinct.

¹⁰ (www.artthrob.co.za Issue No. 68, April 2003).

He doesn't recycle with the primary intention of giving refuse another dimension or second life, but uses the patina of use and the character of scrap metal to give his works a vital energy. He uses scrap metal to interrogate elements of inclusion and exclusion by selecting parts that are specific and recognisable, rather than using mundane scraps with no reference or traceable history. Parts are chosen for their character, their central power in a machine, or the well known action it may perform, echoing perhaps the machinery of a controlling system in South Africa, with its people secondary components, mere cogs or relays. His observation on a corrupt and violent world is illustrated perhaps by the robot-like rigidity of the metal sculptures and the lack of sympathetic emotion each one conveys. The forms are obviously metallic, though they are recognizably figurative. This suggests movement and life, but the cold, machine-like essence of his works prohibit the existence of a soul. By extension, the danger to us, the viewers, comes from a system that is soulless and does not see us as people, but simply as a threat.

Bester's intention in *Who Let the Dogs Out?* (2001) (Figure 20) is to prevent the public from forgetting the atrocities committed during apartheid. His direct display of horror and pain is found in the sculpture,

on the face of a person being attacked by the police dog. Bester's metal sculptures are very heavy, being entirely made of metal, and their content is equally weighty. They convey a sense of permanence and grounding in physicality. The rigidity and permanence of the material could be read as a metaphor for the necessity to remember and learn from the past. Using another material of a lightweight and flexible kind would suggest an entirely different meaning and set of associations.



Who Let the Dogs out? (2001) Willie Bester (Figure 20)

4.4 Moshekwa Langa

Langa's *Untitled*, popularly referred to as *Skins* (2005) (Figure 21), has been an important reference to my own work, resonating with *Carcasses* (2010) (Figure 22), one of the sculptures in the submitted MFA installation. His work is made of discarded cement bags torn into various shapes that resemble tanned animal hides. The cement once contained in the bag facilitated permanence in the building of a structure, yet the bag itself is fragile and impermanent. The idea of building in cement itself relates to permanence of location, while the paper bag is displaced. It is this issue of displacement that Langa explores in his artworks. In *Skins*, Langa rips the cement bags to make the desired shape. He reconfigures the bag by deconstructing it. The paper bags are then painted with industrial lubricants. (www.iziko.org.za, 2001). Exhibited in the gallery as piles of 'skins' bound by wire, their effect was of a macabre imitation of slaughter (Williamson and Jamal 1996:86). The Iziko museum website asks questions such as 'do the 'skins' allude to the wholesale slaughter of animals as seen in the popular sport of hunting? Do the noxious chemicals refer to those used on a daily basis by domestic workers in an effort to keep South African homes clean?'

Skins is an ambivalent artwork. Colin Richards (in Williamson and Jamal 1996:86) articulates this ambivalence by explaining that Langa is an enigma, and an innocent trickster, who had no formal education yet took the art world by storm. He and his work resist categorisation and leave the viewer unsure of where to place him (Williamson and Jamal, 1996:86).

Walker calls Langa a 'radical scavenger' (2002:79). However, Langa claims to have never considered the material he uses. He picks it up off the street, where it is readily available and therefore already familiar to him. He is able to explore mundane objects by pushing boundaries of what they are able to convey or be reshaped into.



Skins (2005) Moshekwa Langa
(Figure 21)

5 Sculptural installation

The works act in concert — they are an installation. A faint smell of plastic envelopes the ensemble — an ensemble that is silent, inert, collapsed. As a viewer approaches, a motion sensor picks up their movement and triggers a set of relay switches. The plastic begins to make crackling sounds as the fans start. The dimly lit gallery contains large, abundant forms and is intended to create an environment of almost overwhelming, claustrophobic activity.

Entering the corridor, the viewer is confronted by hanging red shapes (*Carcasses*) inflating and deflating, becoming smooth and rounded. The viewer has to push through the hanging forms, feeling them brush past their shoulders, creating static in their hair. Each shape bounces lazily away from the viewer's touch when inflated, but deflated they crinkle and bend inertly. The viewer is encouraged to handle the inflated forms, feel their pressure and the smooth plasticity of the material, and feel the emptiness within them.

The main part of the installation comprises a cacophony of sounds and moving plastic shapes, breathing, pulsating, rising and falling in counterpoint to one another. The light is bright and warm, like the African sun, compared to the entrance hall which was darkly lit. The colours and tones are muted, almost faded or bleached of life.

In the foreground dangle long grey suspended shapes. Depending on their stage of inflation or deflation they may or may not be recognisable as hanging vultures. Beyond *Vultures* is a long line of slightly invisible canine forms, titled *Procession* (Figure 23). These are made of transparent plastic that emerges from the wall, slouching when their fan is off and rising attentively when the fan is on. At the back of the gallery the two *Baobabs* (Figure 24) rise and fall against the walls, their branches writhing like tentacles. The fan powering the *Baobabs* is loud and dominant compared to some of the other fans.

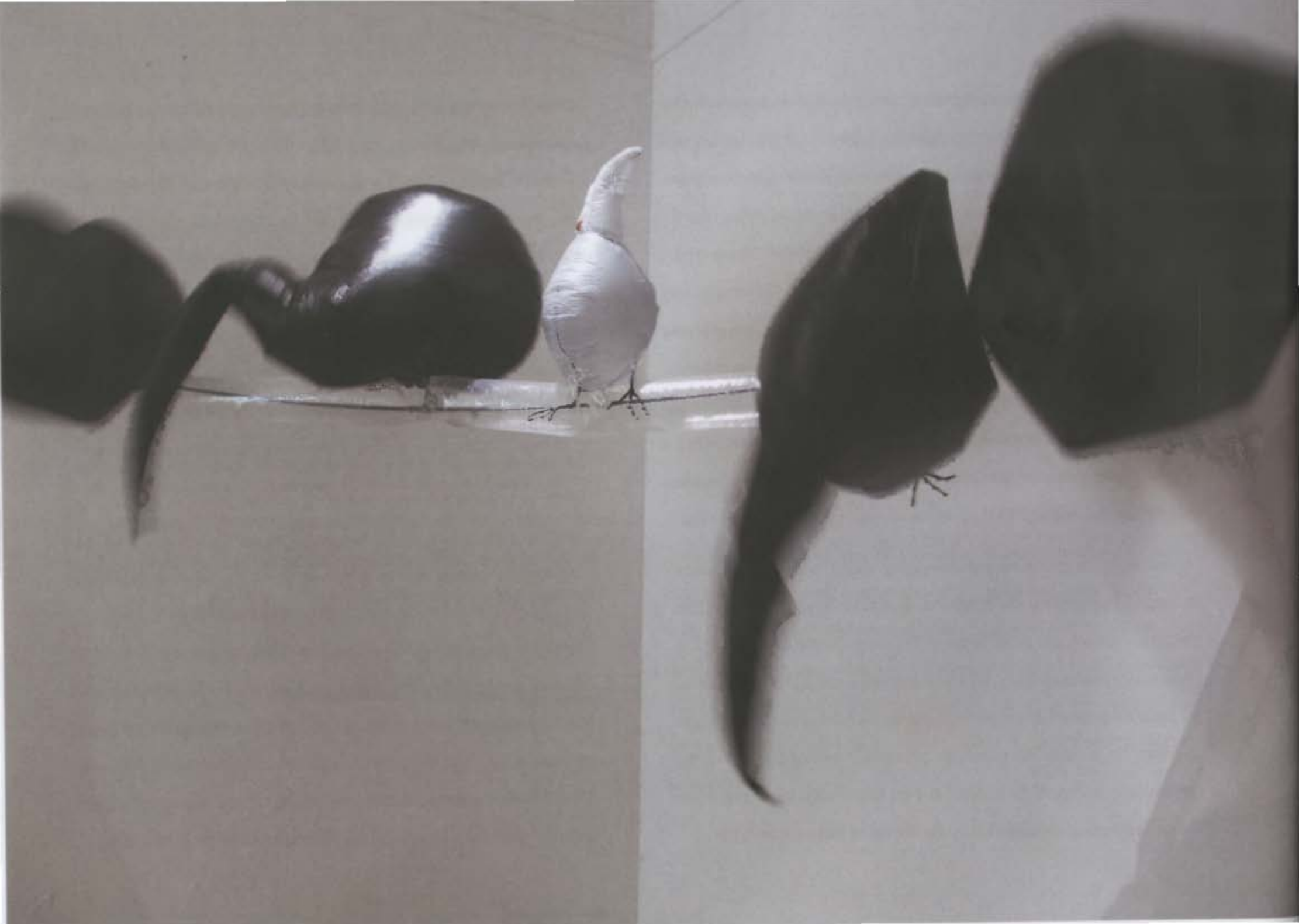
The spectator may look at the three corners of the gallery and notice three versions of *Blackbirds* (Figure 25), placed higher than eye level. They seem quirky and macabre as they watch the moving scene below them, rising to balance on their perch and then falling off again.

The hollow and structureless forms are intended as comment on superficial, fast-paced, fleeting modern lifestyles. Working largely intuitively, I attempted to visualise this concern in plastic. The cycles can be interpreted as a sleeping and waking up action, a sense of giving up and then being inspired, dying and being reborn again or even a disappearing and re-appearing trick. There is an element of childlike fantasy, and a sense of a modern mythological menagerie of animals. Because animals evoke empathy, making them out of plastic can make them seem helpless and desperate, because of the thinness of the plastic, its innate floppiness and the knowledge that such plastic does not remain intact for very long. The forms are made with particular emphasis and attention to the process of inflation and deflation.

A production line is uniform and unchanging, unlike the intrinsic mutation, evolution, imperfection and hybridisation inherent in nature. The cyclical process of growth and decay in nature is different to the linear process of industrially produced items. By making animals and plants in a material of linear time, meaning a material that does not biodegrade or decay into nutrients for another life form. My intention is to emphasise both the prolonged existence of the material and the fragility and transience of the natural environment as affected by the impact of human activity.

I altered the natural forms translated to into sculptural forms to highlight a change in nature that has been triggered by the infiltration of plastic into the environment that is poisoning and modifying it. These changes result in slight deformations, even a sense of evolutionary adaptations or a metamorphosis. In modifying their forms I highlight this altered aspect in relation to plastics. The simplification of these forms results in a roundedness that echoes natural forms, but the recognition of mutated limbs and warped forms also implies meddling or human intervention. Des Esseintes, in *Against Nature* (1959) sums up this process quite well by saying: 'Nature is incapable of producing such depraved, unhealthy species alone and unaided' and '...man rears, shapes, paints and carves afterwards to suit his fancy' (Huysmans 1959:102). Although he was describing plants and horticulture I feel that the same sentiments apply to the themes of my own work.

I found plastic to be a compelling medium that enabled me to articulate different concepts of natural and artificial substance. It is a pliable medium, always willing to change and adapt to varying volumes and pressures of air. It fits in and alters itself to the requirements of flexibility. It is a material that is wonderfully useful and versatile yet for me it is also a tainted material — loaded with connotations of ecological crisis.



5.1 Blackbirds

‘Insignificant mortals, who are as leaves are, and now flourish and grow warm with life, and feed on what the ground gives, but then again fade away and are dead.’

Homer in *The Iliad*.

These bird-like figures, made out of black rubbish bags, are attached to a horizontal pole. The shapes hang limply until the fan is triggered. They begin to rise and fill with air, becoming taught and fat. Just as their forms become recognisable as birds, they deflate and fall downwards (as the fan stops). They are hybrids evoking the idea of a bird rather than a particular type of bird. Certain elements are reminiscent of specific birds, but in their overall shape they cannot be identified. Their colour evokes associations with ill omens or provokers of evil. Once inflated, they begin to wheeze asthmatically until the fan stops and they unanimously slump over the pole, dangling from their claws.

Blackbirds (2010)
Catherine Dickerson
(Figure 25)

5.2 Carcasses

‘Monsters manufactured!’ exclaims Prednick in *The Island of Dr Moreau* (Wells 1946). Moreau explains that ‘these creatures you have seen are animals carven and wrought into new shapes.’ He explains his life’s devotion to the ‘plasticity of living forms’ (Wells 1946:78).

In *Carcasses* I used red plastic sheeting to make two rows of eighteen plastic carcass-like forms dangling from their umbilicus-like tubes. They are placed in the entrance to the exhibition and the approach of each viewer activates a motion sensor that triggers the work’s inhalation. The clear tubing leading to each umbilical cord starts to swell up with air, making subtle crackling and rustling sounds. The viewer is now pushing through taut deformed figures with protruded limbs as they pass into the main part of the gallery.

These figures are not specific but zoomorphic, some evocative perhaps of butchered carcasses, and others, because of the umbilical cords, suggesting fetuses and birth. This is intended to generate an awkward feeling of unease and discontent. They appear to be in a state of transformation between birth and death, suspended above the ground and waiting to mutate, or find their final form.

Carcasses (2010)
Catherine Dickerson
(Figure 22)





5.3 Procession

This work consists of a series of thirteen dogs that form a pack. They are made of transparent plastic sheeting (most commonly used in the packaging industry to protect goods from being damaged or dirtied during transportation). The dogs are connected in a long line that allows air to flow through from shape to shape. The clear plastic transparency makes them seem ghostly, caught between visibility and invisibility and also suggests a glass-like fragility. I exaggerated the forms of the dogs by overarching their backs, elongating their legs and lengthening their noses. This was done to enhance the inflation/deflation movement and to make them seem awkward and desperate, inflating in a direction but never getting there. There are no details such as mouths or eyes to distinguish them as individuals within the pack.

I felt profoundly moved by an image of Cai Guo-Qiang's *Head On* (2006) (Figure 26), a work akin to *Procession*. In *Head On*, the wolves are leaping in a flying arc towards a transparent wall; the ones hitting the wall are contorted from the impact and sent sprawling on the floor. The installation captures a moment frozen in time, in which Cai explains that 'humanity is easily blinded by a kind of collective mentality and action, and is destined to repeat such error to an almost unbelievable degree'. The dogs in *Procession* are emerging from the wall, running away, unlike Cai's wolves which are colliding with an invisible wall. Using the wall as a metaphor in my own work, I perceive it to represent the problems of plastic and the denial, or 'running away' from the responsibility of 'facing up' to it.

Procession (2010)
Catherine Dickerson
(Figure 23)

5.4 Baobabs

Two baobab trees occupy the far corner of the installation. The trees grow and rise, elongating and stretching out their crumpled forms. Their many branches reach the upper volume of the gallery, searching and wobbling like the tentacles on an anemone. Both trees are thick, reminiscent of a stone pillar or tower. The base of each tree is weighted down, keeping contact with the ground, the centre of gravity. They wobble unsteadily as they rise, similar to children's punch-bag clowns that always return to an upright position. The fans stop and the trees begin to let go, branch by branch, flopping lower and lower until the pull of gravity brings the entire unstable tree trunk collapse to the floor. It splays out there like a wounded animal. The collapsed state is pitiful. This cycle of growth and decay echoes nature and the cycle of life. The upright form of the tree echoes *The Forest of Telescoping Totem Poles* (2005), alluding to the interconnectedness of life.

The West African writer Seydou Drame describes a funeral for a baobab tree in Burkino Faso. It is honoured for its use as a place of shelter, a refuge for spirits and a source of usefulness in hard times (Packenham 2004:15). The baobab was honoured as would be an important member of the community, because it too is recognised as a provider, one who 'bends its ears' in times of sorrow to bear fruit. (Packenham 2004:15).

Baobab (2010)
Catherine Dickerson
(Figure 24)





5.5 Vultures

Four grey plastic, shapeless forms hang from the roof, whispering and rustling in response to any zephyr that touches their surface. On closer inspection one may distinguish a protruding head and beak, and the rest of the form as a body with long thin wings. The empty bodies float limply in the air at eye level, necks bowed down and wings draped low, just long enough to touch the floor. The tips of the wings seem to claw at the ground to find stability and direction. This work inflates from the wing tips. Once they start to inflate the bodies begin to swell, the heads begin to rise and take proper shape and the wings start to fill up, floating higher and higher. Finally, the forms appear to glide through the air. The form itself is of a simplified yet still recognizable vulture, albeit with a pterodactyl or hadeda ibis hybrid. The wingspan is now very great in relation to the bird's body.

This work is humorous in that it is pathetic *and* imposing. The plastic bags used are from bottle stores, places that are open late and attract a variety of people. The vulture is a scavenger with generally negative associations. The grey plastic used is thin and flimsy, fragile and pathetic. This floppiness is echoed in place of the bottle store, where the very material of *Vultures* has originated. The slow wings are uncoordinated, like that of an inebriated individual feeling its way across the gallery space. The awkward and threatened reaction that one has to *Vultures* requires a form of comic relief. There is underlying humour in seeing them deflated and floppy. It is a form one can almost feel – like spreading one's arms and wanting to fly, it evokes a sense of one's own body.

Vultures (2010)
Catherine Dickerson
(Figure 27)

Conclusion

The installation is intended to create a harsh environment of life-like forms, breathing, even evolving and hopefully surviving the impact of human interference. The dogs in *Procession* are intended to suggest man's best friend as well as its wild counterpart, the hunter and scavenger. The clear plastic they are made from could make them seem to be disappearing. The *Carcasses* hint at animals painfully contorted and victimised, but simultaneously suggest ideas of evolution (under duress) and metamorphosis. The *Baobabs* both rise triumphantly over the other works in the gallery, reaching their arms out protectively, but their deflation evokes pathos, referencing deforestation and shrinking habitats. *Blackbirds* and *Vultures* both signify scavengers who view the world from afar, perhaps allowing them a broad perspective on current events and on going changes in the world.

This installation has been inspired by inflatable advertising as well as the inflatable sculptures produced by the artists discussed here. I have been particularly interested in the kinetic aspect of inflatable sculpture and was equally inspired by the notion of refabrication,

whereby artists, recognising aesthetic qualities and residual cultural associations they can use, transmute rubbish into sculpture. These interests, together with a concern for recycling my own discarded consumer plastic, led me to explore the refabrication of plastic waste as inflatable sculpture.

Plastic's lightness and flexibility make it an appropriate material from which to make inflatables. However, in the body of work presented here, the plastic is not merely the medium but also the subject. It is the focus of my concerns regarding ecological and environmental crisis. An atrocity of plastic pollution is certainly the trash vortex (a floating plastic island the size of Texas in the North Pacific gyre).¹¹ The plastic breaks into ever smaller particles, but will take decades, even centuries, to bio-degrade. Many, even microscopic, animals are killed by ingested plastic.

As complex systems of inter-dependant life forms, ecologies exist as continuous cycles of growth, collapse, decay and regeneration. Such cycles are echoed in the interactive kinetic movement, the counterpointed cycles of inflation and deflation of the installation presented here.

11 Greenpeace. 2009

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