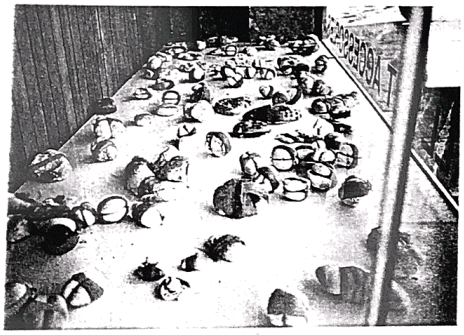
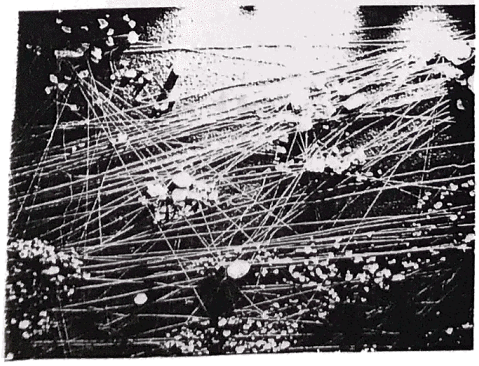
by Anne Ferran

In the air On the ground

Sue Pedley: *Listening to Clara, Ethel and Ada*





Details: **Sue Pedley**, ***Listening to Clara, Ethel and Ada***, **1997.** Wool, dough, gypsum, lettering.

Sydney, Erskineville Road... This could be a street anywhere in the world and yet ... this art could only be Sue Pedley's. Everything about it says so: the bright orange and iridescent blues, the wool, the gypsum, the steam, the knotting, wrapping and stitching. Along with the element of recognition comes surprise at finding her here. Sue Pedley, 'as prejudiced as the next artist' (she says it herself) when it comes to community art—what is she doing making art in a vacant shop in Erskineville? (Erko, the locals like to say. Irksomeville, a lawyer friend of mine used to call it.)

Her being here intrigues and bothers me. In fact I'd say that my first reaction to this work is equal parts delight and botherment. It has something to do with the kind of artist Pedley is, someone who makes installations with materials like plaster, felt and yarn. She makes things for which there are no names, yet they are easy to describe: words like spontaneous, playful, organic, colourful come to mind. The objects suggest a myriad of other activities, of a non-art or an anti-art nature but, nonetheless, this is contemporary art as we know and recognise it, with all the critical fundamentals in place. You couldn't possibly mistake it for anything else.

This bears thinking about. It triggers a chain of questions about fine art and community art, what can be expected from combining them, whether such a coupling will or can be successful and, if so, on what terms. Pedley tells me that, ecologically speaking, the zone where two environments meet is the one that supports the most life. I like the analogy but experience suggests that this happy fruitfulness is likely to be only part of the story.

Erskineville is an inner-western suburb of Sydney, traditionally working-class, a mixture of terrace houses and Housing Commission flats, undergoing a late-blooming gentrification. Its retail strip occupies two or three blocks on Erskineville Road before the shops start edging untidily away in the direction of nearby Newtown. It is a mixture of old and new, ethnic and Anglo: a Thai take-away, a Vietnamese bakery, a hairdressing salon, a TAB, the local pub, a couple of cafes.... As elsewhere in the city's inner-west, the factories and warehouses are disappearing under a rising tide of medium density housing. Only a few hundred metres from the shops are Sydney's vast railway workshops, once a major feature of the city's industrial landscape, now similarly caught in the throes of redevelopment.

Originally Pedley conceived *Listening to Clara, Ethel and Ada* as an essay in what might be termed 'an art of place'. Clara Street, Ada Street, Ada Lane and Ethel Street (who were these women?) are small suburban streets close to where she lives. Specifying them in the title is like pegging out the ground she means to work on, the immediate neighbourhood. *Listening* suggests that she will be open to what is there already, that she'll work with an ear to the ground (and one to what's in the air).

Those elements were in place from the beginning. The shopfront location came later, as did the actively political dimension, the post office component. When Australia Post announced in 1996 its intention to close the local post office, residents responded with a Save Erskineville Post Office campaign.

Pedley became involved; later she decided to incorporate the issue into her art work.

At first when Pedley approached South Sydney Council for premises it was not receptive. Subsequently Council relented and gave her three months' use of three vacant shops directly across the road from the post office. Two of these spaces comprise a double shopfront and the third is separated from the others by a cafe. Pedley got them rent-free; the Council agreed also to pick up the cost of utilities. As to what these shops mean to the community—older residents remember the days when children's dancing classes were held in numbers 110–112; today there is concern over their future and the possible effect their redevelopment might have on the character of 'the Village'.

A brief chronology: Pedley moved into the shops in June, 1997. Between then and early August she worked there most days. On 9 August, a Saturday afternoon opening was held on the square outside the post office. As you'd expect, there were people from the local community and others from the art world. Cakes, sandwiches, tea and scones were served, dough was moulded into shapes and microwaved, speeches were made, photos taken, placards displayed. The shops stayed open for another six weeks, with Pedley in attendance, under the umbrella of Australian Perspecta 1997: Between Art and Nature.

> ... in [a public art] context, how much is the right amount of weight to give to aesthetics—the beautiful, memorable image, the moment of insight or recognition—and how much to social outcomes?

'Local history, collective memory, community scale', Jeff Kelley identifies these as the hallmarks of effective public genre art.[1] But effective for whom? Observing this art work over a period of time, it strikes me that Sue Pedley wants a lot from her community, probably at least as much as she can offer it in return. Previously a studio-based artist, she is seeking to make herself a place as an artist in her local community; this will include its acknowledging the value of the work she does. In return she will contribute her skills towards an intensified sense of place and community connectedness. As an interested observer I'd very much like to know if this ambition of hers can be realised. But I have other questions too: for instance, can the various intentions within the work—its formal, conceptual, social, political aspirations—be integrated? (I particularly wonder about this since I've been educated as an artist to doubt that they can.) Moreover, in this context, how much is the right amount of weight to give to aesthetics—the beautiful, memorable image, the moment of insight or recognition—and how much to social outcomes?[2]

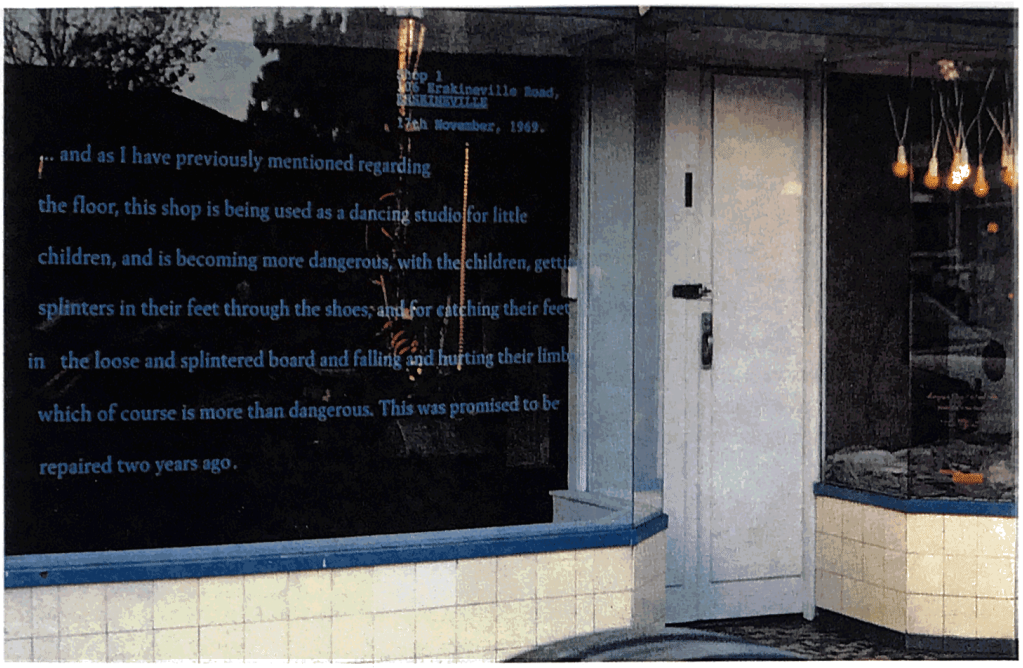
'I didn't know it was going to be so beautiful when I started.' Working over a period of weeks, Pedley constructed an immense three-dimensional weaving based on the lattice-like molecular structure of gypsum. It grew to be a huge, delicate cube of orange threads, lightly suspended from the ceiling, a spider's web fashioned with a geometer's regularity. Pedley points out that traditional weaving is a communal activity. She chose weaving for this project because it gave her a reason to be there all the time and because it occupied her hands whilst leaving her free to talk. A simple repetitive process, it could have allowed others to lend a hand but in practice few did. (It's not hard to see in retrospect that such precise work required a skill and a patience that few passers-by could muster.)

In the adjoining shop Pedley sewed hundreds of pebbles of gypsum, a crumbly greyish rock, into the carpet. (Gypsum is a principal ingredient in plaster; plaster is a favourite material of Pedley's.) Countless strands of orange yarn criss-crossed the floor, connecting the scattered pebbles. To me it looked like an astronomer's map of the night sky; others saw a diagram of the actual dancing feet of the '50s and '60s. In a small window of this shop she suspended red and yellow light bulbs; beneath them an amorphous-looking pile of felt pumped a cloud of steam into the air. Other components were sign-written onto the shop windows, a small diagrammatic version of the gypsum structure and an excerpt from a letter that she had found in the Council archives and which concerned the shop: *...and as I have previously mentioned regarding the floor, this shop is being used as a dancing studio for little children, and is becoming more dangerous...*

Down the road, in a shop still graced with the name Bow Wow's Pet Shop, Pedley covered the windows with snapshots—of historic Erskineville, of actions in the Post Office campaign—hundreds of them, many daubed with bright blue food colouring or stitched with orange yarn. In the topmost windows she displayed placards with slogans like: *You can't sell it, it's not yours* and *Cranky old buggers against the closure of the post office.* And underneath dozens of odd-shaped balls of dough, baked hard and bound in yet more orange and blue yarn. Bums, breasts and balls are what they looked most like, sinister scones made with ironic intent. 'I kept making them, children made them. They were an easy way of people participating.'

At first it looked to me as though Pedley's choice of materials (gypsum, wool) simply reflected her past practice. Then more pertinent connections began to emerge, affinities between the wool of the yarn and the woollen carpet on the floor of the shop, between her use of gypsum and the plaster of its walls and ceilings. In the case of the steam, another favoured material, the connections were of a different kind. Steam and evaporation and plaster go together: when wet plaster is hardening it releases steam; at the very beginning of the cycle of plaster production, saturated crystals evaporate and produce gypsum; in the past, working with dyes and plaster, Pedley observed how her materials responded to changes in humidity, intensifying and fading in colour. All of this adds up to the use of steam in this work as a metaphor for ongoing processes and for the transformation of energies within systems. In the steam, scones went mouldy and photos began to drip blue dye onto the carpet. On cold nights, as it condensed inside the glass, faint traces of long-ago, vanished signage appeared on the window. For some the steam suggested breath or tears, or even the sweat produced by the little dancing feet, the childish straining bodies.

The scones—were they important? She was a bit uncomfortable when I pressed her about the scones: 'I had this idea to make protest scones and send them to Australia Post, a bit like the Arnott's biscuit scare'. She went as far as having an Australia Post stamp designed and made, to



Detail, **Sue Pedley, *Listening to Clara, Ethel and Ada*, 1997.**
Wool, dough, gypsum, lettering.
Photo: Christopher Snee

frank them. That's where the binding came in, wrapping them to look like parcels. One way to understand the snapshots is as analogous to the making of the scones. Her use of photography is repetitive and accumulative, bordering on obsessive. She covered the photos with blue food colouring that partly obscured the imagery; she stitched into them; when there was nothing else to photograph, she rephotographed the photographs. Once daubed with food colouring, disintegration quickly set in, except that disintegration is too scientific a word; they simply broke down, dried out and curled up.

These materials and processes are diverse but they have things in common. All are ordinary, everyday, low cost. Taken together they constitute a work *ethic*, one which favours practicality, generosity and resourcefulness and which relates strongly to the domestic sphere, especially to children, their games, their inventiveness and the materials they play with. As part of this ethic, Pedley is more inclined to recycle materials from work to work than to invest value in finished objects. Finally there is an openness about her work which takes many forms and is, I think, its most dynamic, rapidly evolving aspect at present. Ways of 'being open' range from the airiness of the weaving, to the inclusiveness of the materials, processes and aspirations, to the literal openness of the shop to the street and to passing traffic.

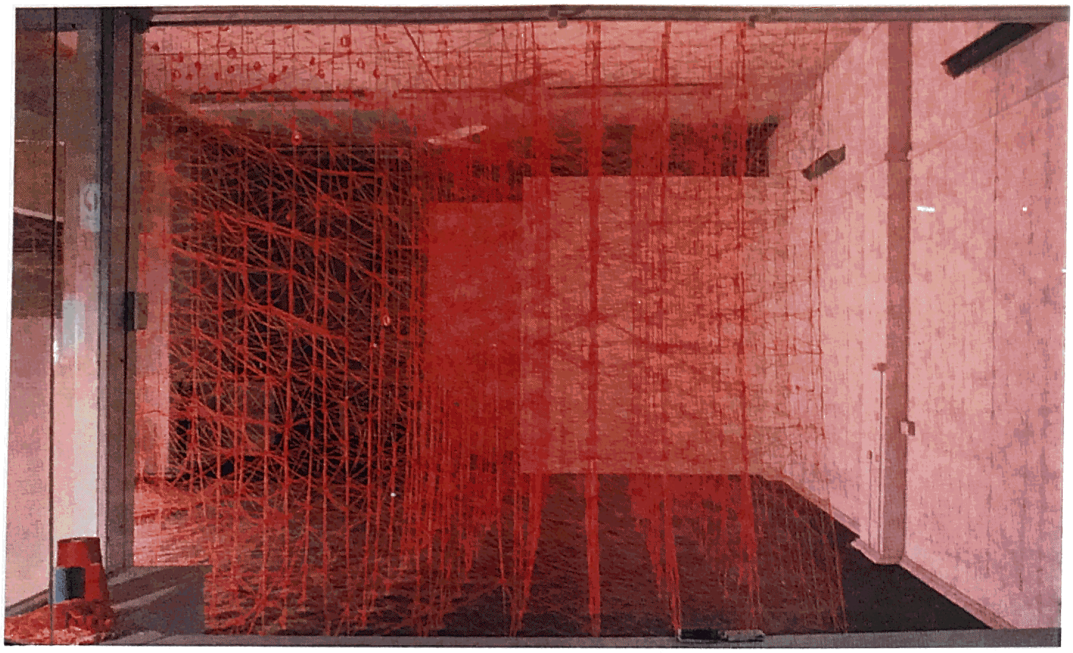
Pedley trained and has worked in early childhood education. She knows about the capacity of play to release energies, unlock creativity, promote change. I suspect she also knows that there's risk in choosing these particular materials and processes. Their association with childish play could mean that we (the art audience) will not take them seriously. In this case it is a risk that pays off. It is more difficult and, I'd argue, more of an accomplishment to triumph with these materials than with ones in which the audience recognises immediately aesthetic or ironic credentials.

'The weaving was the thing.' Weaving, web, mesh, tissue of connections, melding of creative expression and social life ... not surprisingly perhaps, the weaving succeeded best in pulling the various tendencies of the work together. Visually it was the most spectacular and the most intriguing element. Like a spider's web, it drew people into the work's orbit and held them there, feeding their curiosity and wonder. This part of the artist's work, creating powerful images and making them available to others, is as important for public art as it is for art in a gallery. When it is especially successful, as here, it can overcome the difference in expectations that different audiences bring to the work. One unforeseen but fascinating outcome was to see how the local audience struggled with the contradictions between the weeks of labour it took to make the weaving, its beauty and its evident impracticality and economic worthlessness.

Then it was over, the sewing unpicked, the floor swept clean, the weaving dismantled. The whole thing pulled down to almost nothing, a formless bundle of yarn, rocks and curling photographs, scones that were already moulding. What was left was a gap where it had been, a sense of loss for that bit of life and colour on the street. And more questions: what was achieved? for whom? (and for how long?).

I asked her first who saw it. During the day people could walk in off the street: 'Local artists, some I knew and some I didn't. Old people—there's a bus stop nearby. Aboriginal people, workers, a lot of workers'. The distant view was best by night and many must have seen it that way, as a fleeting glimpse from a passing car. They would have registered a blue light radiating from behind the massed photographs in the pet shop window; then more windows glowing with red and yellow lamps, the felt pumping out its cloud of steam, the brilliant orange web picked out in strong white light. 'What did they say?' 'Things like, "God, you must be patient," and "This is a lot of work." They often said it was beautiful.'

There is a lot that can't be said about audience reaction. Audiences are strange animals, our theories only begin to get a grip on them, and even less so when there are overlapping audiences with dif-



Detail, **Sue Pedley, *Listening to Clara, Ethel and Ada*, 1997**.
Wool, dough, gypsum, lettering.
Photo: Heidrun Löhr

ferent expectations. Pedley's ways of working derive from personal experience and observation. They are more intuitive than intellectual. This can make for something that can feel loose conceptually but the looseness doesn't seem to put the audience off—on the contrary. What is yielded in rigour is made up for in buoyancy, energy, a capacity to connect in different ways with different factions of the audience.

I said earlier that I was fascinated by the way considerations of value and labour emerged in this work. It is nothing new for an artist to opt to work outside the gallery and to want to decommodify the art. If there is a difference here, it is that this artist chose a set of shops to work in. In a sense she set herself up, by working shopkeeper's long hours at something with no practical function or exchange value. No-one observing her could deny the work involved so many hours of labour, so much patience and commitment. It convinced the audience on one level and perplexed them on another: 'Do you mean to say you are doing all this for nothing? Are you sure you tried hard enough to sell it?' (a local businesswoman). As a worker among other workers her position was tenuous but that became food for thought as well: 'I felt like an idiot in some ways, but I also think it is important work'. Her capacity to sustain an anomalous position and to trade off some of the mystique of being an artist made room for many kinds of engagement with the work (the openness again...).

It was indeed easy to approach this work and to enjoy it, but that in itself does not make it an easy work to evaluate. There are too many levels for that (the aesthetics are perhaps the least difficult part.) It could be argued that social outcomes can't be assessed yet, that they will manifest over a period of time. The post office campaign was successful, but even had it not succeeded there would have been positive outcomes—connections established within the community, memories revived and so on.

There was an undeniable warmth of response to the work in the local community. Newspaper coverage was extensive and sympathetic. Pedley says it gave her a strong sense of visibility as an artist in her community and the satisfaction of experiencing its reactions at first hand. However I couldn't help noticing that this work did not attract an art audience in anything like the numbers that came to other parts of Perspecta. It could conceivably have been that Erskineville is too far off the beaten track for a gallery-going public. Or that they succumbed in advance to preconceived ideas about community art, doubting that what they'd see would be worth the trouble of getting there. By making the work sound predictable, the catalogue didn't help. But for whatever reason, many didn't go to see it. I think they made a big mistake.

Many agree that Australian Perspecta 1997 was a powerful idea which disappointed in the execution, mainly because too much of the work lacked depth and resonance. Its most eloquent messages were about estrangement from nature, melancholy, and loss, nature divorced from culture or irremediably damaged by it. Unforgivably perhaps, there was almost nothing in it about a nature that includes us and all our behaviour, that is in constant flux, that has the capacity to astonish us and catch us off guard. Sue Pedley's work, less visited than the rest, experimented with something that was dynamic, productive, energetic, transformative. In the context of Art and Nature, this was art being used to model nature in an altogether different way. In a shopfront in Erskineville, for just a few weeks, they embraced ... and most of us weren't there to see it. Now that is ironic.

notes

1. Jeff Kelley, 'Common Work' in *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, ed. Suzanne Lacy, Seattle 1995, p. 141
2. For criteria for evaluating public art see: Suzanne Lacy's introduction to *Mapping the Terrain, ibid*, pp 43–44

Sue Pedley's *Listening to Clara, Ethel and Ada*, took place between 1 August—6 September 1997, at 106–112 Erskineville Road, Erskineville. It was part of Screaming Green, curated by Angharad Wynne-Jones of The Performance Space, Sydney, as a component of Australian Perspecta 1997: Between Art and Nature.

Sue Pedley is a Sydney-based artist. Anne Ferran is currently artist-in-residence at the Australia Council studio in Barcelona. She returns to Sydney in March.