

# Outside of all places

## Fiona Connor's sculpture

Oscar Capezio

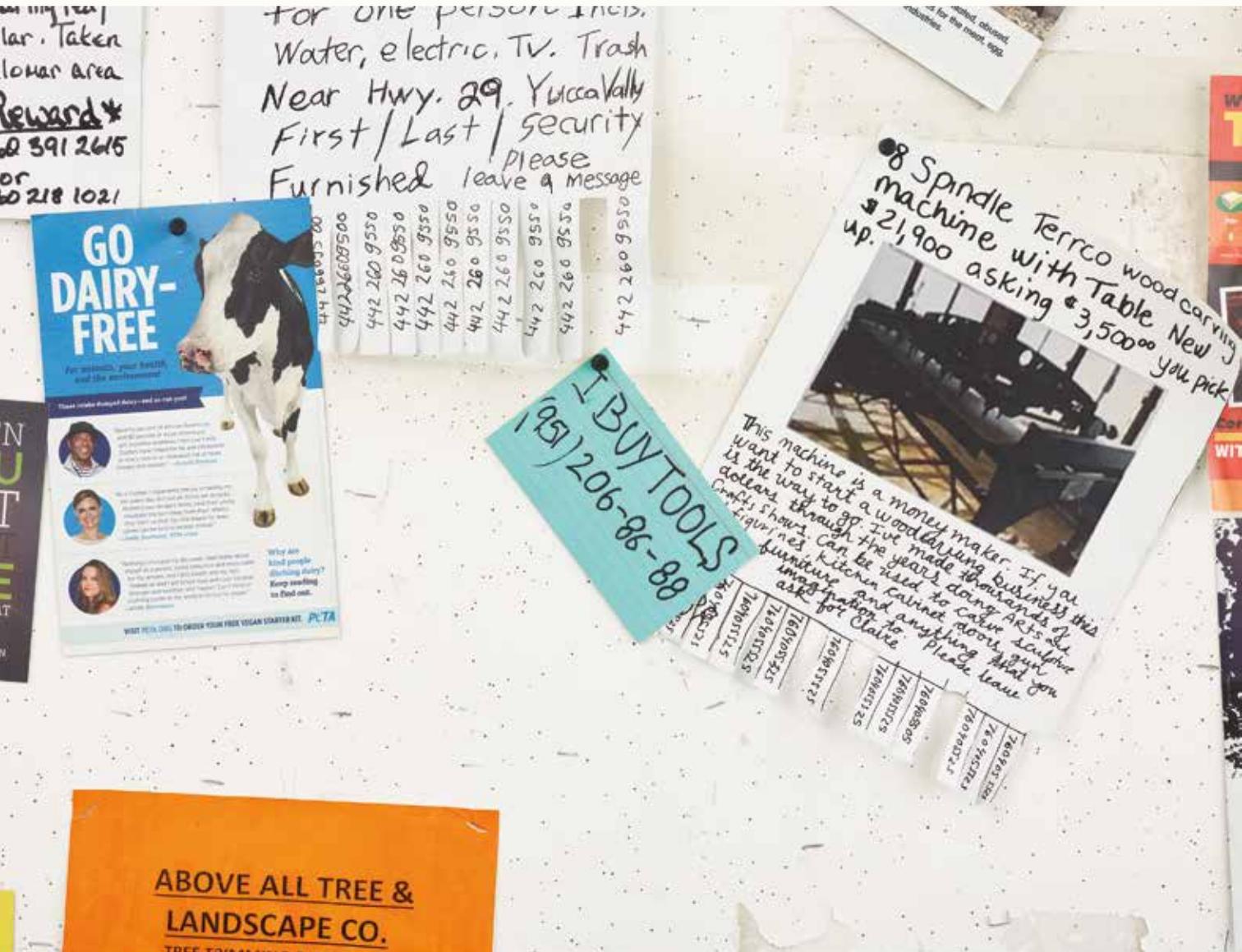
Down to earth, Fiona Connor takes notice of the way the world holds its objects. Her sculptural practice attends to the pervious boundaries that have been established between art and daily life, dwelling on points of contact and exchange, and the familiar sites of everyday production and reception. In carefully re-presenting commonplace objects, Connor uncannily informs us that the material world has become peripheral – overlooked – though it continues to exist, dragging itself beneath our feet, impeding our passage, often awkward and messy yet inescapably necessary.

The artist's first solo presentation in Australia was commissioned by Melbourne's Monash University Museum of Art in 2014. It comprised a series of nine freestanding 'wallworks': hefty double-sided recreations that rendered both the interior and exterior, and the internal structure of the walls on which works from the university's art collection are displayed. Implanting these into the museum along with the 'real' artworks themselves, Connor revealed the ways that artworks interact with the built environment. In witnessing this act of displacement, I sensed a kind of heavy-handed violence, as if some authority or power had ripped the walls and the works from their original context, the implications of which I couldn't make out, and still the sheer weight of the sculptures perplex me.

More recently Connor was featured at Fine Arts, Sydney, in a show that included two 1:1 reproductions of community noticeboards, made of archival-quality plastic, ink, metal, wood and paint.<sup>1</sup> The first board was an unframed plasterboard-wall section scattered with notices, presented in landscape format, quoted from the Cleaning Co-op in California's Yucca Valley. This scat-

tered display was alive with printed and scripted appeals for exchange, for sale or seeking – 'WANTED LIKE MINDED THINKERS' – offering to 'BUY TOOLS' with bold text, chattering among a constellation of equally incompatible images: a flesh-eating zombie, a sad African child, a cruise ship and more and much else. The second work was a cast white resin monochrome of a boarded-over architectural frame, also derived from some place near the artist's home in Los Angeles.<sup>2</sup> This seemingly blank surface appeared whitewashed, the messages having been redacted or buffed-out, leaving only the stipples of paint remaining, the whole thing receding as if embedded into the gallery wall.

When I encountered the sculptures in November last year – each installed on their separate walls, the gallery immaculately imposing – every banal visual detail, every intrinsic stain of the world, every trace of use and accumulation was immediately presented for my attention. All at once their material particularities appeared reflected and remade, the decay of time already doubled. In contemplating these displaced earthly interfaces, it seemed irrelevant to separate out one element, one individual notice or surface of the architecture, even one work from the other, because the usual spatial distinctions and supervening formal categories were at one and the same time simulated, contested and inverted by Connor's displacements. The structures that organised their production and reception were already authored and redefined: they were already done-over. This experience left me at a loss. Feeling uneasy and conflicted, it got me reaching for clues, more broadly, in her practice with the hope of bridging the divide between the original context of the object and its new insulated situation.



In recent years, the Auckland-born artist has remade commonplace objects such as park benches, real-estate signs, drinking fountains, walls, doors and several additional community noticeboards. These objects are appropriated from places that belong to specific communities linked by interest or necessity: various social clubs or workplaces, a yoga studio, convenience store, church meeting hall, local laundromat or library. Other works are based on objects that exist outdoors – in public streets and suburban parks. These things are recognisable and identifiable as objects that take their meaning and structure from the ways we move through and make ourselves known in public. Still they appear utterly foreign within a gallery: it's initially impossible to tell whether we are looking at a dislocated found object (a readymade) or a crafted sculpture. In actuality, the works are thorough-going simulations – with every detail achieving its verisimilitude through an exacting process of documentation and technical reconstruction. Normally, we don't give such things a second look, and seldom would we consider their formal composition as anything other than accidental or necessary – as anything more than a matter of fact. However, in fixing the image through manual processes – such as screen-printing onto aluminium foil in her studio, weathering cork boards on her apartment rooftop, or casting resin objects from moulds formed in the street – Connor imparts a new material and temporal presence to the 'original' object.<sup>3</sup> Instead of being utilised or ignored, the sculptural double becomes something to be honoured and considered 'in itself', while obviously gaining in exchange value as it circulates.

In moving these objects into new contexts, Connor encourages the viewer to consider sites that are adjacent to the domain of contemporary art as terms of comparison. It's a mode of address that is common to contemporary sculpture as many artists recall the performative methods of conceptual art, effectively tying the work to a context in order to complicate and theatrically restage the formalist legacy of monochrome painting and minimal sculpture. The appropriation of urban objects and architectural languages by Klara Lidén, for example, provide a strong echo to Connor's recent monochromes and wallworks,<sup>4</sup> while the community noticeboards share a more material likeness with the resin casts of Hany Armanious: namely, the emptied white fragment *Empathy Chart* (2009), and the freestanding brown *Interface* (2011). Contrasting these somewhat reactive and detached sculptural practices, Connor's appropriation appears more generous and grounded, as if to imply that their composition and implicit social function has genuine consequence. That is to say the formal 'bottom-up' organisation of the community noticeboard and the 'top-down' regulation of the untitled monochrome seen in Sydney have some actual relation to the prevailing social conditions and public needs of the real communities memorialised in these works. There is an interesting tension at play

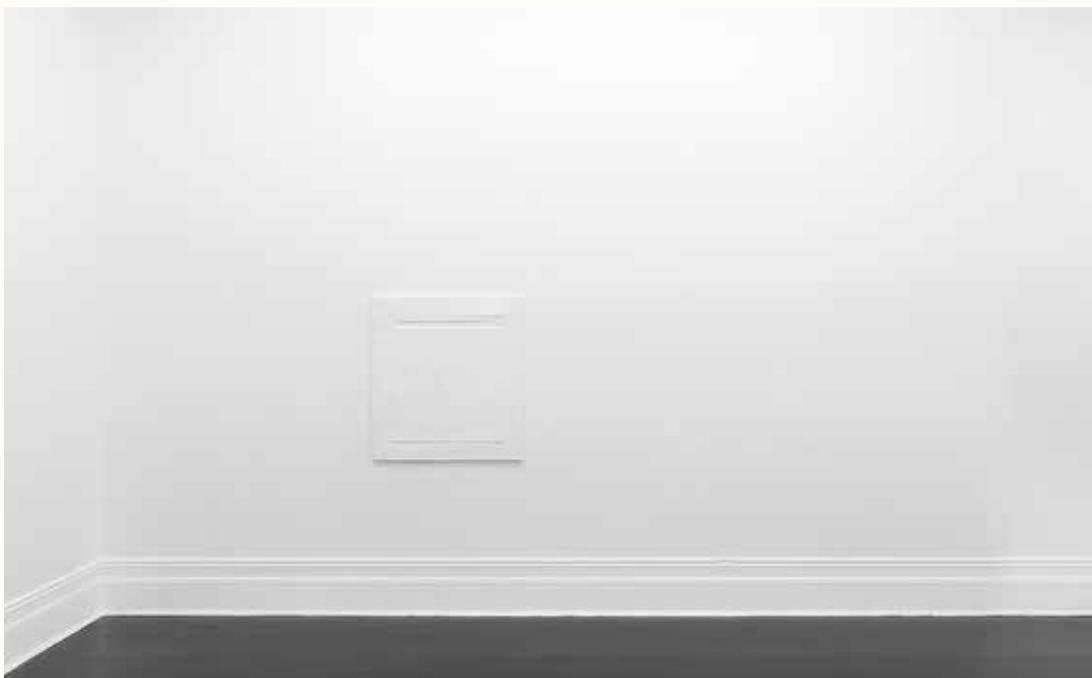
in her social engagements, between exploitation and commemoration, critique and commodification, which makes us wonder what is at stake for the artist. What do all these meticulous efforts at replication, displacement and reorientation aim towards? What is Connor striving to render visible?

To make some sense of Connor's approach – to show how this generosity helps us understand her motives – it is pertinent here to address her wider sphere of artistic influence. As Connor's work travels both physical and imaginary distances to resist any literal reading of the sculpture as fixed, the specifics of place as stable, so they offer new interpretive conditions for the object. Such an approach was characterised by the American installation artist Robert Irwin as 'site-conditioned' (as distinct from 'site-specific'). Site-conditioned art requires us to consider the object's relation to 'applied and implied schemes of organisation and systems of order, relation, architecture, uses, distances ...'<sup>5</sup> Early exponents of this form of expanded sculptural and performative practice included Michael Asher, whose writing on 'situational aesthetics' and teachings at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) had a profound influence on a generation of artists, including Connor, who completed her Master of Fine Art at CalArts in 2011 after working on a project with Asher years earlier. While Connor considers the comparison a complement and admits there are parallels, she is quick to point out that she is far more enthusiastic about 'making stuff' than Asher was.<sup>6</sup> Undeniably, Connor makes an intense physical investment in the making of this stuff. But as I eluded to already, this isn't just any stuff, and Connor isn't entirely indifferent to the content. Yet in the remaking she seeks to relinquish a certain mastery over the object (though this does not apply to technical mastery). Hers is a mastery that models an apparent openness, a loosening of the bonds that tie her to the work. This partial withdrawal allows the spatial and discursive parameters to assert their own forms of authority. Revealed in the process are the conditions that enable (or negate) forms of visual presentation, and the frames that alter the object as it moves through new networks of visibility and circulation. The distinction between notions of production and consumption are blurred, with the relationship between the artist and audience, the viewer and event deliberately distorted.

Connor represents these objects as material facts bound up with their robust social and institutional networks. For the viewer, this apparent realness requires us to attend to the seemingly objective thing and its awkward isolation – the way these simulations strike us as being out of place and out of time. At the same time, we are encouraged to focus on the systems that are concealed within the work, that act on it, and that prevail in the very moment of encounter. These conflicting demands for our attention establish an anxious situation in which to view and relate to the works, and to each other.

Top:  
Fiona Connor, *Community Notice Board (Cleaning Coop)*, 2018, installation view, Fine Arts, Sydney, 24 November 2018 – 2 February 2019; plasterboard, acrylic, silkscreen and UV prints on aluminium, staples, pins, 122 x 214 x 8cm; image courtesy the artist and Fine Arts, Sydney

Bottom:  
Fiona Connor, *Untitled #18*, 2018, installation view, Fine Arts, Sydney, 24 November 2018 – 2 February 2019; cast resin, white paint, 88 x 81 x 3cm; image courtesy the artist and Fine Arts, Sydney



There is an interesting tension at play in Connor's social engagements, between exploitation and commemoration, critique and commodification, which makes us wonder what is at stake for the artist.

In now reflecting on the power of Connor's transposition, and having witnessed the opening reception back in November, the implicit conflicts that I first observed are in no way resolved – rather, they have become amplified in the rewriting, with the relationships of meaning sufficiently stretched to reveal the problem. This realism that the artist presents to us is always doubled, partial and insufficient in relation to the reality it purports to represent. The sculptural double is always haunted by its equivalent 'out there' in the world, the spectre of its maker and its own history. The effective dissonance set up by Connor's dialectical play – of artist/audience, site/non-site, centre/periphery, permanence/change – shadows a broader paradox: that when aesthetic confections become substitutes for their referents, the social origin (a community, place, person, object or history) becomes almost *too* visible, *too* exposed, so that it risks becoming a mere fetish, just another image, just another commodity. By looking again at something usually overlooked through this form of revision, Connor threatens the very thing that makes the sculptures appear real: she risks losing what is implicit in the original object, obliterating the context that gives it meaning by overwriting it. And these very tensions make her work so stimulating, confusing, at times seemingly futile, yet always gripping.

Even though it may be possible to indicate their original location in reality, Connor's sculptures exist 'outside of all places', in non-places that function according to non-hegemonic conditions, places that are simultaneously physical and mental, spaces of difference that are symbolically utopian, indifferent or perhaps defined by the anti-aesthetic architecture and urban texture of the 'heteropolis' of Los Angeles.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, Connor turns the inside out and the outside in, transforming the public exhibition into a site that tests the limits of intimacy, attention and imagination. In her view, the gallery is no different from the street below, public space is the same as private space; they are simply organised differently, with different technologies of control, different frameworks, different lighting systems, different soundscapes.

In puzzling over Connor's work for some time now, her sculptures seem pertinent to the present moment as we tend to ignore – more and more – how the most commonplace of material things (people, posters, walls, doors, pictures) gather and work together. Often so self-absorbed, so far apart and divided, all these things transform into white noise – an earthly muzak. Connor's objects arrive as a warning of just how far removed from the material world we have become. Offering simple yet baffling propositions – working models – for understanding different ways of doing and undoing things, of organising and being together in a common world. Like a mirror, Connor simulates a scene of encounter that always exceeds me, is outside of me, and splits me in two.

1. 'Fiona Connor' ran from 24 November 2018 until 2 February 2019.
2. Modelled from public architectural features, the resin cast sculpture is part of a series of five monochromes first exhibited under the title 'Direct Address' at the Los Angeles gallery 1301PE from 12 September until 27 October 2018.
3. As detailed in an insightful essay by one of Connor's teachers at CalArts: Leslie Dick, 'Drift: Time in Fiona Connor's sculpture', 2016; see <https://hopkinsonmossman.com/cms/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/fiona-connor-leslie-dick.pdf>, accessed 24 January 2019.
4. Connor has produced resin-cast monochromes by applying silicon to the surface of public architectural features in situ, later hosting public 'cast peeling parties' to celebrate the removal of the mould. The entire process is documented as content for a series of printed posters. See [www.materialsandapplications.org/events/monochromes](http://www.materialsandapplications.org/events/monochromes); or 'materialsandapplications' on Instagram.
5. Robert Irwin, *Being and Circumstance: Notes Toward a Conditional Art*, Lapis Press in conjunction with Pace Gallery and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1985, p. 27.
6. Fiona Connor, in conversation with the author, November 2018.
7. See Michel Foucault, 'Of other spaces: Utopias and heterotopias', 1967: <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucaultf.pdf>, accessed 31 January 2019.