the knot not and the knot now

by Audrey Boyle

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Attestation

Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge, it contains no material previously written or published by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or institution of higher learning, except where made explicit in the references.

Audrey Boyle, March 2014
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I would like to preface this introduction to my exegesis by asking a question whose answer encompasses and underpins the overall approach I wish to take to this body of writing.

What distinguishes artistic 'research' from philosophical, or scientific 'research'? What must be the defining hallmark of an artist's thesis — that which sets it apart and distinguishes it from a thesis in sociology, public health, biology, or any other science?

That aspect, I believe, can only be found in the particular, even peculiar, circumstances of the individual artist — in the personal. After all, art, as an activity, is nothing if not a personal, subjective, even idiosyncratic endeavour before it is anything else and is of value to other human beings for precisely these reasons. Therefore the viewpoint taken throughout this thesis is a personal one; one unapologetically subjective in tone, one whose starting point is 'I'.

Preface
INTRODUCTION
Figure 1. Great Grandmother Freda, appliqué, c1920s, photo courtesy of Ainsley Hunter

Figure 2. Mother Ainsley, cross-stitch, c1950s, photo courtesy of Ainsley Hunter

Figure 3. Grandmother Lois, Das, shells, bottle, c1970s, photo courtesy of Ainsley Hunter

Figure 4. Mother Ainsley, jute weaving, c1990s, photo courtesy of Ainsley Hunter
origins / 'making do'

My masters project has its genesis in the world I experienced as a child growing up in a working class household in a small provincial town in New Zealand. Although not poor, I was taught very early on the art of 'making do', of using whatever was at hand to provide the necessities of life. My grandmother taught me to knit and sew, my grandfather demonstrated the use of hammer and saw, while late autumn evenings would find me with my father picking blackberries from the roadside.

My initial artistic offerings were oil paintings, however these soon gave way to papier-mâché creations. From there, as a young woman, I led a somewhat bohemian existence making stage sets and costumes and selling my creations to shops and markets here in New Zealand and in Europe. Finally in my early 30's I went to art school and it was here that my childhood experiences found their current expression — a sculptural style emerged that employed craft skills and cheap, available, usually natural materials, in assemblages whose formal nature often resembled those blackberry thickets of my childhood.
Figure 5. Audrey Boyle, *Interval* (detail) 2012, photo courtesy of Gaelene Manuel
As well as being an artist I am an amateur historian. I enjoy the challenge of delving into the intricacies of family stories, of ancestors long gone whose presence now amounts to nothing more than a few lines of text on a screen. From these faint indications entire family histories can be discerned; family trees whose spidery growth unfurls itself with each birth and stops short with each death — joy and grief thus figured into the very structure of lines.

In attempting to uncover just what my art practice is about I looked initially at various academic formulations. At the outset of this project I argued that my practice was a protest at the rise of digital technologies — that it's handmade ethos and low tech approach was a Ruskin-like attempt at championing the labour of the hand over that of the intellect. Ruskin was a 19th century critic, who, appalled at the effects of the Industrial Revolution, argued for a return to traditional craft practices. The idea "that the particularities of craft knowledge might temper the corrupting influence of [technology] with the righteous, even spiritual, nature of thoughtful labour,"\(^1\) gave rise to what is now known as the Art and Craft Movement.

Figure 6. Detail of grandmother Lois’s EST from Porirua Mental Asylum, image courtesy of Ainsley Hunter

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In the last 2 years I have produced five installations that provided me with other perspectives on my practice, perspectives which I will analyse later in the body of this exegesis. However, all the analytical approaches I applied — though in part fruitful, seemed, in some way, not entirely representative of what my practice 'is'.

It was at this point that the ghost of Lois, my maternal grandmother, appeared. Lois had been placed in the Porirua Mental Asylum back in the 50’s and given a series of electric shock treatments. Further research indicated that she had had a series of miscarriages coinciding with the death of her father, and that this was the probable cause of her declining mental health. The treatment of that decade, however, consisted of having a rag stuffed into your mouth and having electric terminals attached to your skull. I remember her telling me of the darkness and loneliness she felt as she looked out the cell window to see rows of coffins in the courtyard — waiting, waiting, waiting.

As I dwelt on Lois’s fate and the family tree of which she and I are a part, it occurred to me that my interest in family histories and their graphic representations as organic entities — as trees with branches that bloom and die — and my practice with its rhizome-like nature, were one. The dead ends and new beginnings of practice and my thinking around my practice, had its analogue in my family history — in other’s family histories. It could be fruitfully analysed not only in the complex conceptual categories of much contemporary discourse, but also in the experiences of my ancestors, their lives now mere threads on a page, their deaths marked by the cessation of lines.
Figure 7. Audrey Boyle, *Sling Camp* (detail), 2012

Figure 8. Audrey Boyle, *Subtlehack* (detail), 2013
The repetitive rhythms of my spatial 'drawings', the vortices, webs and knots, the holes and gaps in structure, had their parallel in the webs and vortices of my family history. The dead ends of one's family tree — the childless great aunt, the nephew dead at six — seemed to me to have their linear and graphic three-dimensional counterpoint in the apparently chaotic voids and truncated branches of my installation work. Therefore it is the meta-narrative of ancestral lives and deaths as sketched out in the spectral pattern of family trees that informs and guides the writing and the making of the work. The question of who I am, a woman of Irish heritage, the granddaughter of Lois mourning her dead babies, an artist who constructs webs and seemingly chaotic linear assemblages out of dead matter — is consequently rightfully at the centre of this analysis. Around this meta-narrative of family, living and dead, spin the various aspects of my research.
Figure 9. Audrey Boyle, primary school drawing, 1972
Chapter one discusses the role of craft in my art practice, and the strengths and weaknesses of such an approach. The next chapter centres around the idea that art can be a simple process of stripping away the detritus that prevents us from seeing, as a child might see, that all matter, all 'things', are invested with a strange vibrant aura. Chapter three looks at how my practice emphasises process and could be considered as a kind of three-dimensional drawing practice. From here I take a different tack and examine the symbolic importance of knots within my art (and life) before I return in the final chapter to a more conventional examination of the role the body plays within my artwork.
Figure 10. Letter from William Waite to his sister Maudie, 1917, image courtesy of Ainsley Hunter
CHAPTER ONE
Figure 11. Kareao in natural setting in Waitakere Ranges, 2013

Figure 12. Piha homestead, 2011
and what is the glorious fruit of our land?²

The first installation, *Sling Camp*, was installed at City Workshop Gallery in Newton. It consisted of an assemblage of supplejack, (kareao), sourced from the rainforest surrounding the family homestead near Piha. The kareao, a native vine, was suspended in a haphazard manner from the roof and walls of the gallery resulting in a cascading skein of sinewy lines that reached the floor. The structure of the work being a product of the weight and mass of the vines acting on its constraints — horse bits (snaffles) — metal rings used by equestrians to control their horses.

Figure 13. Audrey Boyle, *Sling Camp*, City Workshop Gallery, 2012

Figure 14. Audrey Boyle, *Sling Camp*, City Workshop Gallery, 2012
Inspiration for *Sling Camp* came from various sources, but of most significance was the album "Let England Shake" by the musician Polly Jean Harvey. This was Harvey's eulogy to the first world war and I believe its complex rhythm and syncopation had a direct influence in the construction of the art work: it also directly influenced me in my choice of colour. I chose to paint the kareao white as this enhanced the emerging bone-like quality of the material and brought to mind the tragedy of those young men who died so long ago. In particular it made me think of my great uncle, William Frank Waite, who was just 23 when he was killed in action at the battle of Messines during World War 1. I often thought of him and others lost during the making of this work, the music of Polly Jean Harvey’s "Let England Shake" a constant companion.

*Soldiers fell like lumps of meat*³

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Figure 15. William Frank Waite outside stables, Napier, c1914
William's final letter written to his sister Maudie from Sling Camp in England, a military base for horseman (hence the snaffles), on the eve of his departure to France and the hell of the trenches and death, had the lines, "It is a cold place here. Snowing and raining all the time, we will be glad to get away from here. They say that it is warmer in France than here."

He remains buried in France.
Figure 16. Audrey Boyle, video stills documenting process, 2011
of craft and art

Janis Jefferies in "Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art", writes how "crafting, decorating, and imbuing a material object can be an embodiment, a sign of personal knowledge, and it can give form to our own stories and memories." Certainly *Sling Camp* is an example of just that, its bone-like skeletal quality a direct homage, in my mind, to my great uncle. Jefferies further writes "The acts of binding, knitting, and tying are the means of piecing together that which has been broken and cut. This is also what connects craft to the work of narratives, as both weld disparate elements to memory and the construction of what we would call the self." Disparate elements — the combination of horse bits, the colour white, the bone-like sinewy vines, my great uncle dead in the snow of Messines. Was *Sling Camp* my attempt at piecing together that which has been broken and cut?

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Figure 17. Audrey Boyle, video stills documenting process, 2011
Many craft practices however, are problematical when seen through the lens of contemporary art. The critic Buszek analyses these shortcomings in her book "Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art." She points out that much craft "taken up in defiance of our exponentially more high-tech world, has led to romantic associations with media such as clay, fibre, glass and wood by both the artists and collectors drawn to them." This, she writes, has lead to an adversarial situation where "the craft world that embraces and promotes these media is nearly as exclusive in its insistence upon maintaining the romance of these media as the so-called art world is in its romance with the conceptual."  

While it is true that I employ skills that could be regarded as obsolete, such as hand sewing, weaving and knitting — skills handed down for centuries from mother to daughter — I believe I avoid the "fetishism of effort" that characterises the worst of craft output when viewed from a contemporary art perspective. In this respect it is useful to look at the work of other artists deemed contemporary craft artists to see how their practices are similar, or differ from my own, to see if there can be any resolution to this cleaving of craft from art, this separation of hand from mind.

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Figure 18. Audrey Boyle, *Interval*, Mount St Gallery, 2012, photo courtesy of Gaelene Manuel
In the last twenty years or so there has been a large shift within this craft/art debate which has seen many artist breaking down the ideological distinctions between the two. One such artist is Sheela Gowda, an Indian artist who uses everyday materials to create process-orientated installations such as "And Tell Him of My Pain" (1998). This consisted of a mass of thread stained the colour of blood by turmeric (a traditional Indian spice) and hung in a haphazard manner within the gallery. The threads formed ropes whose ends terminate in shining clumps of metallic needles. The overall effect, as one critic described it, was one of "arteries leaking blood". The "implicit aggression" of this work, how it might refer to ethnic violence that was endemic to 1990s, is just one reading of the work however. Others have analysed it in terms of the spice culture — as a traditional aspect of women's lives within India — or a comment on the textile industry and "the pain of female domestic life in a patriarchal society." 

The significance of the political within Gowda's work allows her to successfully bridge the gap between traditional Indian women's crafts and Western contemporary art. While I do not claim the political as a conscious point of departure for my own work, there are aspects of Gowda's oeuvre — its obsessive quality, its investigation of materiality and its positing of the body as a site of primary experience — that I share. In "And Tell Him of My Pain", Gowda obsessively pulled over 100 metres of thread through the eye of each needle. Such an obsessional approach to the craft of sewing was also apparent within my own work of Interval as I shall shortly explain.


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Figure 21. Audrey Boyle, video stills documenting process, 2013
material girl

I confess to being a material girl. However, unlike the pop singer, my obsession with material is not a financial affair, rather it pivots on an intense intent in working with material, fashioning it, manipulating it. This process was nowhere more apparent than inInterval, a work which consisted of upwards of 100 hand sewn 'snakes' arranged in large clumps within the confines of a gallery space. The process involved in its making was a mission of endurance. Each 'snake' was made by cutting metres of Dacron into lengths, applying glue and wrapping this glue covered fabric around metres of irrigation tubing. Its floral aesthetic became a homage, once again, to my great uncle William (the last photo we have of him is amongst flowers) and my grandmother Helen, who encouraged me to use the odd bits and pieces of exuberantly coloured leftover fabric to create door snakes (draft extruders) on her old knee-driven Singer sewing machine.
Figure 22. Audrey Boyle, video stills documenting process, 2013
Coming as it did after my work with the kareao with its funereal air, *Interval* was for me a celebration of female survival. I felt at the time I was turning the bones of *Sling Camp* into blossoms, turning death into life, obsessively sewing and repairing the damage wrought during war by means of a craft handed down through generations of women. In retrospect *Interval* was a quietly feminist work. Its focus and celebration of the craft of sewing, and its floral decorative nature, made it an example of 'Women's Art', and as such, a political statement filled with serenity, even if my conscious intention lay simply in the memory of my grandmother bent over her Singer sewing machine, turning the detritus around her into an item to keep one warm.

There is a kind of knowledge that comes from years of working with a particular medium that gives practitioners a breadth and depth of knowledge that mere knowledge of 'theory' doesn't vouchsafe. In "Vibrant Matter, a political ecology of things", Jane Bennett points out that "the polycrystalline structure of nonorganic matter"superscript 12 was discovered first not by scientists but by metal workers whose "intense intimacy with their material enabled them rather than the less hands-on scientists"superscript 13 to be the first ones to make such a theoretical breakthrough. Bennett goes on to write that it was "the desire of the craftsperson to see what a metal can do rather than the desire of the scientist to know what a metal is"superscript 14 that gave manual workers the edge over their cerebrally inclined co-workers.


Figure 23. Audrey Boyle, video stills documenting process, 2013
It seems this thesis of "vibrant materiality" as outlined by Bennett might provide a useful theoretical framework within which to base further analysis of my practice. Accordingly my next chapter will be an investigation of precisely this "culture of things [that are] irreducible to the culture of objects."\textsuperscript{15}

Figure 24. Audrey Boyle, *Subtlehack*, Snowwhite Gallery, 2013
thing power

"I am interested in the quality of material, whether it is a chair on a piece of concrete: that you experience it over time, that it changes with the light, that you have a particular experience of it that is separate from talking about it, taking pictures of it, or writing about it."\textsuperscript{16}

Here the artist Stockholder is alluding to the way that many children often experience the world "filled with all sorts of animate beings, some human, some not, some organic, some not."\textsuperscript{17} Perhaps she is alluding to a sense of \textit{thing-power}, the idea that all material, human or not, organic or not, is invested with a vitality or energy, "that is as much force as entity, as much energy as matter, as much intensity as extension."\textsuperscript{18}

Figure 27. Audrey Boyle, *Sling Camp* (detail), 2012

Figure 28. Audrey Boyle, *Shift* (detail), 2012, photo courtesy of Gaelene Manuel
Over the years, my natural inclination has been to search for locally found materials, often fibrous and ephemeral, and through improvisation and experimentation, transform these primary materials into 'something else' I call art. Like Stockholder above, my work is perhaps at its most successful when this 'something else', this vibrant materiality, cannot quite be articulated.

A critic noted of Stockholder's oeuvre, "pure play — of form, colour, texture, cut adrift from everything else — is what matters here, what opens up the art objects possibilities for meaning." These "possibilities for meaning", ones irreducible to any categorisation, are what interests me in my practice. Other artists such as Eva Hesse, the much discussed American sculptor / painter of the 1960s, have also spoken of this intent in their work. She wrote in her diary "I would like the work to be non-work. This means that it would find its way beyond my preconceptions... it is the unknown quantity from which and where I want to go. As a thing, an object, it accedes to its non- logical self. It is something, it is nothing."

This could imply that it is really simply a matter of 'play' in the end. At times throughout the past few years I have worked intensely with a material only to discard it. When I start working with a new material there is a certain feeling of liberation and excitement, a feeling contingent on the unpredictability of precisely what it is that I shall do with it. Such a feeling was apparent when I first glimpsed the kareao growing in the rainforest of the Waitakeres and it was precisely this aspect of materiality, this vital energy of the kareao, that I wished to reproduce in my installation work.

Figure 29. Audrey Boyle, video stills of opening of Sling Camp, City Workshop Gallery, 2012
This attitude towards material, this philosophical position deemed "vitalism", that sees in all matter a transformative energy, has a big and distinguished history, one beginning with the atomism of the Greek Democritus who posited that all reality is in constant flux, continuing through the ideas of Spinoza and Bergson and finally into the 20th century philosophies of Deleuze and Guattari whose theories of "immanence" form the theoretical framework of so much contemporary practice. I do not wish to add to the immense amount written from an artistic perspective on "immanence" but there is a commentary by Bennett on Deleuze and Guattari’s term "assemblage" that appears to me to define precisely the spatial ambition within my practice.

Bennett writes "Assemblages are ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts. Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within. They have uneven topographies, because some of the points at which the various affects and bodies cross paths are more heavily trafficked than others, and so power is not distributed equally across its surface. Assemblages are not governed by any central head: no one materiality or type of material has sufficient competence to determine consistently the trajectory or impact of the group. The effects generated by an assemblage are, rather, emergent properties, emergent in their ability to make something happen."²¹

Figure 30. Audrey Boyle, *Subtlehack* (detail), 2013
In the installation *Subtlehack*, the fake kareao wound its way among the space in a visual stutter, there was a starting and a stopping, knots and whirls punctuated its unfolding. In keeping with Deleuze's ideas of assemblage there was no obvious organisation, no hierarchy of forms apparent, no 'head' from which the lines descended, no direction or function contingent on form. The part/whole relationship appeared to be an enigma.
Figure 31. Audrey Boyle, *Interval* (detail), 2012, photo courtesy of Gaelene Manuel

Figure 32. Audrey Boyle, *Subtlehack* (detail), 2013
Subtlehack was made after my work with Interval. It was a matter of honing down the flowery oversized 'snakes' and thinking more about the actual plant as it grew in the bush. I machine sewed thin white lengths of bandage-like stretch fabric, covered flexible electrical wire with the Dacron and then pulled and stretched the fabric over this to produce the nodes. These inanimate 'things' took on a life of their own and appeared in the studio to be possessed of a fierce, vibrant energy; a frenetic electricity. When finally installed in the gallery Subtlehack resembled nothing if not some errant weed, its knotted lines and complex structure recalling Bennett's comments about Spinoza, how Spinoza felt that the elements of life "entails continual invention: because each mode suffers the actions on it by other modes, actions that disrupt the relation of movement and rest characterizing each mode, every mode, if it is to persist, must seek new encounters to creatively compensate for the alterations or affections it suffers." If the tendrils and branches of Subtlehack were emblematic of just this, then so is the process by which the work is made.

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Figure 33. Audrey Boyle, Subtlehack (detail), 2013

Figure 34. Audrey Boyle, Interval (detail), 2012, photo courtesy of Gaelene Manuel
CHAPTER THREE
Figure 35. Audrey Boyle, studio, 2011
"Ideational drawing is a process and always in process; thinking in action, and action as thinking", and, "when drawing is used to ideate, it is in the present tense; it is what it is in the immediacy of the thinking act. Thought, on the other hand, is of the past, in a sense concluded, settled and in some way objectified."\textsuperscript{23}

The critic, T. Rosenberg summarises an important aspect of my working process — its adherence to a methodology of "drawing in space" whose goal is not preordained. That is to say if, as many critics have noted, my work has a linear quality, what it depicts as drawing is not thought out in advance. This point becomes clearer when we look at the distinction made between ideational drawing and other types of drawing, for example, observational drawing. Whereas observational drawing has as its goal the depiction of a subject, ideational drawing has no subject, it is simply drawing as thinking. With ideational drawing the product 'is' the thinking, consciousness captured in the immediacy of the moving hand on paper — or in my case, the manipulation of material in 3-dimensional space.

Figure 36. Audrey Boyle, page from music lessons book, 1975
I have learnt to let the materials behave as they will, and accept them for what they are. As I stated earlier, the first step of my process is play, to take a material and to transform it in ways that seem natural to it. The vital act of making intensifies the second step of the process. The extended first step becomes another step in the process and so on. With each extension of a prior decision, the materials metamorphose into something new in a manner akin to musical improvisation. The act of making is combined subconsciously with conceptual intent (what I regard as intuition) and the outcome is uncertain as each step along the way affects every other, and so the product is simply the sum total of contingencies. *Subtlehack* hung in another venue would be entirely different, it's site specificity just another of the contingencies integral with its makeup.
Figure 37. Audrey Boyle, *Sling Camp* (detail), 2012
This process enables me to create a snapshot of the creative thought process in action. It is as if I am attempting to lay bare the guts of my thoughts and feelings in the intricacies of those tangled lines, or, more accurately, it is not so much that the installation is a representation of this, but that it is the thought process. Rosenberg notes "The drawing is rather, a space where one thinks. The drawing does not need to make sense to anyone else apart from the person drawing and to themselves only when they are drawing." Of course my ambition as an artist is that my three-dimensional drawing does 'make sense', at least, to somebody.

In What is Philosophy, a seminal work by the philosophers Deleuze and Guattari, the creative act and thought itself is likened to the actions of a dog, head down, sniffing out areas of interest in a new territory — “If thought searches, it is less in the manner of someone who possesses a method than that of a dog that seems to be making uncoordinated leaps”. It is also noted how the creation of new concepts “implies a sort of groping experimentation”.

Figure 38. Audrey Boyle, *Interval* (detail), 2012, photo courtesy of Gaelene Manuel

Figure 39. Audrey Boyle, *Interval* (detail), 2012, photo courtesy of Gaelene Manuel

Figure 40. Audrey Boyle, *Interval* (detail), 2012, photo courtesy of Gaelene Manuel
Just such a "groping experimentation" informs my entire practice. I always approach my work with a very rough idea of what it is I wish to make, the artistic outcome being contingent on site, material attributes, technical issues and occasional accidental occurrences. I had, for example, intended that the 'snakes' of Interval were to resemble kareao vines in length and breadth. However, after much material experimentation, this proved to be technically impossible. The floral cotton material would not stretch over the Dacron as intended. So I fattened the 'snakes' and in so doing the concept for the work changed as the image I held in my head evolved from the thin vines I had originally intended to the more bloated draught extruders produced by my grandmother.
Figure 41. Audrey Boyle, Interval (detail), 2012, photo courtesy of Gaelene Manuel

Figure 42. Audrey Boyle, Interval, 2012, photo courtesy of Gaelene Manuel
When I began installing I had initially sought to have the 'vines' coming out in bunches from the walls of the gallery. I tried this with the — now — draught extruders, only to find the results visually underwhelming. It just seemed too tame, the fat snakes too octopus-like for a concept which was attempting to avoid anything illustrative. I finally decided on hanging them in bunches. Again this idea was subject to revision too as I stripped the installation back from six 'bunches' to just three. This simplified aesthetic placed more focus on the sewn content of the grouping and avoided the visual overload that more bunches would have entailed.

This analysis of process in *Interval* is symptomatic of my practice in general, a practice in which making and concept evolve simultaneously. In *Interval* the "dead end" of my initial attempt to recreate the thin vines of the kareao ultimately resulted in a tribute to the patient sewing skills of my grandmother (and by extension perhaps to all the women of the generation who suffered through war and grief).
Figure 43., Audrey Boyle, Video stills from *Interval* opening, Mount St Gallery, Auckland 2012
Richard Tuttle, an artist whose work borrows heavily from calligraphic traditions, also hinted at this lack of conscious intention in his art, the absence of a defined outcome. When asked in an interview if he was concerned with "personal identity" in his art, he replied that for him, personal identity, the signature, was limiting. He said he preferred "a kind of object made with no awareness of itself. It's purer, it's inexplicable, it seems to be capable of expressing some inherent fundamental quality that more conscious, sophisticated, self-aware kinds of things can't express." So it is with my practice. I am seeking an outcome that is not cast in stone, that is not self aware, that cannot be predicted but simply reveals itself for what it is to those who can see.

Figure 45. Audrey Boyle, *Subtlehack* (detail), 2013

Figure 46. Audrey Boyle, *Subtlehack* (detail), 2013

Figure 47. Audrey Boyle, *Subtlehack* (detail), 2013

Figure 48. Audrey Boyle, *Subtlehack* (detail), 2013
CHAPTER FOUR
Figure 49. Audrey Boyle, Subtlehack (detail), 2013

Figure 50. Audrey Boyle, Subtlehack (detail), 2013
the knot not and the knot now

When the opportunity arose to install *Subtlehack* in a gallery I attempted to arrange the handmade kareao in a way that had worked in my studio. However the result appeared to lack vitality as the space limited its voice for the vibrancy it held in the studio. On the second attempt I tried tying the handmade kareao in knots and was immediately pleased with the result. These knots seemed absurd in an Eva Hesse way — they were not knots that functioned in any way, nothing was tied by them. I came up with the phrase *the not knot and the knot now* whose absurdity as a phrase seemed to mirror the works absurdist formal qualities.

While thinking about how knots seem to play a central role in both the craft aspects of what I do and the actual physical manifestation of my installations, I recalled having read "The Shipping News" by Annie Proulx. The art of knot tying is integral to the whole story of The Shipping News. The text points out "that knots — entities so essential to the shipping and wilderness experiences in general — are also essential to the human experience. Through the knot, the shipping life comes to stand in for the human experience in general." 27 Literary critics have noted how the central protagonist in the story, Quoyle, is bound to his ancestry by knots, (paraphrased from notes), that Quoyle "must examine the binds of the past in order to discover a new life free from pain, they must essentially, undo and retie the knot." 28

Figure 51. Audrey Boyle, Subtlehack (detail), 2013
From the perspective of family lineage the whorls and knots of *Subtlehack* seemed to echo in some strange way the voids and vortices created in family trees by unexpected deaths; the holes and gaps in the artwork recalling the miscarriages of my grandmother and the tragedy of great uncle William. When I look at how chance and happenstance has shaped the lives and deaths of my forebears, I see *Subtlehack* evolving and unfolding its way through space, persisting through death, persisting "despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within"29 — Lois confirmed to a mental hospital, William dead at 21?

These dark energies, these knots that must be untied so that life can proceed (but that also give rise to life) are integral to my identity, my art and my life. As an artist I am, like Quoyle, constantly undoing and retying the knot of family circumstance, past events and present day reality.

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Figure 52. Audrey Boyle, Tangle, Harbourview Sculpture Trail, Te Atatu, Auckland, 2014

Figure 53. Audrey Boyle, Tangle (rear view), Harbourview Sculpture Trail, 2014, photo courtesy of Gaelene Manuel
CHAPTER FIVE
Figure 54. Audrey Boyle, video stills of *Tangle*, Harbourview Sculpture Trail, 2014
a thing in space

lost in space

"Whether material, conceptual, staged, or spontaneous, an installation work creates a kind of triadic skin between itself, its viewers and the space or place in which it – however superficially, ephemerally or tangentially – situates itself. This doesn’t mean that the same installation cannot or will not inhabit many different spaces at different times and be seen by different viewers; installation is not necessarily about a space; it is about bodies in space."\(^{30}\)

The work *Tangle* (2014) is an apt example of this quote by Joanna Burton. Sprawling over some 100 square metres, it consists of an expanse of knotted and twisted kareao. Unlike, for example, a painting, there is no one privileged point of view inherent in *Tangle*. The five or ten minutes it takes to explore its many nooks and crannies give rise to a multitude of 'points of view' — all dictated by the viewers body moving through the space of the installation.

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Figure 55. Audrey Boyle, Tangle, Harbourview Sculpture Trail, 2014

Figure 56. Audrey Boyle, Tangle, Harbourview Sculpture Trail, 2014

Figure 57. Audrey Boyle, Tangle, Harbourview Sculpture Trail, 2014
Such an approach to practice, one that implicitly implicates the body of the viewer in the negotiation of meaning, can only be disruptive of the visual paradigm that has, up until recently, gone unchallenged as the one sole criterion by which art should be judged. In the history of art, it is the eye, rather than the experience of the body, that has reigned supreme. However, as the critic Kaira Marie Cabañas points out, this optical paradigm “adheres to a mode of visual address that is neither neutral nor natural. It is based on a model of vision whose historical project has been to sublimate, to raise up, to purify, securing for the spectator a visual control independent of the body and the contingencies of context”.

This is just one aspect of the importance of the corporeal to my practice. However I believe what Cabanas and Burton were getting at is also the manner in which artworks can reinact actual bodily sensations. Here what is important is not so much the viewer's body acting as the agency for vision, but the actual bodily sensations experienced by the audience. Tension and release are two obvious examples of this in my work. The tension of the kareao in *Tangle*, its compression into tight whorls and knots and its subsequent release into the space of the installation is emblematic of a body's response to stress or its absence. Here it is not the actual 'point of view' that is important, rather it is the viewer's actual bodily response to the artwork, the leap of imagination that replaces the artwork with the actual viewer's body. It is just this imaginative projection that Harold Rosenberg was alluding to when he spoke of visual artwork being "an action of the body suspended in material."
Figure 61. Audrey Boyle, *Sling Camp*, City Workshop Gallery, 2012, photo courtesy of Arts Diary NZ
One artist I look to of the recent past whose practice revolved around the corporeal is Eva Hesse. A cursory look at her sculptural work would note the role gravity and weight has in shaping her installations. Weight cannot be seen — it is something we intuit only from direct bodily experience. There would be no 'down' nor 'up' were it not for our bodily apprehension of it. For Hesse, it is our bodies direct apprehension of the forces of the universe that is of importance here. Take, for example, the sculpture 'Hang Up' — here Hesse described this work as "the most ridiculous structure that I ever made and that is why it is really good."32 It consists of a "mummified frame... wrapped up like a broken arm in a hospital bandage,"33 and protruding from this is a thin metal rod. At one point the rod bends down under its own weight to touch the floor. This absurd combination of two elements, one shaped by gravity, the other reminiscent of the limb of a hospital patient, is typical of Hesse's oeuvre. Again and again, throughout her art, the corporeal is either explicitly referenced in terms of aspects directly suggestive of the body, or bodily sensations such as the haptic, or simply weight, and are brought to our attention.

Figure 62. Eva Hesse, Hung Up, 1966, The Art Institute of Chicago (assessed 12 January 2014)

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Figure 63. Audrey Boyle, *Shift* (detail), 2012, photo courtesy of Gaelene Manuel

Figure 64. Audrey Boyle, *Shift* (detail), 2012, photo courtesy of Gaelene Manuel

Figure 65. Audrey Boyle, *Shift* (detail), 2012, photo courtesy of Gaelene Manuel
While my own work does not explicitly reference the body in terms of being illustrative of body parts in the way Hesse's work does, it does foreground the unique corporeal concerns of weight, tension, release and so on. The recurring structural aspects of my work — the tight whorls and knots and moments of relative calm — are easily read as an analogue of any number of bodily sensations. People speak of being stressed, or hung up, or tense — all these sensations could be said to be enacted within my art work. Very early on in my career as an artist I was drawn to a mode of working that utilised suspension as its main device. The result is a practice that is vitally concerned with weight and its corporeal implications.
Figure 66. Audrey Boyle, Shift (detail), 2012, photo courtesy of Gaelene Manuel
*Shift* is another of my works that emphasises the body. Again using white painted kareao, I created a tunnel-like structure by lacing and taping the kareao above head height, whilst leaving a space through which the audience could walk. Here my goal was to create a functional structure — success or failure in the project hinging not so much on how it looked but how it performed as a structure — how it channelled, directed and controlled the bodies of viewers as they negotiated it from the entranceway. Decisions as to where to place this length of vine in relationship to that length of vine were then made in accordance to non-visual criteria — I worked as a builder would work, the art lay in the concept of shelter or structure, in its efficacy as a practical object — not in its attractiveness as architecture. Again, as in *Tangle*, *Shift* is an example of an installation where the physical body of the spectator becomes an integral part of the artwork. Even here, however, I could not escape the narrative of family history. My father, an electrician, was killed in a work-related accident aged 53. The white electrical insulation tape tying the work together was an unconscious reference to this tragedy.
Figure 67. Audrey Boyle, *Tangle*, Harbourview Sculpture Trail, 2014

Figure 68. Audrey Boyle, *Tangle*, Harbourview Sculpture Trail, 2014, photo courtesy of Jenny Fuller

Figure 69. Audrey Boyle, *Tangle*, Harbourview Sculpture Trail, 2014
Even my use of colour could be seen to have a corporeal dimension to it. The vivid white of *Tangle*, its contrast with the cool greens of its bush setting, has an unsettling effect. The artist Orly Genger has spoken of treating colours as an object, almost as a physical object itself, one that will intrude on the viewer and can create an intense physical reaction, a bodily reaction, that the colour becomes an object that takes over space and dominates it. My use of white in my current bodies of work certainly has something of this in it. This echoes Harold Rosenberg’s idea that an artwork is simply the action of the body given material form.
Figure 70. Audrey Boyle, *Sling Camp*, City Workshop Gallery, 2012, photo courtesy of Arts Diary NZ
dance me to the end of love

A commentator remarked on the "baroque fluidity" inherent in the loops and twists of my work. Such a musical analogy neatly dovetails with an art which emphasises corporeal concerns. If my installations are in some way suggestive of dance, of the body's response to music, it suggests that the ability 'to be moved by something' has a central role to play in my practice. Of course there is a double meaning at work here. Metaphors that speak of emotion such as the above, and the phrase 'to be touched by', spring from bodily experiences. This indicates that the ability to 'feel' things, to 'emote', hinges on the haptic, on our capacity as embodied beings. My art is therefore grounded in the body that creates it, in the feelings experienced through that body and the mind that interprets its sensations.

Figure 71. Audrey Boyle, \textit{Subtlehack} (detail), 2013
Conclusion

This exegesis began with the declaration that my art was primarily a response to the narrative of family, and that it was a story told in the light of my experience of familial events. I went on to explain that while the foundations that drive my practice are built upon a subjective motivation, its unfolding is nevertheless systematic in intent and critically reflective.

Chapter 1 dealt with the first of these issues - the role of craft as it relates to contemporary art. The new millennia has seen an upsurge in the interest given by contemporary artists to traditional craft practices and my work is a reflection of this. The point I and other artists are making is that craft practices can contribute to academic reflection if carried out in a manner that avoids the mere fetisization of effort. Political intent, even if not a conscious factor in my work, results from the utilisation of traditional women's craft such as sewing. To display sewn objects in a contemporary art setting, as I did in Gallery Three at Mount St, is to contribute to a political dialogue concerning the value of 'woman's work'.

The next chapter concerned itself with that aspect of my oeuvre that focused on materiality — specifically the "vibrant materiality" given form by the author Jane Bennett. As explained, this mode of vision has a long history, one culminating in the present day theories of Delueze and Guattari, and others. My particular contribution to the debate around this topic concerned itself with the way my assemblages resemble self organising entities.
My installation practice, I maintained, placed 'agency' not in the hands of a single totalising force, but in the combination of various agencies each reacting to each other. Site specificity, weight, colour, the physical attributes of drying vines... all contributed to the result.

The following chapter explicated the related issue of process. Here the temporal dimension of the idea of assemblage revealed itself. Ideational drawing — drawing as thinking and thinking as drawing — is an apt temporal metaphor for the spatial extension of assemblage. I attempted to show here how my work organises itself through time the way it is organised through space — via improvisation.

A short analysis of the importance of knots to my work followed, based upon the literary work done by Annie Proulx. Here my question was simple. Why does the knot feature so heavily in my work? What is its significance.
Finally I turned to look at my choice of suspension as an installational device and how this inevitably foregrounds corporeality. I explained that it does so in two ways. First by making the viewer's body an integral part of the artwork as he/she physically negotiates its space, and secondly and perhaps most importantly, by restaging various corporeal sensations, the most important of which is tension and its absence. My concern here was to draw the viewer's attention to the way the body is also the site of feeling in an emotive sense. In this way my exegesis ends where it begins - in the subjectivity of personal responses.

Life is something we experience only through the body. The death of my great uncle, the death of my father, the image of my grandmothers at work on their old sewing machines, all have impacted on my intent as an artist. My practice is an unfurling of this narrative, another twist in the tree of family of which I am a part.
Appendix

invitation to the examination for master of design

audrey boyle

the knot not and the knot now: a thing in space

"subtlehack"

friday 8 august 2014
examination 11am
opening 530pm-730pm
snowwhite gallery
unitec
main entrance building one
carrington road mt albert auckland

all welcome
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