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Making Strange:
Interventions in the Material Fabric of Everyday Life

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Abstract

This dissertation is concerned with the broad question of how art functions as a distinct mode of enquiry, knowledge and communication. It focuses on art works which result from some kind of action on or intervention in the material fabric of everyday life. The interest is in how this affects the person encountering the work, in a way that provokes a broader questioning of habitual understandings and assumptions. Instead of representing an idea or thing, or presenting an argument, such works communicate in a different kind of way. This is an indirect form of communication, partly because it operates through the relationship between the work and the person encountering the work. The person might feel a response to the work before they formulate clear thoughts about what it means, and their felt responses will be part of their thinking. Their felt responses are filtered through their body and their own memories. Perhaps all art can or does communicate in this way. The dissertation explores these concerns through consideration of selected works by three artists: Gordon Matta-Clark, Mona Hatoum, and Doris Salcedo.

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Introduction

This dissertation explores the work of Gordon Matta-Clark, Mona Hatoum, and Doris Salcedo, three artists who engage with the material fabric of everyday life in ways that provoke reflection, and questioning of settled horizons of understanding. The phrase 'material fabric of everyday life' points to both the everyday-ness and the material-ness of the substance of their work. That substance might consist of buildings, in the case of Matta-Clark, or objects, in the case of both Hatoum and Salcedo. Hatoum fabricates her objects out of varied, sometimes unexpected materials, but in these works it is the form of the object which is recognisable because of its everyday familiarity – a doormat, a cheese-grater, items of banal domestic life. Salcedo often works with personal items of everyday living such as clothing or furniture, acquired from relatives of their original owner.

The question of materials interests me because of the histories they contain (Adorno, 1967; Kemp, 2015; Ingold, 2012). Any material object contains multiple overlapping strands of history. This might entail a biography of the material or object: where it originated, where it has travelled, how it has been transformed. An object of use will have the personal record of its owners or users imbued within it, with marks, fading, uneven surfaces worn down over time. Material entities and objects are also rooted in specific histories in the sense of their conditions of possibility (Miodownik, 2014) and their social relations (Benjamin, 1999).

Underlying this interest in the way artists engage with materials and objects to create new reflections is a broader concern with how art functions as a mode of enquiry which differs from other forms of knowledge. Art offers a way to explore the world and to communicate to others, but what is communicated, and how, is indirect and indeterminate. Simon O'Sullivan (2007, p. 39) proposes that the actual work of art is 'itself understood as a specific form of thought'. By engaging directly with materials, art can enable a mode of thought which operates in ways other than representation, bypassing the rational, reasoning intellect (O'Sullivan, 2007; Lange-Berndt, 2015).

Matta-Clark, Hatoum and Salcedo bring their practice to bear upon their materials and objects in ways which generate varied responses from those who encounter their work, ranging from curiosity and wonder to tension and unease. Focusing on how these artists interact with their materials, I began to think about the range of actions they perform, akin to Richard Serra's *Verb List* (1967–68) (Serra, 1994). Rosalind Krauss emphasises that Serra's transitive verbs, beginning "to roll, to crease, to fold, to bend, to twist", were a route to material abstraction (Krauss, 2024, p. 201). Serra made nearly a hundred works using lead and responding to the verb list, such as *Splashing* (1968; fig. 1) (Crimp, 1981). By combining material and verb, Krauss suggests, Serra 'sought to remove representation'; the works were instead rendered as 'a pure function of language' (2024, p. 201).

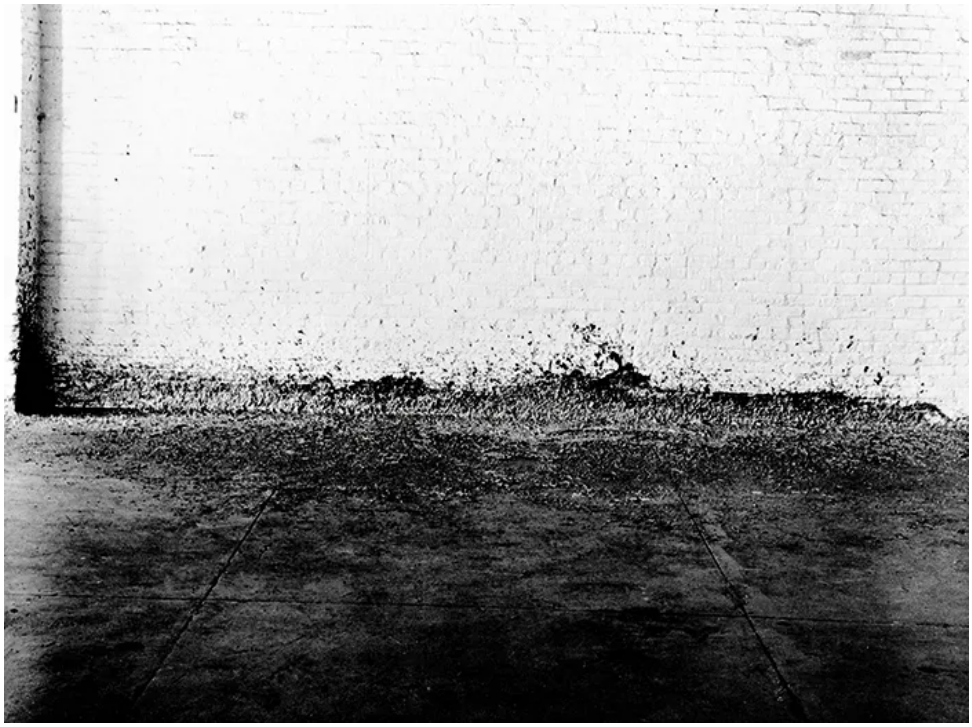


Fig. 1 *Splashing*, 1968, Richard Serra. Lead.

Works by Matta-Clark, Hatoum and Salcedo are also non-representational; they are not images of something, whether object or idea. But nor are their works abstract. The material substance of their works is made up of or inserted in specific contexts, suggesting or actually imbued with places, lives and experiences. The artists intervene on these materials and contexts through a variety of actions. Between them, Matta-Clark, Hatoum and Salcedo at times

cut	illuminate	stitch
saw	electrify	weave
tear	distort	fill
dissect	rematerialise	collect
crack	move	connect

split	remove	amass
open	enlarge	combine
pierce	join	hide
reveal	attach	isolate

elements of the material fabric of everyday life. This dissertation explores how this combination of the actions of these artists and the everydayness of their objects and materials gives rise to striking responses.

The dissertation examines selected works from each artist, considering the process of creation of the work, its materiality and form, and its visual or sensory impact. After a brief elaboration of theoretical foundations in chapter 1, we encounter Gordon Matta-Clark's walls and floors in chapter 2, and then move through the interior, to the domestic objects of Hatoum and Salcedo in chapters 3 and 4. Matta-Clark's works addressed the violence and inequalities of capitalist modernity and private property. Hatoum and Salcedo share these concerns while also addressing political violence, war, occupation and exile. I have chosen these three artists not because of their shared thematic concerns (though they do share thematic concerns) but because of how they all explore those concerns by working on and with actual objects and materials, the stuff of everyday life.

1. Foundations: theory and concepts

This dissertation hopes to develop research which can inform my own practice. I therefore aim to pursue reflections about the work and practice of these artists guided by the question, what does their work do? If their work provokes certain reactions, how does this happen? In addressing these questions, it is helpful first to briefly summarise theoretical insights regarding the encounter with a work of art, especially art which is made using everyday materials.

The word encounter is used deliberately because, first, it avoids slipping automatically into the usual language of vision, and secondly, because it directs attention to the relationship between a person and a work of art. One approach which can help to think about this relationship is the theory of affect, which aims to conceptualise thought on the basis of embodiment rather than reason (Callard and Papoulias, 2010). O'Sullivan (2007, p. 38-39) summarises: affect is 'the effect a given object or practice has on its beholder … affect is to do with the body and with thought'. O'Sullivan elaborates this idea using the thought of French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, who in turn drew on the work of a French philosopher of an earlier generation, Henri Bergson (O'Sullivan, 2007, p. 38-47; Deleuze, 1988).

Writing in the late nineteenth century, Bergson developed novel understandings of time, mind and memory which went against the prevailing assumptions in Western philosophy informed by Cartesian dualism and positivism (Bergson, 1971; 1988). Since the time of Descartes, Western thought and common-sense has rested on a mind-body dualism, which assumes that the body is composed of matter, while the

mind is immaterial (Shand, 2017). Bergson conceptualised time as a process of duration, distinct from both abstract Newtonian ideas of time, and the spatialised clock time which governs modern social life (Ansell-Pearson, 2010). He elaborated a theory of consciousness which proposed a different understanding not just of mind and matter, but of the composition of the whole world as formed of entities which are in process or in flux, rather than static and fixed. Mind and matter, body and soul, are continuous, not different in kind (Allen, 2023, p. 81). As a consequence Bergson conceived of memory as rooted in the body rather than purely in the mind. He conceived of the passage of time, and its experience, as a durational flow such that the past interpenetrates the present and future (Ansell-Pearson and Maoilearca, 2014). Elizabeth Grosz summarizes Bergson's project as 'the replacement of static conceptions of things through the creation of dynamic conceptions of processes in continual transition' (2005, p. 10).

One of the many thinkers who engaged with Bergson's ideas was Walter Benjamin, a German Marxist philosopher profoundly concerned with a materialist understanding of history, and with the work of art. His explorations of the relationship between the past and the present focused on the realm of everyday life, and how the objects of the present contain the past within them (Benjamin, 1999). He recognised the major innovations in Bergson's thinking but considered his approach to be ahistorical: Bergson had failed to locate the question of experience and consciousness in history (Blencowe, 2008; Ansell-Pearson, 2010, p. 74; Benjamin 1969b). The ideas of French Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre can help to bridge this gap between a Bergsonian understanding of experience and Benjamin's attention to the historical specificity of

social conditions. Lefebvre considered how the very condition, surfaces and objects of everyday life are specific to historical circumstances, which in our times are the relations of capitalist modernity. The distinct character of everyday life in modernity extended from objects to the city, architecture, institutions, and to the rhythms of production and consumption, such that ‘the everyday is therefore a concept’ which ‘illuminates the past’; ‘the everyday is covered by a surface: that of modernity’ (1987, p. 9-10).

2. Walls and Floor: Gordon Matta-Clark's building cuts

The everyday is covered by a surface, that of modernity. Maybe this is where we should start, with the help of Gordon-Matta Clark (1943-1978), an American artist who lived and worked in New York in the 1960s and 70s. His work, which Stephen Walker characterises as 'an enquiry into modernism' (2009, p. 10), was a direct challenge to his own architecture education at Cornell University, where he studied in the 1960s, as well as to the contemporary urban condition.

He is most widely known for a series of works known as 'building cuts' made in the US, Italy, France and Belgium. These works were made on buildings scheduled for demolition and now only exist in documentation. However his practice of building cuts also involved removed 'building fragments', which then persisted as works to be displayed in galleries. These included *Bingo* (1974) and *Bronx Floors* (1972-3), shown here in figs 2-4 below. Matta-Clark made *Bingo* with a group of volunteer students over a period of ten days, the time he was given before the house would be demolished (Crow, 2003, pp. 86-92). After planning the work by imposing a grid of rectangles over a photograph of the house, Matta-Clark and his team cut and removed the sections progressively, revealing the inside of the house in section like an architectural diagram or, conversely, as in a child's dolls-house with a removable front. The house was subsequently demolished; the removed sections are all that remain, as striking objects to behold in a gallery (fig. 2).

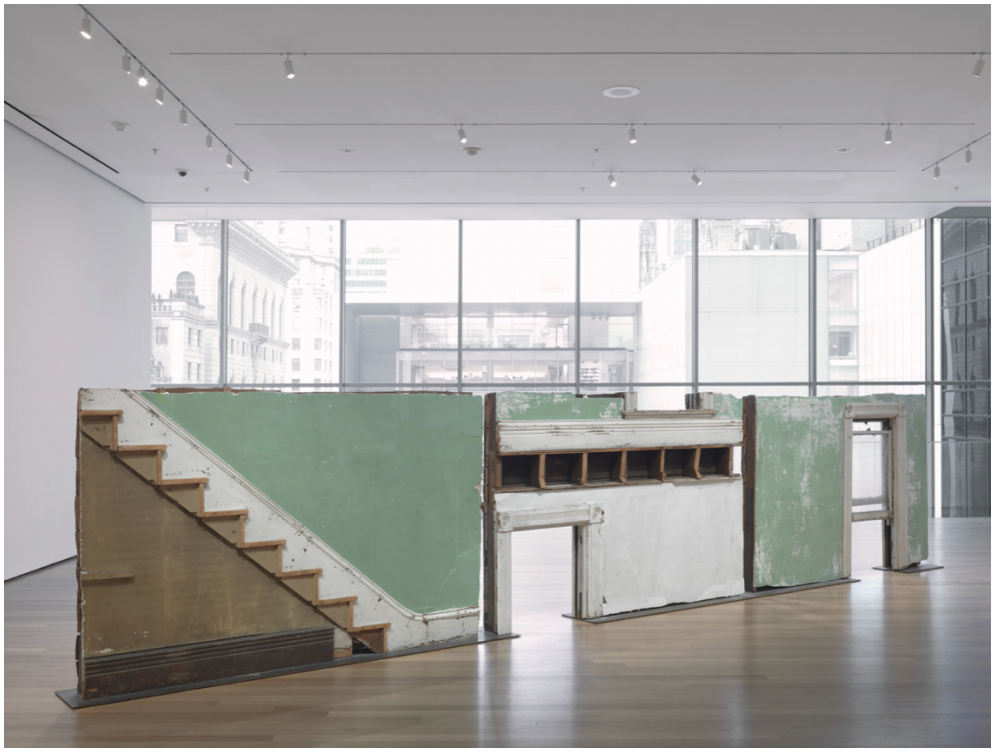


Fig. 2 *Bingo*, 1974, Gordon Matta-Clark. Building fragments: painted wood, metal, plaster, and glass, three sections.

I vividly remember my own sense of excitement seeing this work in the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2016. I had previously seen photographs of his building cuts in an exhibition at the Barbican in 2011. These were a central element of Matta-Clark's multi-stranded working process – the photographs did not simply play a documentary role but served in themselves to articulate new visions (Lee, 2001, p. 81-84; Walker, 2009). But when I saw the work *Bingo*, encountering it unexpectedly as I walked with my sister from one gallery room to the next, I experienced a vibrant, double shock of recognition. On one hand, I instantly knew it was a work of Matta-Clark's, having visited the exhibition in London previously. At the same time there was another sensation, which I can only describe as the almost physical shock of seeing a slice of reality, of very physical, gritty urban reality, in a major museum of art. This wasn't a photograph, nor a realist painting, nor documentary or

anthropological film, but, unashamedly, a chunk of an actual building, presenting itself, front and back, with all its particular but recognisable details of worn surfaces, half a doorway, the slope and zig-zag of stairs, even an open window. There was a contradictory sense of magical playfulness combined with unavoidable seriousness. This wasn't a game, nor a theatre set, but an actual part of what really had once been someone's home.

Matta-Clark's photographs tell another story about his working process (fig. 3). One of the most striking features of the photographs is the way the cuts and removals open up new visions of a building's structure. Often shot at an angle, we can dizzyingly look down through an angular, straight-sided hole, as if through a frame, to what is visible of the storey below – parts of walls, parts of windows. The photographs, often in black and white, offer new articulations of structure and space.



Fig. 3 *Bronx Floors*, 1973, Gordon Matta-Clark,. Gelatin silver print.

Apprehending an actual building fragment, even if only in an image (fig. 4), offers another dimension, a new sense of the material fabric itself.



Fig. 4 *Bronx Floors*, 1972-73, Gordon Matta-Clark. Wood and linoleum.

Part of what Matta-Clark was doing was insistently drawing attention to the mundane fabric of the city, and so it pays to look carefully. This strange, quasi-rectangular structure is a complex object. It has a bright blue patterned surface, with an edging on two sides of dark, curved and slightly raised wood. The blue seems to be a stiff thin layer glued to an underlying, slightly thicker piece of wood, which is in turn attached by square wooden posts to another parallel layer, about a foot behind,

composed of narrow wooden slats. The blue surface has a regular decorative pattern, and a few dark marks indicating something dragged across and something spilled.

Although the structure is positioned in a vertical plane, viewers would immediately know that the object is a slice of floor that has been removed from an actual building, and positioned on its side in the gallery. This suggests that the layer of slats behind is a section of ceiling from the room below. The dark curved wood likely marks two doorways. The ‘floor-ness’ of the floor is recognisable because of its familiarity: it is scuffed from having been constantly walked on; the colour and the pattern of the material suggests linoleum in a kitchen. The dark thin line across the bright blue surface, the spill, and the generally rough and marked appearance give a sense of many years of lives lived in the home to which this surface served as kitchen flooring. Urban lives, presumably in a tenement building; hard-working, tough lives – this is not a luxurious floor.

It is the material familiarity of this object which indicates its ‘floor-ness’, but there is also a strange unfamiliarity. We are looking at the surface of a floor, the thin layer of wood beneath, and how it is attached to the ceiling of the room below. This is a view of the material and structural fabric of a home which is not usually available. In this sense, we are looking at a dissection, a cut which reveals the inner layers and composition of a once-living being. This gives a different kind of awareness of the object before us – an awareness of the material fabric of an urban home. We normally see an interior wall or floor as a flat surface enclosing space and activity, not as a solid slice of material with complex differentiated layers separating above and below,

inside and outside. These surfaces usually appear in our own present, with little information about previous layers of time. They appear as static and fixed, not, to use Bergsonian or Deleuzian terms, as durational. Traces of the past sometimes become visible when a building is being redecorated and earlier layers of carpet or wallpaper are revealed; or, more drastically, when a building is part-way through being demolished, and the surfaces of once-private domestic spaces are suddenly exposed for all to see.

These unusual views and the knowledge they suggest are enabled by Matta-Clark's carefully planned incisions, which he considered a process of 'undoing' a building (1976, p. 182). Matta-Clark explained that it was the 'aspects of stratification' revealed by the cuts and removals that interested him most:

> not the surface, but the thin edge, the severed surface that reveals the autobiographical process of its making. There is a kind of complexity which comes from taking an otherwise completely normal, conventional, albeit anonymous situation and redefining it, retranslating it into overlapping and multiple readings of conditions past and present. (Matta-Clark, 1976, p. 184).

The slice of floor shown above in fig. 4 was one of a series that Matta-Clark made in the early 1970s, accessing abandoned buildings in the Bronx neighbourhood of New York (Lee, 2001, p. 72-81; Bessa, 2017, p. 8-12). This was a time of economic crisis in the US and globally, after the boom of the 1950s and 60s. The near-bankruptcy of New York was manifest in 'urban blight' and 'the decay of entire areas' (Ursprung, 2011, p. 140). In particular the area known as South Bronx, home to mainly black and Puerto-Rican communities and composed largely of rental apartment buildings, suffered catastrophic decline (Jonnes, 2002). Long and complex social, political and

economic histories of race, inequality, disenfranchisement, class, capital investment, and capital withdrawal, came together in a configuration of rising crime, drug use, systematic abandonment of buildings, and an 'epidemic of arson'. Jonnes summarises this terrible predicament:

> This old city neighborhood, once solidly lined with brick apartment buildings and stores, had been laid waste in peacetime as thoroughly as if it had been bombed in a savage war. (2002, p. 8).

In cutting through the surfaces of decaying areas of the urban fabric, Matta-Clark was exposing the dysfunctional political relations, as well the material substance, of the city. Walker observes that Matta-Clark's criticisms 'extended to the apolitical attitude of North American modernism, and to its increasing liaison with scientific, rational thinking' (2009, p. 4). Matta-Clark certainly voiced his views explicitly, saying for example that his works addressed the gap between 'the self and the American Capitalist system' which he understood as a situation of 'mass schizophrenia' in which the individual's outlook is subverted by 'industrially controlled media, markets and corporate interests' (1976, p. 182). He locates architectural modernism's International Style within American Imperialism and the Western Corporate Axis (1976, p. 184) and considers architecture 'a lacky to big business' (1977, p. 188).

Matta-Clark described his building cuts as seeking to 'transform the structure into an act of communication' (Matta-Clark, 1976, p. 183). What they communicate is not an explicit statement about politics, however; we must read his interviews to find that. His works provoke critical reflections on the contemporary urban condition and everyday life because of their distortions of the familiar, but they do not tell the viewer

what to think. Whether encountered on-site, in photography or as a building fragment in a gallery, it is the unfamiliar view of the familiar fabric of the city which we recognise and respond to. Matta-Clark provides a new and unsettling sense of the urban fabric. He reveals its durational quality, cutting through smooth abstract surfaces of modernity to relocate walls and floors – the containers of everyday life – in historical processes of construction, use and abandonment, dispossession and accumulation.

3. Interior I: Mona Hatoum's hostile objects

With his cuts and removals, Gordon Matta-Clark started to open-up and rethink the question of everyday life in the city in terms of dynamic material structures and social organisation. Now we turn to explore the objects inside the home, in the work of Mona Hatoum. Over many years, a central strand of Hatoum's work has focused on ordinary domestic objects, from the doormat at the entrance, to rugs, sofas, beds and cots, room dividers, and kitchen utensils. I don't know if an exhibition has ever been organised concentrating solely on this element of her practice, arranging a selection of her works as if in a domestic space. Many solo shows present a wider breadth of her practice which ranges from performance to works addressing themes such as architecture, maps, and the body. But it is possible to imagine a home filled with Hatoum's objects; it would not be comfortable.

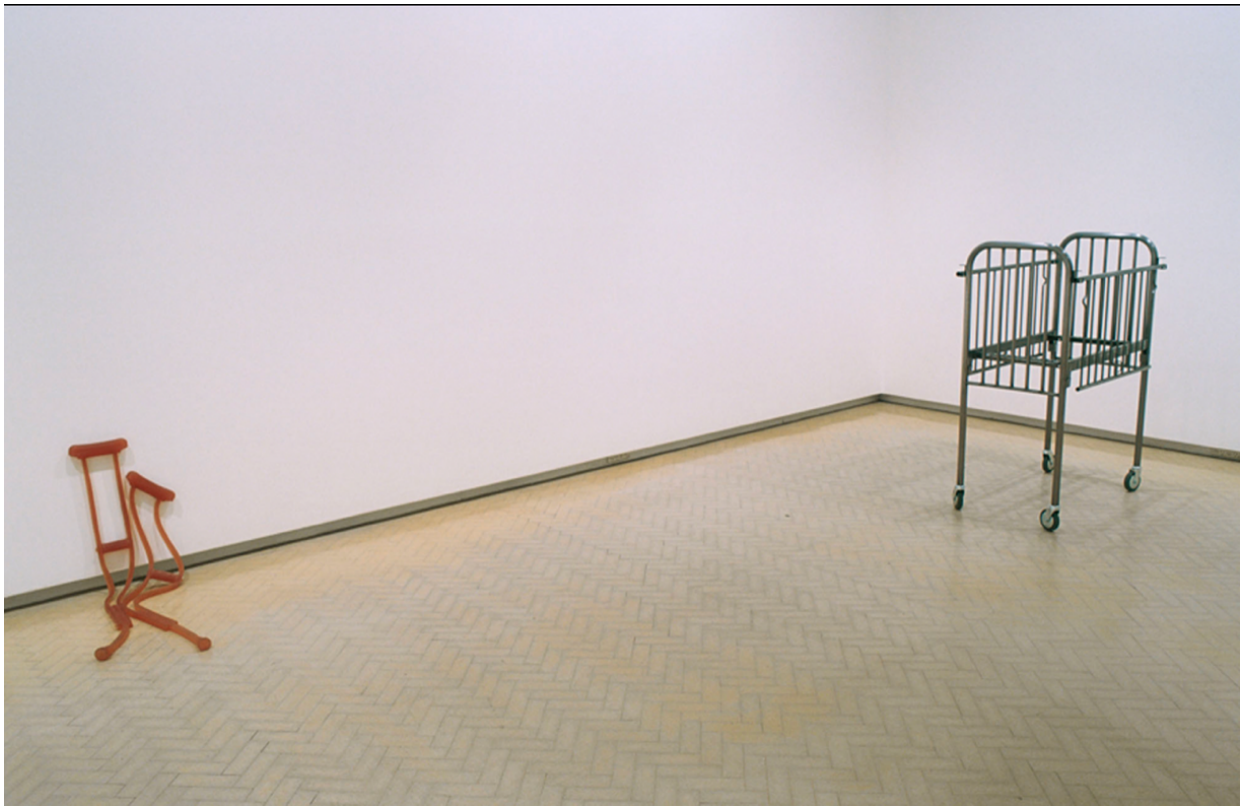


Fig. 5 *Mona Hatoum: Over My Dead Body*, MCA, 2005. Installation view.

The image from an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Australia, shown in fig. 5 above, gives an idea of how a visitor might encounter some of her objects. Walking into the room, there are two items which appear recognisable in their form, but in each case, something is wrong. What is evidently a baby's cot looks more like a cage, with its cold metal bars. Even more disconcertingly, the base of the cot consists of taught cheese wire, which is designed to cut (fig. 6).



Fig. 6 *Incommunicado*, (1993), Mona Hatoum. Metal cot and wire. Detail.

Nearby is what appears to be a pair of crutches. The purpose of crutches is to offer support to a person recuperating from a leg injury. But these crutches are made from a pliant rubbery material. They lie slumped in a soft, pathetic orange wilt against the corner of the room, unable to support their own weight let alone anything else.

Entering the next room, the visitor catches of sight of what first seems to be a welcoming scene. There is warm lighting, and kitchen utensils scattered on a table surrounded by chairs, as if an evening meal is being prepared (fig. 7).



Fig. 7 *Homebound*, 2000, Mona Hatoum. Installation view. Kitchen utensils, furniture, electrical wire, light bulbs, dimmer unit, amplifier, two speakers.

Approaching, it becomes apparent that the scene is separated from the visitor by an aggressive fence of taught horizontal wires which prevent passage but allow vision (fig. 8).



Fig. 8 *Homebound*, 2000, Mona Hatoum. Installation view.

Then other details emerge. The lights start to dim in an irregular manner, there is an audible hum, and a strange network of electrical wires. Every object, from the child's toy on the floor to the side-table with lamp to the chairs, table, colander and saucepan, are connected by wires (fig. 9). The visitor realises that the entire scene is alive with electric current; this apparently familiar domestic scenario is in fact fatally dangerous.

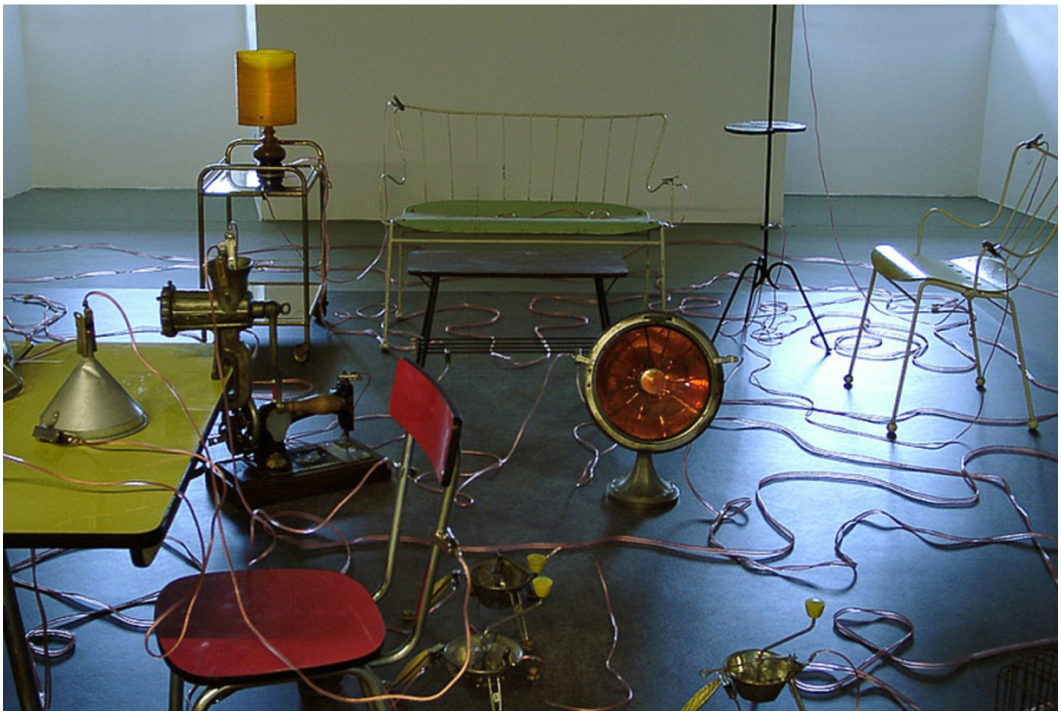


Fig. 9 *Homebound*, 2000, Mona Hatoum. Detail.

Elsewhere the visitor (to the home or exhibition) might encounter a doormat made of sharp pins which would painfully pierce bare feet; a seat in the form of a giant cheese-grater which would cut through clothing and skin; a bed made of steel treadplate which would offer no warmth or comfort to tired limbs.

Individually and together Hatoum's domestic objects convey a sense of an environment which is uncomfortable or dysfunctional, even sinister. These objects should signify home, rest, comfort, support. But they are made of the wrong material, or have been electrified, placed out of reach, or grotesquely enlarged. Edward Said reflects on how Hatoum's work produces simultaneous sensations of recall and disturbance in a 'new elaboration of familiar space and objects' in which

> familiarity and strangeness are locked together in the oddest way, adjacent and irreconcilable at the same time. …Domesticity is thus transformed into a series of menacing and radically inhospitable objects. (Said, 2000, p. 15).

Hatoum acts on the recognisable object in ways which reconfigure the ordinary. This often involves some kind of switch, in scale, material or purpose. The material switch might accentuate dysfunctionality, threat or pain – a child's cot made of rubber which cannot stand up, or of thin glass liable to break; a bench or doormat which will pierce the skin with sharp metal points. A switch in scale and purpose renders a harmless object suddenly threatening (Wagstaff, 2000). Hatoum describes how she uses these material interventions to achieve a felt sense of contradictory emotions: associations are 'suggested by the physical aspect of the work and the phenomenology of the materials used. It was not so much a representation of something else but the real thing in itself' (1997a, p. 17).

By suggesting associations, the communication of the work is indirect. Applin (2016, p.6) describes Hatoum as working 'in the gaps between making and meaning'. This is because the effect is often felt before it is reasoned (Hatoum 2005). The tension is first experienced as a physical sensation, rather than an intellectual response. The work establishes a relation to the viewer's body as well as their mind, activating what

Sheena Wagstaff (2000, p. 28) calls ‘corporeal learning’, ‘a direct physical, even sensual experience – to be the starting point from which a viewer can respond to her art.’ This is powerful because the viewer is left with a feeling of confusion or discomfort, but is not told what the work means. Hatoum has elaborated,

> things are implied and not directly stated … I don’t think art is the best place to be didactic; I don’t think the language of visual art is the most suitable for presenting clear arguments, let alone for trying to convince, convert or teach (1997a, p. 12-13).

She explains that her intention is to create a sense not just of curiosity but of unease on the part of the viewer, such that they might start to question settled assumptions about the world :

> I am trying to make people question what they are looking at, walk away with more questions than answers, complicate things so that it becomes challenging to one’s assumptions about the world. (Hatoum 2005)

The themes of confinement, uncertainty and threat which pervade Hatoum’s work are conveyed indirectly through physical sensation. This means that the works resonate with a range of experiences, and the meanings attributed to her work vary according to context. This is deliberate, and central to Hatoum’s practice (Hatoum, 1997a). She dislikes being categorised as a Palestinian artist addressing regional issues (Antoni, 1998). Interpreting her work through her biography, which many commentators do, is reductive of Hatoum as an artist and of the complexity of her work (Applin, 2016; Morgan, 1997, p. 9-10). Hatoum explains that her personal and family experience ‘comes into my work as a feeling of unsettledness. The feeling of not being able to take anything for granted, even doubting the solidity of the ground you walk on’ (1997b, p. 134).

Making an everyday object out of the wrong material, or running electric current through a familiar domestic scene, might seem a relatively simple device. There is a deep significance to the actions and alterations that Hatoum undertakes, however. In these works, all of the objects – a cot, a pair of crutches, kitchen furniture, a colander – are immediately recognisable. Their form and legibility is situated at the heart of modernity. As Lefebvre argued, ‘a modern object clearly states what it is, its role and its place’. From the armchair to the coffee-grinder, he says, ‘the form- function-structure triumvirate is at once evident and legible’ (1987, p. 8). By using recognisable everyday objects, Hatoum is grasping the essence of modernity, but by altering their material constitution she reveals or proposes that modernity has additional structural features. If modernity produces possibilities of ordinary everyday life for some, it also systematically produces impossibility of everyday life for others.

4. Interior II: Doris Salcedo's material narration

While Mona Hatoum's domestic objects provoke distinct unease, those of Doris Salcedo require quiet contemplation. Salcedo's work addresses personal and societal experiences of loss, trauma and mourning in the context of political violence (DiSarnio, 2021; Adan, 2010). Salcedo conducts extensive research with communities experiencing loss and violence, often interviewing family members. She is neither anthropologist nor journalist, however, and her subsequent work, operating on 'the paradoxical terrain of art' (Salcedo, 2015, p.215), articulates these experiences in an indirect, almost poetic manner. She has no wish to re-present violence which, she has said, would only repeat the violence (Salcedo 2021). She explains (Salcedo, 2015, p. 215):

> The experience of an individual is always my point of departure. But during the process of making an artwork, I must maintain a distance in order to leave that person intact, untouched. … My work departs from the singularity of a lived experience but en route, effaces that experience.

In effacing the singular experience, her work communicates – even if only through allusion or sensation – the effacement of lives enacted by political violence, while also determinedly holding on to a sense of those who have been killed or disappeared. Salcedo (2015) understands her practice as making work 'in mourning', refusing the silence and forgetting which accompanies such violence. This combination of honouring lives and their memories, mourning and refusing silence, while confronting the brutal obliteration of life, arises from her use of objects of everyday life which she works into, bringing additional materials to bear and creating new, poetic or haunting forms.

A large piece of furniture stands solidly on the gallery floor. Other pieces of furniture stand nearby (fig. 10). The size, solidity and quality of the furniture gives a sense of composure, not in terms of wealth or class but of dignified lives, of families, generations, grand-parents, parents and children, cousins, gatherings. Large pieces of wooden furniture – wardrobes, cupboards, beds, cabinets, chairs – are arranged together in groups, giving a sense of several whole families and homes.



Fig. 10 *Untitled Works*, 1989-2008. Doris Salcedo. Installation view.

They are not arranged as they would be in a lived-in home, however, but heaped together as if packed for departure. But they are stacked together strangely, with one item of furniture extending into another, one cupboard penetrating through a larger wardrobe, a bedframe enclosing a chest of drawers, chairs joined to and inside beds and cabinets. These arrangements could give a sense of entangled bodies in intimate embrace; of vibrant lives coordinating with each other, complementary and lived together. Yet all of these senses of life are deadened and extinguished by the

uncompromising weight of the concrete which holds these beautiful pieces of furniture together in fixed, awkward, dysfunctional solidity. The result is a pervading stillness, the stillness of death, absence, individual and collective mourning, of lives brought violently to an end.

The concrete fills the interiors of the furniture, the spaces of chairs, drawers, shelves, spaces for sitting, for displaying crockery, glassware or books, for hanging clothes, storing blankets, spaces used by children for hiding and playing. These spaces of everyday life in a family home have been filled in with solid, heavy, dusty concrete which also engulfs and buries clothing, sheets, blankets, coats. The items of fabric are partially visible; they are squeezed, crammed in, suffocated, drowned, rendered lifeless, submerged by the once viscous and now eternally solid concrete (fig. 11).



Fig. 11 *Untitled*, 2001, Doris Salcedo. Wood, concrete, glass, fabric and steel. Detail.

The size, heaviness and stillness of these works command prolonged reflection. They do not communicate any direct or singular message. They require pausing, to look attentively, to work out what is being seen and what it might mean. The combination of wooden furniture and concrete is an unexpected and violent juxtaposition of materials which should not belong together. The wooden furniture bears direct traces of actual lives and should have an anticipated warmth, suggesting conviviality and duration. Concrete, on the other hand, has a sense of cold, abstract weight. Concrete is a fundamental material of urban modernity (Miodownik, 2014, p. 64-84). It is a material of cities and parking lots, motorways, bridges, hotels; and of the Cold War, modernisation, imperialism and walls (Adalet, 2020; Grossman, 2024). Concrete suggests large-scale, anonymous power. Here, lives the wood once supported, the concrete now obliterates.

In Salcedo's work the original object, and a new everyday material, and their mode of being joined, combine to articulate poetic and mournful narration. In *Unland* (1995-1998), instead of the modern, heavy material of concrete, Salcedo employed delicate, personal materials to join together pieces of wooden furniture. Parts of tables are joined with fabric and stitching to create awkward, mysterious forms (fig. 12). These forms look immediately like tables, and not like tables. They have a flat surface and four legs, but in each case consist of sections of slightly different-sized tables joined together. The joining of parts results in a form which is too elongated, as if having been painfully stretched. Although apparently stable, these new structures do not inspire confidence in bearing weight, as their joins appear clumsy, fragile and unsupported.



Fig. 12 *Unland*, 1995-1998. Doris Salcedo. Installation view.

The dimensions of the two sections do not fully match, resulting in an awkward, jarring unevenness.



Fig. 13 *Unland, Irreversible Witness*, 1995-1998. Doris Salcedo.

The three share an overall structural similarity of form and material, but with individual nuances. One of the elongated tables has a baby's cot placed on its side on one end (fig. 13). Another has one section shaded a ghostly pale white alongside the solid brown of its conjoint section. Looking closer (fig. 14), it becomes apparent that the join between the unmatching sections of table has been effected through stitching, with a very great number of thin dark threads criss-crossing each other and disappearing into the wooden surface of the table. These dark threads also hold in place a delicate white fabric which has been stretched taught to cover one section of table. We learn from the description that these threads are in fact hair, and the white fabric, a child's dress.



Fig. 14. *Unland, The Orphan's Tunic*, 1997. Doris Salcedo. Wood, cloth and hair. Detail.

What a sombre, haunting, perplexing combination of material and form, of easy familiarity – a wooden table – distorted into impossible unfamiliarity. Again, these complex structures demand close, quiet contemplation, though yield little in terms of obvious meaning. There is a sense of previous use and function which no longer exists; a contradictory sense of both sturdiness and fragility; a sense of materials, processes and forms all out of place and wrong. Like the concrete and the wooden furniture, tables and hair do not belong together; sewing into wood has no apparent place in any reasonable world.

Salcedo provides several associations for this incredibly labour-intensive 'absurd gesture' of sewing into wood. She emphasises her location in the global south:

> We work. We work for the global north. All the goods that are being produced in our countries enrich the global north. So it is important for me to mark that I am producing work in the global south (2021).

On the other hand, she needs this absurdity to reach 'a level of beauty', 'to show that infinite aspect of those lives that have been destroyed so brutally and out of time'. Finally she mentions inspiration from the poet Paul Celan's expression of simultaneous pain and beauty:

> I needed that kind of pain to keep me doing this absurd stitching through wood with hair, it's such an absurd gesture. … absurdity is what bespeaks of the sovereignty of the human being … our ability to do things that are beyond need (Salcedo, 2021).

The point in mentioning this is not that we need to hear Salcedo's explanation in order to understand the work, but to draw attention to the role that these absurd gestures play. This action of Salcedo's makes no apparent sense and yet has been done, with

painstaking, repetitive care. This absurd gesture plays a role in the construction of the overall sense of the work, if only to require questioning and reflection. In its absurdity, this gesture helps to narrate the impossible stories the work is telling. Walter Benjamin's reflections on the art of storytelling seem to capture some of the effect of Salcedo's laborious interventions in the fabric of everyday life.

Contrasting the spirit of storytelling with its contemporary replacement, the dissemination of information, Benjamin says 'it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it.' (1969c, p. 89). In storytelling, the 'most extraordinary things' are related, but 'the psychological connection of the events is not forced on the reader'. The storyteller – here, Salcedo – interprets things in their own way, 'and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks.' Benjamin goes on to relate storytelling specifically to 'the milieu of work', as 'an artisan form of communication' (p. 91) arising from 'sustained, sacrificing effort' (p. 93). The loss of the art of storytelling parallels the loss of 'the role of the hand in production', he says; 'in genuine storytelling the hand plays a part which supports what is expressed in a hundred ways with its gestures trained by work' (p. 108).

Conclusion

Gordon Matta-Clark, Mona Hatoum and Doris Salcedo all seek to raise questions about the dominant organisation of social life in contemporary times. Their works, while varying considerably in appearance, share a basis in the material fabric of everyday life and lead to a questioning of settled habits of thought and horizons of understanding. The works considered here consist of material objects or fragments of everyday life which are imbued with time and history, rooted in specific contexts or recognisable by the modern universality of their form. These materials and objects have been cut out or cut into; distorted in material composition or size; or combined in strange, non-sensical ways with other everyday materials. Through a series of actions such as cutting, sawing, removing, enlarging, electrifying, filling and stitching, familiar and recognisable objects have been rendered strange, out of place, hostile or silent.

The actions these artists perform are done not just to the material, but also to its historical and social dimensions. The resulting works are apprehended in an encounter, and made sense of through bodily sensation and memory as well as reasoning and intellect. It is the corporal as much as the rational response which, through both recognition and apprehension of distortion, feels the jarring, unfamiliar awkwardness of the works.

This mode of communication is necessarily implicit. It operates through the relationship between the work and the person, giving rise to varied associations and responses according to the context and the person's own experiences and

memories. The result is not a straightforward communication of the specific concerns of the artist, but rather, feelings of curiosity, confusion or unease leading to reflection and questioning.

I will finish with a brief consideration of how this enquiry relates to my own practice. My current work involves making creatures using found material, mostly waste materials or detritus of the present – cable ties, clothing tags, bottle tops, used-up angle-grinder disks, and the tabs from HRT patches (figs 15-16).

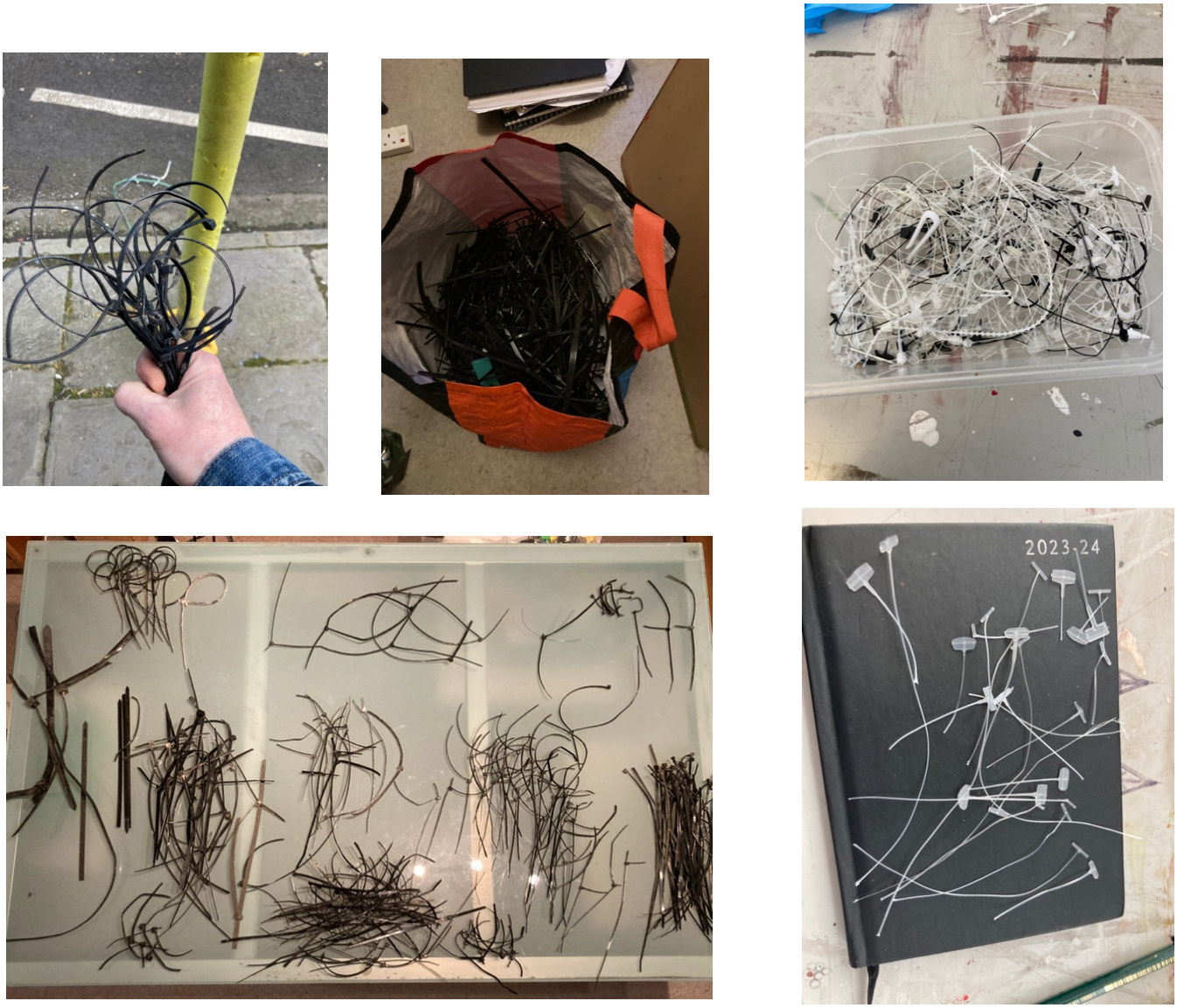
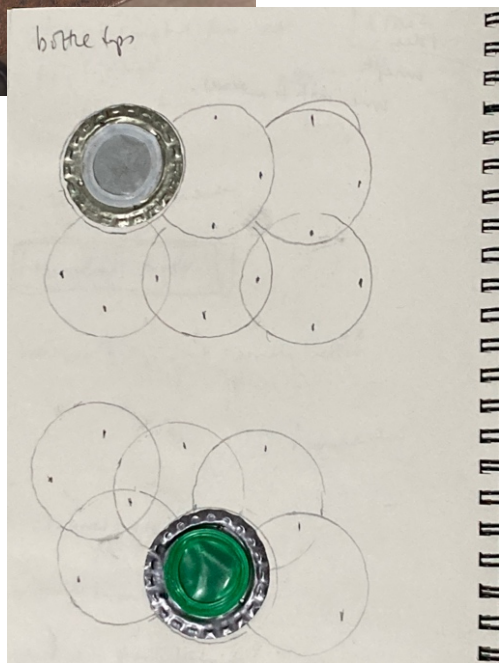


Fig. 15. Plastic cable ties; clothing price tags.

These items vary in material and form. They inhabit diverse arenas of everyday life, some (HRT patch tabs) with singular and personal use, others (cable ties) with highly varied uses which range from banal to violent. With regard to material, they could be categorised as hard or soft; malleable or rigid; recyclable (metal) or environmentally toxic (non-recyclable plastic). With regard to form, they could be categorised under 'things which resemble some kind of spike' (fig. 15), and 'things which resemble some kind of scale' (fig. 16). These categorisations then suggest plants and animals (spikes – seed pods, hedgehogs; scales – pine cones, fish, pangolins).

This body of work and material enquiry relates to concerns of environmental pollution, waste and over-consumption, and more broadly to capitalism and colonialism. It also addresses dominant knowledge forms (the scientific imagination; naming and categorising) and questions of time and history, from the rhythms of everyday life contained within the materials, to the relationship between the deep past (fossils) and the deep future (imagined creatures). I have my own understanding of what themes are being explored as I make these works, but it is the material exploration and invention which offers both insight and indeterminacy, to me and others. In this way, no matter how heavy or serious the themes being addressed, the work itself invites a range of interpretations and responses, arising from the familiarity of the materials and their new combinations. These responses can include humour and imagination alongside more serious reflection, enabling the work to speak to a broad audience. It is the putting of elements of the existing material fabric of everyday life into new combinations and forms which bridges the gap between the familiar and unfamiliar and, in doing so, opens up space for creative reflection and questioning.









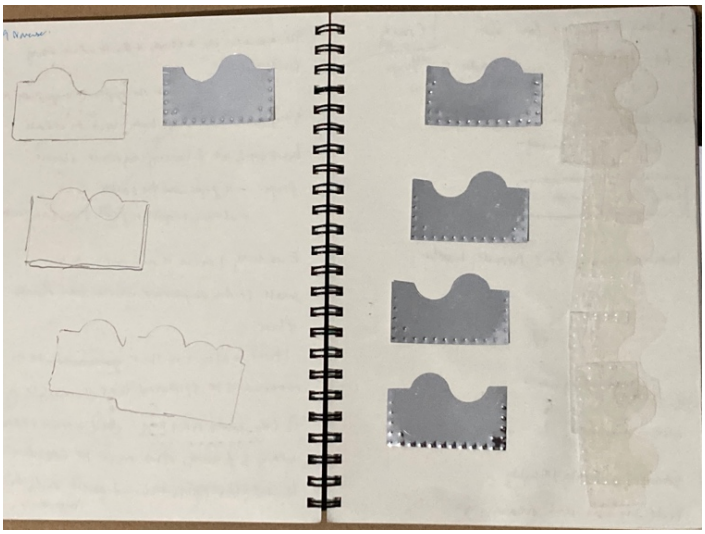


Fig.16. Bottle tops; angle-grinder disks; HRT tabs.

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