

Penelope Aitken's Conversation Pieces¹

Writing of the personal is not simple -- abstract concepts are much easier to trap in words -- feeling is more elusive. But it is on an emotional level that I connect to Penelope Aitken's art, making the writing of it a more complex task.

In April 2000 Penelope came to Taipei as the Australia Council's artist-in-residence at the National Institute for the Arts. At that time I had been here for only four months, and during Penelope's three-month visit we learnt a lot about the city, and more, together.

Noticing the small and often trivial details of a new environment is an experience shared by all travelers and, in Taipei, Penelope and I talked of her love of Jane Austen, a woman who wrote of ostensibly little things, where the small coalesces into the large, though with the former often still visible, only overlooked. Similarly, from the beginning of her exhibiting career -- group shows from 1989, her first solo in 1995 -- Penelope has also taken the seemingly inconsequential, the personal as her subjects.

CONVERSATION PIECE ONE

Miss Penelope Aitken was to be in Taipei for three months. While limited in terms of knowledge of its culture and peccadilloes, she was confident, indeed excited, at the opportunity to live and work in an unfamiliar environment. She was immediately charmed by the accommodation provided by her hosts, which afforded her views of the mountains that at one and the same time provide the city with aspects of its beauty, and contribute to the oppressive smog that usually sits upon its shoulders.² One of the most difficult things in taking up a distant residence for an extended period is leaving behind the ones we love: our friends and family. Within her rooms, physically separated from those close to her, and from the city centre, the isolation informed her first exhibition in Taiwan entitled, *In which the artist from the warmth of a light woollen blanket contemplates the mist shrouded mountains as a metaphor for love*, a window onto the artist's private landscape, a mixture of veracity and fanciful imaginings. Paintings of toy sheep

harked back to earlier work and Australia's historical reliance on the animal, evoked further through skeins of wool, spun out by her grandmother, winding the artist back to her family. The elements spoke of a variety of people and things -- love and distance -- and Miss Aitken's artistic conversation was continuing, interpellating and celebrating the moments of our lives. In her work there is a history of imbuing the inanimate with humanity.

Penelope's histories are not the grand narratives of nations being forged or wars of attrition, but the unknown personal histories that each of us creates and loses. In 1998 *Genealogy: for my mother's mother's mother's mother's mother* was her first public talk with her past, her own family's matrilineal lineage. Penelope points out that in Western societies it is relatively easy to follow the trail of our father's family. Women take their husband's names, relegating their own history, their own family, to a corner. Their individuality is subsumed within their new family.

In the exhibition, white handkerchiefs, each with one corner knotted, were hung along the wall of the gallery, like dancers, separated, imperceptibly moving -- but achingly silent. Fabric is often infused with history, or at least, like the handkerchiefs, for me irrevocably tied to my grandmother -- with memory. The most recognisable use of the fabric/history metaphor is the quilt, the making of which is a widely shared tradition, in Eastern and Western societies.

In traditional societies quilt making was nearly always the work of women and usually for the benefit of one younger woman who was soon to be married. The process of making the bedclothes as a wedding gift cemented the institution of marriage (including monogamy and fidelity), within the society, placing the individual couple in the context of the extended family or community. During any manual group activity there is a lot of room for talk. A secondary but related outcome of quilt making was the discussion which took place as the sewing proceeded. Women have often been seen as the caretakers of social values, maintaining the customs and social mores of their community. Therefore

the finished quilts not only recorded the labour and fabric styles of the time but, to the makers, they also recalled anecdotes and gossip, speculation and morality tales.³

With such thoughts in mind, Penelope began work on her second Taiwan project, *The substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen*. In a dirty city, she chose white; in a noisy city, she chose silence; in a city of readymades, she chose to create something. Her own quilt. Like earlier women, it was to be a group endeavour. But unlike those groups, hers was made up of men and women, native English, Chinese and Japanese speakers, who came together to sew diaphanous squares of white fabric, and discuss their own definitions of faith.

CONVERSATION PIECE TWO

Time disappears like mist, seemingly endless but gone before we have turned our heads. Three months seemed a long time -- then already two were gone and the artist had one more exhibition to mount. In the short time things had changed -- no longer a stranger in the city, the artist now had new perspectives on which to draw, and spent much time talking to people and learning. There was a desire to bring all the people she knew together to create a conversation and evidence of that conversation, a white quilt made from squares of fabric -- Keita painstakingly cutting, Lin carefully ironing each piece, Mio and Christine working out the rhythm of their stitches. A group of people, surrounded by clouds of white, brought together by the artist to sew and discuss 'faith' -- but none of us can concentrate on such a metaphysical topic -- it's too hard just to work out how to sew. The artist's vision, memories, of her grandmother and women who have gone before of sewing and talking, of creating their histories and teachings, doesn't quite work out as she imagined -- they knew what they were doing, and we have to learn the manual work before hands and minds disengage. Over weeks as the quilt grows it becomes easier -- Penelope travelling about Taipei with her bag of sewing, sitting in cafes talking of books and holidays remembered, of shoes and men, careers and art -- and the conversation takes over, the quilt is bringing us together to talk. And once we've separated, it remains, unfinished but tangible *the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen*.

The 1970s feminist movement, what is now referred to as the second wave of feminism, began the examination of the personal histories in the fine arts arena on a wide scale. Women's bodies, long the focus of male artists, were reclaimed; children and family were brought into galleries and accepted, eventually, as high art. Women artists were no longer constrained or concerned with what their male colleagues deemed 'art'.

Penelope and I are children of this time, raised to believe that we could do anything. Part of the third wave of feminism, where embracing feminism is cool, de rigueur, rather than subversive. And we are encouraged in our pursuits by our friends, women similar and different to us, who we know will always be there to support us. The friendships men often find so difficult to understand.

In her second Taipei exhibition, *The Politics of the Personal*, at Dimension Endowment of Art, Penelope extended this theme, showing her quilt and another installation, in separate rooms. The second installation continued a theme begun in 1998 in an exhibition called *soft*.⁴ In the earlier project, translucent cushions were painted on canvases and named after the artist's friends and colleagues.

Each painting was given a woman's name such as Julia, Suzie, Amanda, Simone etc. The works were named after they were painted and therefore are not intended as portraits as such. Instead they were named as we would name a pet or a child, to mark ownership, place and attach meaning and personality.⁵

In Taipei, *An ongoing conversation in a reclining position on matters deep and personal* brought the paintings into three dimensions, with a collection of pillows, floating white in a haze of black light. Maybe like thought bubbles, the meditative space is a congregation that rarely occurs in reality, a meeting of all our friends, perhaps at our wedding, or more likely, funeral. The hush creates an inviting, though disturbing, intimacy.

CONVERSATION PIECE THREE

hey bella

i was thinking -- the quilt is in a conversation, too -- it talks to the cushions, to *An ongoing conversation in a reclining position on matters deep & personal* -- are you making a house?!

you've said that the cushions suggest a dialogue or a gathering to me they are like how we carry our friends inside -- i love going into the dark room and these floating pillows, well, they're a trip!! but they're the interior -- the quilt floats above them, its group and public nature opens up the conversation you've previously been having with yourself.

i guess the inclusive way that the quilt came about flows onto the walls of the gallery -- conversations are no longer confined to 'real' spaces -- the words about faith, emailed from around the world are a new way of conversing, drawing threads together 'a virtual sewing bee'.

you've said that you had to learn to ask for help -- that it was one of your lessons, living in taipei. i guess we're lucky -- it's a place full of people willing to help. do you think this is the basis of the faith question? in having to trust that people would -- some maybe, but not all. Faith in friendship, in art, its community. . .

our experiences lead us to believe we can 'do' anything -- privileged with education and opinions, with money and freedom. Austen's heroines were constrained by societal expectations, the need to marry or care for their parents -- they were also constrained by language, by the proper tropes of approaching even those closest to them -- artistic expression was similarly decreed -- sewing, painting, writing -- private activities, to stop idle hands

Bella, it's also hard to write about friendship -- the words don't quite fit. remember the

poem i wrote you -- holding it in the ether of a veil -- you create nets, drawing people together.

Penelope Aitken's resolution and continued testing of the minutiae of our lives takes her work far beyond the purely interior. Art, friendship, faith are three things humans share and sometimes spend time trying to define, but they can't be easily caught. Their meanings morph and like conversations, jump, are refocused and completely inverted. They flow, never able to be stitched into place. That is why they continue to fascinate.

Bronwyn Mahoney
Taipei, July 2001

1 Historically a conversation piece was an event held in a domestic setting, similar to a soiree or parlour game, in which the guests discussed esoteric questions. Conversation pieces were also plays or paintings depicting such occasions. Recently the expression has come to signify an unusual object that arouses comment or interest.

2 'I hadn't thought about linking [the wool] with the mist until I got to Taiwan as we don't have the same sort of atmosphere at home. After I arrived the wool really looked very comfortable here, visually like the mist but warm and protective against the cold too.' Interview with Wang Jaw Jun, National Institute of Arts Newsletter, June 2000, p. 3.

3 Media Release, 'The Politics of the Personal' two installations by Penelope Aitken', Dimension Endowment of Art, Taipei, 16 June 2000.

4 *Soft*, Stripp Gallery, Melbourne, 1998.

5 Artist's statement, Stripp Gallery, 1998.

'It is a new day and here I am again back at the computer not sewing but at least feel as if I am working to an extent as I am getting a lot of replies to my faith question. There are some lovely answers - I'm glad I did this - it brings out the best in people.' email from the artist to a friend, June 2000.