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Work Alicia Miller ing Materials Bella Kerr's Keeper: Keeping the Social in Art

Bella Kerr's 'exhibition' at Mission Gallery, from April 2 – May 12, 2013, isn't really an exhibition. Exhibitions are static, stable and mostly unchanging even though they have a temporal frame. Keeper is an inhabitation of the gallery space. The space is peopled by presence – though that presence is not just a human one; it also includes the objects and artifacts of activity that take place in the space over the duration of the project. The gallery space becomes a shifting 'situation,' given character and definition by what takes place in it. Over the course of six weeks the gallery is 'kept' by four keepers – Bella Kerr, Kathryn Faulkner, Karen Ingham and Jane Rendell – who inflect their own presence, interests and objects into it and invite the audiences engagement with what they have created.

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The idea of the 'situation' in art has become an increasingly important one in the last decade, as socially-engaged practice has re-entered the mainstream of artistic production. It prescribes a way of working that is durational, often participatory, and describes space, place and site as shifting constructs of the social, defined only by the meanings created through our interaction with them. Keeper has many of these qualities and the experiences it offers its audiences, elicits their collaboration in making the meanings of space, place and site.

In this capacity, Keeper is about the socialization of the gallery space in a way that is explicit and unmistakable – the gallery space is 'humanized'. It becomes a place where we leave the individuality of ourselves and engage in an exchange with others. Rather than the gallery as white cube – a space where objects are shown by individuals – Bella has created an opportunity to show and share our meanings of space, place and site with each other through our being and presence within it. This is the space of conviviality—a word whose definition is derived from the Latin 'convivere', to live together. We live together in the spaces of Keeper.

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April 19, 2013

I come to the gallery to meet with Kathryn Faulkner, for my 'bibliographic interview.' I lean rather hard on the table as I sit down and it pitches forward precariously. Kathryn tells me later that she loves my posture in the photo that is taken to document my interview, because it suggests 'real engagement.' My chair is pushed away from the table so that I tip forward towards her, managing this time not to upset the table.

Kathryn and I sit and chat amiably and intimately about books—in her keeping of the space, she is giving people reading prescriptions. There are a series of coincidental connections in our conversation. I say I read *The New Yorker* and she asks if I have read a recent piece on Tino Seghal in it and then tells me about her experience at the ICA show—a little girl came up to her as she waited in line and asked her what art is. I have heard this story just a few days before from another friend and it made me want to see Tino Seghal's work. Then we talk about the other side of my life in organic farming and she recommends 'On Walden Pond', which I have never read, bad American that I am, and we talk about Emerson and Thoreau. I tell her I've just read a piece on Margaret Fuller in the *New Yorker*—she was a friend of Emerson's and edited his publication, 'The Transcendentalist'. It all seems to connect. The list she hands me at the end reminds me of pieces of myself I have forgotten to attend to.

Kathryn is interested in temporality in her practice. She works with pinhole photography which requires time. The image is etched on to film not in a instant, but in a minute, or ten, sometimes across an hour or even a night. It is a durational medium and the image is less distinct; it is soft and often blurred where there has been movement or the light has changed. In *Keeper*, Kathryn brings together her photography with an exploration of books and reading.

Books have been an increasing focus of her work and it is in book form that her work from Keeper is compiled. Bound in a soft silver colour, with the question 'So, have you always been a reader?' on the cover, it includes the pinhole images made during the interview session along with the reader's name and shorthand notes on what books were discussed. Books represents many things for Faulkner and in the Working Materials for the exhibition, she makes a long list of this: they are pleasure, provocation, sustenance, self-portrait, revelation, sorrow, place, talisman and treasure, among many other things. But most significantly, books are a starting point for a conversation between readers, a bridge between one self and another, marking out a space between them that both share.

The idea of habitation is important in Keeper. Each Keeper inhabits the space of the gallery, taking up occupancy, dwelling in it and the space shifts and changes with each of these dwellings. Dwelling is an important idea in place-making. The philosopher Martin Heidegger marked it out as a fundamental expression of existence and the activity by which space undefined and unrefined becomes place. Dwelling, as geographer Tim Cresswell has discussed, roots existence in place and '...place is about stopping and resting and becoming involved.' That is what Keeper offers, a chance to stop and rest and be involved. It seeks to expand an idea of communality through activity within the space of the gallery.

There is no clear 'theme' connecting how the space has been used, though there are objects and structures which appear in each of the 'settings'. The tables which populate the space, particularly, give a consistency to the experience of it from week to week. Their presence anchors the space. But how they are configured and how the space feels alters with each keeper. There is a specificity brought to the gallery which is generated by each keeper's dwelling in the space. Their dwelling is private, in that it is theirs, and idiosyncratic to their practice and their interests as an artist. For the time that they keep the gallery, it is their place. But because they dwell in the gallery, which is inherently a public space – a place where art meets its audience - the space is also common. Because it is also common and ordinary, it is available for anyone to enter into; this commonality then returns us to the idea of conviviality. Living together, we make place. The commonness of place creates 'habitual and shared communication,' (Wagner and Mikesell, 1962) between those who inhabit it.

April 25, 2013

Karen Ingham talks to everyone who comes into the gallery, greeting them, introducing herself and encouraging people to sit at the table and draw and be in this space, be at the table. The activity at the table is captured as a palimpsest, an accumulation of marks – drawings, doodles, writing, impressions – from the people gathered round the table throughout the week. She has asked people to think not just about the table as a noun, but also as an adjective, to table. The table is more than just a static object, a piece of furniture. It acts. This is what interests Ingham, 'the agency of objects.' The table both is and does.

Karen talks to me about the domesticity of tables, their importance to women as the centrepiece of the kitchen. She is interested in 'table-ness'. I think about my own kitchen table growing up—an ugly banal piece of furniture with a formica top and metal legs. But we sat at it every night and ate lovely food that my mother had carefully cooked for us and at the table, we talked and listened and laughed with each other. That table is somewhere at the root of me where food and family became a part of one another. The table provides the space in which we both are and do.

Karen works most frequently in lens-based media – you might call her a photographer but that is perhaps too constricting. Her work is most characterised by an inter-disciplinary engagement. She explores a wide range of ideas in science and the natural world, in architecture and design, in domesticity and space, through the work she makes. The table, she writes, '...is a metonym of female domestic space.' The idea of metonymy is that of a part representing a whole, so the table, especially the kitchen table, becomes the domesticity of women – their space, the place where they dwell. The palimpsest of the table that Karen captures in her week of keeping, speaks to the imbrication of being and doing that is the domestic work of women.

Domesticity is necessarily a part of the place created by Keeper. Bella built it into the project by placing ordinary pieces of furniture and domestic objects in the gallery space – chairs, tables, books, small objects and bits and pieces of the everyday. This serves to ground the space and keep a consistency within it, so there is something familiar even as each keeper changes and works with the space. This familiarity and consistency is important in creating domesticity. But even as domesticity is created in the space, it is also unmoored. Bella has included 'towers' which she suggests are an 'ambiguous presence' contingent upon use – they could be a bookcase, a ladder, a side board or dresser? Something else, something less useful? Covered in white linen by Jane Rendell in her keeping, they are both presence and absence, material and immaterial, there but hidden. Rendell's space is haunted by domesticity.

May 1, 2013

Bella has the space this week and today it is full of activity, full of tables and full of stuff. The space is becoming an accumulation. The inhabitation of the previous keepers is still visible in things left behind and there are the outcomes of activities and events that have been taking place through the show. The space is full. A group is working with Catriona Ryan on a drawing and writing workshop and they are scattered about the space in small groups laying words out on the floor and playing with them. Coming to the exhibition as an observer, I'm not sure what to do with myself—there is nothing to see, so I watch. As I stand alone in a corner of the room, a participant looks up from her work and invites me to sit down at the table with her—it is a generous offer, to include a stranger in their engagement. A convivial gesture.

I come back to this again and again, this sense of sharing an experience. The social has taken over. The gallery is a place where things happen. People talk and think and are together. Bella takes part too and having met her only over skype, I have to ask someone who she is. Even though this is her work, her keeping in the gallery, I need help picking her out. This is not usual—I knew immediately who both Kathryn and Karen were as soon as I entered the space, without ever having met them. I think this is significant and it tells me something about Bella and her work. In the workshop, she is fully present, participating.

Socially engaged art encompasses a wide range of practices. In some respect, it can be argued that all art is socially engaged. It speaks, it is a form of communication, it is animated by an audience. What perhaps defines some art as socially engaged is that the material of the work is the social. It is more explicitly about social exchange, social activism and participation. In its most sincere and committed form the hierarchy of artist and participant can dissolve into a collective, collaborative endeavour which becomes more than the sum of its parts. This is clearly visible in Keeper, both in the relationship between Bella and the other keepers, Kathryn, Karen and Jane, and in the engagements and activities that take place in the gallery over the project's six weeks.

The dissolution of the artist in socially engaged practice has been keenly criticized, most particularly by Claire Bishop in her seminal essay, *The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents*. Bishop is most bothered by the 'authorial renunciation' of socially engaged practice. Is art, 'art', if the artist is not clearly visible? Without the authorship of the artist's unique and idiosyncratic creativity (which is unquestionably present, just simply re-prioritized), what distinguishes their practice from the everyday practice of living that we all participate in? This collapse into the everyday creates a failure of distinction and Bishop disparages it, writing that the '...conceptual gesture of reducing the authorial status to a minimum ultimately becomes inseparable from the community arts tradition.' It is a mean-spirited statement capitalizing on the denigration of community arts, as not art but as social service. It is an easy out. What Bishop forgets is that there is beauty and meaning in the everyday if we attend to it and it is important material for an artist like Kerr, who wants us to see the 'place' of the everyday by moving it into the gallery and illuminating it.

The privileging of process over product is also problematic for Bishop and arguably for a 'viewer', but is it for the participant? Participation requires a different kind of engagement, one that shifts and changes necessarily, one that is process based. Is the open-endedness of Kerr's approach – her willingness to let other keepers, keep the gallery in ways that interest them rather than working within a prescribed framework she has defined for the context of the work – chaotic? Remarkably not, for me. It is because it engenders a conversation. It is a conversation generated by Kerr's participating in her project. As Nicholas Bourriaud writes of relational aesthetics '...art is the place that produces a specific sociability...it tightens the space of relations...' and in doing so it intensifies and elevates social exchange. The conversation weaves different perspectives and interpretations and provide a range of frames from which to think about the project. The trajectories of thought, open meaning and expand the experience of Keeper.

This conversation takes many turns and it includes not just the keepers of Keeper, but also those who contributed their thinking in the Working Materials – Owen Griffiths, Ciara Healy, and Denise Kwan – these writings give further context to Kerr's consideration of space, place and site in Keeper. Griffiths thinks about the Mission Gallery and the trajectory of its existence as a space; what is its past, present and future? Time is the embedded frame of space and Griffiths invites us to reflect on this space over time, both the memory of it and its possible futures. Kwan offers us a meditation on the place of the gallery, how it presents itself and what it says. It is a conflicted space which 'has its own battles' and 'cannot afford to simply be a site of aesthetics.' It is a catching thought, that the gallery's devotion to aesthetics somehow puts it at risk – it is the gallery as church rather than community centre that threatens its integration with the everyday which is really where it must be. Ciara Healy's haunting essay, 'Linger a Little Longer' invites us to think about how we dwell in the spaces / places of our world and how we might extricate ourselves from the 'thick' trappings of a world drenched in capitalism and 'linger a little longer in love.' Healy asks us to search for a more authentic life that participates and shares presence in the world with each other and with all living things.

May 10, 2013

The final week in the gallery is a remembering of sorts – a fitting end to Keeper. Jane Rendell has shrouded everything in heavy white linens. The gallery is somber, but also light from the abundance of white. She remembers a Welsh Dresser, owned by her grandmother and now her mother and which will belong to her at some point in the future. She remembers a house where the furniture was hung with linens and childhood of trips to a place where it always rained in the holidays. When I come into the space, I wonder if the Welsh Dresser is here somewhere covered by the linen? Jane speaks to me about how memory can be covered by other memories distorting and hiding parts of each—are the linen and the dresser similarly imbricated? Memory is neither presence nor absence. Instead presence and absence is collapsed into a form that is immaterial and real. Memory is a ghost. Jane's title, 'Coming to Welsh', implies an arrival. An arrival in a past which joins a future.

Jane is an archeologist of the everyday. In her research she has become increasingly interested the 'setting' of the everyday as a 'scene for the reproduction of social relations, and also the consumption of architecture through occupation, use and experience'. Keeper provides a way to explore this in a deeply personal way and to materialize it in space. 'Coming to Welsh' expands on an earlier essay by Jane called 'The Welsh Dresser'. In 'The Welsh Dresser', Jane traces childhood memories and the fabric of family back to place – her aunt's home in Cwmgors, Dyfed, which she visited regularly whilst growing up and which housed the Welsh Dresser. The Dresser maps a lineage of women, as it is passed down the matriarchal line of the family. The essay reflects on the site of Welsh Dresser, but also its material relations through a litany of the objects that the dresser holds – lustre jug, buttons, tailor's chalk, diary, two keys, hook without eye. Jane examines the vocabulary – inevitably a vocabulary of domesticity and female-ness – deconstructing its language in terms of her memories of family and what it told her of her place in it. 'It allows me to think of my motherland, not the country of my own birth, but that of my mother and her family. It brings to mind the coming together of the family around the dining table, on ordinary days, at special times of the year and for big occasions – births, deaths and marriages,' she writes. The memory of the Welsh Dresser in 'Coming to Welsh' is one of future loss. The Welsh Dresser will pass to Rendell, when her mother dies. 'Coming to Welsh' is a contemplation of that future and how it will change her.

What is not lost of presence in the ephemeral passage of time, becomes memory and myth. Memory, fragmentary and illusive, weaves itself into a narrative; memory is set into the story that you tell of it. It is a way of capturing it so it can be passed on and remembered – remembered by the teller as much as by those who listen. However, in the telling, the delicate fabric of memory that is like a veil becomes heavier, and perhaps like the linen laid over the objects in the gallery, it obscures what is remembered. We are caught, never knowing everything. Remembering is an imperfect activity.

Keeper passes from memory to myth in this narrative. This is my keeping of Keeper, my keeping of its memory. Suzanne Lacy has written of the importance of myth and memory in the record of an art work – documentation is never the thing itself and ultimately tells little about the experience of art. My myth of Keeper tries to fill that gap.

May 11, 2013

Keeper closes with a celebration of eating and being together—a fitting end. Keeper moves into memory. I will now remember Keeper and my own individual process of keeping it. It has made think more deeply about the social nature of human life. The confining individuality of each ourselves is always longing to extend itself into others, where it finds completion.

Cultural geographers Philip Wagner and Marvin Mikesell have written that '...habitual and shared communication is likely to occur only among those who occupy a common area.' (Wagner and Mikesell, 1962)

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Acknowledgements

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