





## Thinking is Working: Taxonomy and Time in the Art of Emma White

It's a delightful and rare privilege to walk around Emma White's studio, so much so that I pop back for a follow up interview that mostly comprises of me pacing around and poking stuff. On the ground is cardboard, magnetic poetry, a fridge door, a photocopier, scribbles on paper, a stack of CDRs, BIC pens, highlighters and Artline markers. The moment is uncanny, when you realise something there isn't from Officeworks, that it has, rather, been handcrafted by White from polymer clay or cast in silicone. It's a total art-hit.

"WOW", I exclaim as I squat and peer at something "Emma, that's *fucking amazing*".

"Ella," she retorts, barely looking back from her computer, "that's just bubble wrap." Oh. I move on.

*Seductive* is a word often employed when one encounters the exquisitely constructed, ever-so-fudgy, soft and super-real sculptural work of Emma White. And it *is* seductive, sexy. In a robustly frail, visually luscious kind of way, what initially appear as standard stationery items become almost lickable. Let us not, however, get too caught up in the *thinginess* of White's work, as there is so much beyond these flirtatious first encounters that deserves to be discussed: value, classification, categorisation and temporality all come into play in ways that stir significant questions about the place of art and the role of artists in present times.

### PAST

White's interest in organisation, labour and the time allocated to both is clear in her earlier work. The time-out from work, during work, and the time-wasting parts of work are particularly visible in her series requiring the collection of used staples from a mailroom, *Grey Area/Grey Nebula* (2008), her sorting of used self help books, *Kingdom of the Blind* (2003) or in the sourcing of second-hand jigsaw puzzles from op-shops, *Paper Trail* (2005). In the latter, White observed the markings on used jigsaw puzzles, the small crosses on the boxes and the maps and charts enclosed inside, presumably made by op-shop volunteers who had

taken the puzzles home, painstakingly completed them, then drawn detailed diagrams about which pieces were missing. This is a process perceived as increasingly redundant and bizarre by current cultures that yearn for de-cluttering, time efficiency and disposability – a life free from the accumulation of disordered, broken shit.

White also spent time documenting and amalgamating images of empty shopfronts around Berlin and Sydney in *Belonging to the Emperor* (2002). After collecting a mass of images, photographed consistently front-on, Bernt and Hilla Becher-style, White implemented specific methodologies to sort the photos into particular groupings, categorised by colour, by content, or simply by whether she liked them or not. This significantly echoes Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* (1927–1940)<sup>i</sup>, an unfinished collection of thousands of index cards documenting and meditating upon the shopfronts, mannequins, commodities and signage found in the fast-changing, bustling arcades of Paris, noting in particular the ephemeral, and an establishment of relationships between disparate objects. Just as in the empty shopfronts White has documented, ruin and depletion, Benjamin argues, serve as the most interesting elements; more important in understanding history in a present context than sites that are in their prime. The value of ruin is, in part, that it has passed through history and bears the mark of process upon it. The political value of that history lies in reconstruction and interpretation, in removing thought from the realm of mythology, remaining sensitive to its relevance in the present. In each of White's projects she implements systems to observe and order that which may be deemed unworthy of ordering, and in doing so reveals deeper anxieties and emotions that may be assigned to artefacts generally perceived as irrelevant or a waste of time.

### FUTURE

Artists often imagine themselves in the world's great contemporary spaces, in transit to far-flung residencies, as recipients of prestigious awards or on the pages of

discerning critical journals. **Blank Media**, exhibited at MOP, Sydney in 2009, features sculpted standard studio objects – markers, a stencil sheet, a highlighter, magnetic poetry, a photocopier, some texts on paper and a clipboard. It seems there is an arsenal being built, in preparation, of tools you will need in the future to get where you're going. *Epiphany (burnt out)* (2009) is a polymer clay lightbulb hanging on a cord from the ceiling. It is a funny, honest and sad work, implying waiting, anxiety, forced ideas, ambition and uncertainty. It stirs images of the artist in her studio, waiting for the decisive moment, and, as she waits, crafting, with great care, something to simply pass the time, a lightbulb, while she waits for the future big idea. There is an implication here that artists, the supposed custodians of ideas in this non-secular western post-colonial Australian culture, may all be waiting for the future, the big break, alone in their studios. I like *Reproduction* (2009), a looped stop-motion animation of a photocopier printing blank sheets of paper, all crafted from polymer clay. Its ironic nod to mass production is noted, being comprised completely of hand-crafted materials, and, for some reason in my mind, its greyscale office technology aesthetic seems like it could belong on the Death Star. The copier is both futuristic and mundane, its motion both meditative and comforting.

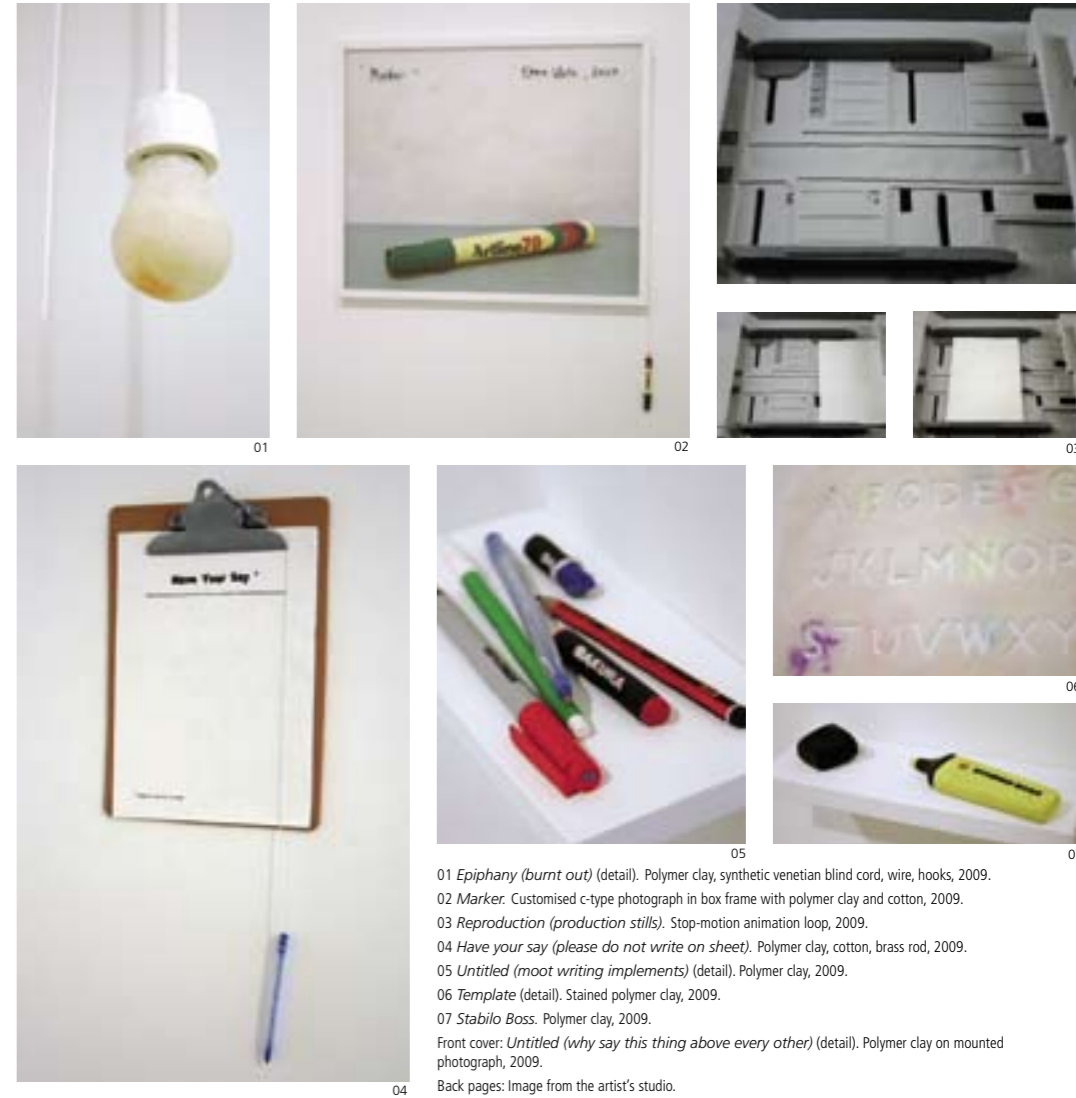
### PRESENT

In terms of time, White's work is fundamentally rooted in the concept of the present – a congealed space that is solitary, experiential, physical and contemplated less in people's minds than their pasts or futures. It has been argued that the internet has brought on a new obsession with the here-and-now: the live feed, the constant update, all-of-the-time and none-of-the-time. Benjamin's notes in *The Arcades Project* return repeatedly to the concept of the present and its transience; both future and past prove strangely contemporary, and are projected into poignant relevance for current viewers. For artists, a vast majority of nuts-and-bolts time is spent in the studio, employing day-to-

day apparatus to fill out forms, write proposals, draft budgets, drink coffee, arrange meetings, send applications, email galleries, write Post-it notes, make photocopies or doodle on cardboard. White's 2008 exhibition **Rise and Fall** at Firstdraft Gallery, Sydney, comprised of a colourful shop-front style display in the gallery window facing the street, but as one entered the exhibition space, they were met with not much: the back of a temporary wall, some sets of screws, an S-hook, a used coffee cup. As previously mentioned, I will not get caught up in the thinginess of the work – the magic realisation only dedicated viewers experienced upon finding that what looked like an exhibition not yet properly installed, was in fact perfect, complete and ever-so-thoughtfully thought-out. It was a show that reeked of the present. Not the art-future. But the cold, immediate unpolished white space, filled with both potential and subtle anxiety that seems to softly ask: why say this thing above every other? In White's eloquent *Time's a-Wasting* (2007) the artist meticulously crafted, from polymer clay, what bears resemblance to a texta inscription on corrugated cardboard. To make this labour-intensive work, or any of the labour-intensive works discussed here, White has taken time out from her paid job, she has taken time out from her weekend sanctioned for consumption and leisure, she has taken time out from contributing significantly to the present economy in any way, and *this* kind of contemplative-inactivity, like her fridge magnet poetry work *Thinking is Working* (2009), postulates that the sheer act of art-making, is, in itself, a micro-political event.

### Ella Barclay

<sup>i</sup> \_ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, edited by Roy Tiedemann, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Harvard University Press, republished December 1999.



01 *Epiphany (burnt out)* (detail). Polymer clay, synthetic venetian blind cord, wire, hooks, 2009.  
 02 *Marker*. Customised c-type photograph in box frame with polymer clay and cotton, 2009.  
 03 *Reproduction (production stills)*. Stop-motion animation loop, 2009.  
 04 *Have your say (please do not write on sheet)*. Polymer clay, cotton, brass rod, 2009.  
 05 *Untitled (moot writing implements)* (detail). Polymer clay, 2009.  
 06 *Template* (detail). Stained polymer clay, 2009.  
 07 *Stabilo Boss*. Polymer clay, 2009.  
 Front cover: *Untitled (why say this thing above every other)* (detail). Polymer clay on mounted photograph, 2009.  
 Back pages: Image from the artist's studio.

Emma White  
**Blank Media**  
 26 February - 15 March 2009

**MOP**  
 Thursday - Saturday 1–6pm, Sunday + Monday 1–5pm  
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