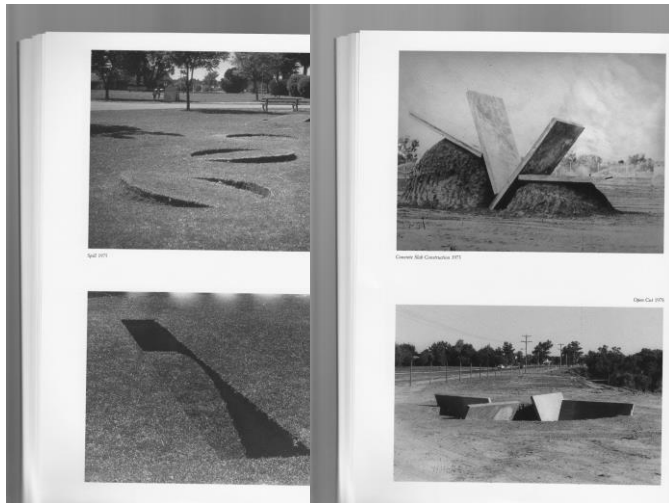


Ken Unsworth: Conjuring art

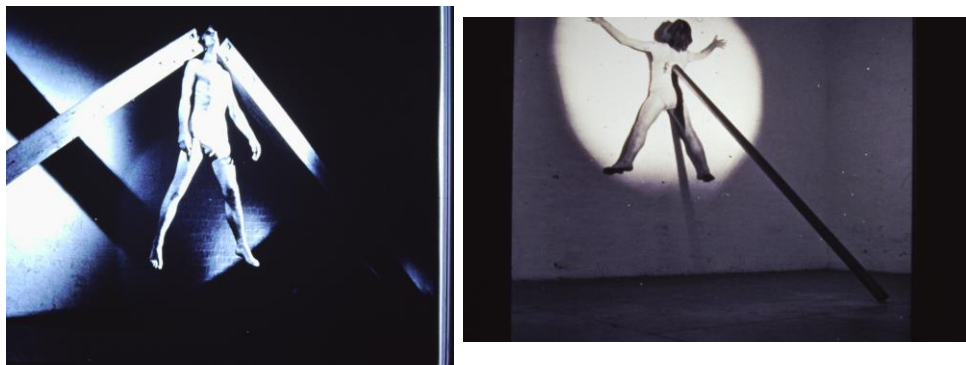
A Journalist once asked Ken Unsworth how he became an artist. Ken disarmingly explained that he had been a teacher in country Victoria when he met the charismatic and beautiful Elizabeth Volodarsky in the 1950s. Elizabeth asked him what he did and feeling that being a country schoolteacher was not sufficiently impressive for this cosmopolitan musician he told her he was an artist. This seemed to go down well so Ken went home to start making art. It was a great start to what has become an outstanding career that is possibly less critically acknowledged in Australia than it is overseas. He has been represented in Biennales in Paris, Venice, Istanbul and Sydney, and participated in major international exhibitions including 'Magiciens de la Terre', one of the most influential exhibitions of the late twentieth century curated by Jean-Hubert Martin at The Pompidou Centre in 1989. He has been involved in important programmes such as that at DAAD in Berlin, Kunstlerhaus Bethanien Berlin, 'Construction in Progress' based in Poland, but manifested in several continents. In Australia he participated in The Mildura Sculpture Triennial, 1973 and 1978; the Australian Sculpture Triennial, Melbourne, 1981, 1984 and 1993; Australian Perspecta, Sydney, 1981, 1985, 1987 and 1988; and the Biennale of Sydney, 1976, 1982, 1984, 1986, 1990 and 2000. He is also represented in major collections such as the sculpture collection at Kroeller-Moeller, Otterlo, Holland and of course all Australian state art museums.

His early attempts were in painting and drawing; forms that he still practices today and yet it is as a sculptor and performance artist that he is best known. Most recently he has created a series of complex multi media theatrical events. He has collaborated with musicians, dancers, and theatrical riggers to create dramatic symbolist events that hark back to the great experimental productions of the Bauhaus in the 1920s or the collaborations of Rauschenberg, Cage and Cunningham at Black Mountain in the 1950s. In order to stage these events he has occupied spaces as challenging as Cockatoo Island, Art Gallery of NSW entrance court and Carriage works in Sydney and now he has converted his studio in Alexandria into a theatre where he and the dancers can rehearse and build sets that are developments from his previous sculptural forms.



By the mid 1970s Ken was actively making sculpture in the form of land art at 'Mildura sculpturescape'. This was the first major recurrent event in Australia to focus on conceptual art, land art and a range of advanced sculptural practices. At this time he was also busy developing his ideas through macquettes and drawings for ambitious public art works some of which were realised many of which remain as drawings and models that could still be constructed. Many of these ideas manifested as visually minimal forms although they were conceptually complex objects. Unlike Minimalism his objects were never literalist or purely pragmatic. They played with perceptions creating visual illusions and always had a narrative possibility one that implied the body. These were qualities that the Minimalists abhorred (at least in theory). Ken's sculptures are invariably balanced precariously, propped, suspended, and always filled with the potential for catastrophe and dramatic action.

Performances



In 1975 and 1977 Ken presented a series of actions that he called 'Five secular settings for sculpture as ritual'. These took the form of body art where Ken's body took the place of a suspended object as in his sculpture. One highly memorable piece recreated Richard Serra's 'Prop' 1968 that is now in the collection of NGA. The Serra sculpture consists of a square sheet of lead that is held against the wall several feet off the ground by a leaning pole of rolled lead. Unsworth's performance was presented as one of a series of theatrical tableaux. The audience was assembled at Central street gallery in Sydney facing red curtains. When the curtains parted there was Ken's body spread-eagled and pinned to the wall by a steel pole between his

shoulder blades. For a couple of minutes Ken remained absolutely still till the curtains closed again. As the title suggests there were five such tableaux, all dramatic, all minimal in form and yet expressive and theatrical in ethos. His theatricality is a constant in all the work including paintings that he returned to recently. These paintings hark back to his early efforts in Victoria and share the symbolist tendency of early Boyd and Perceval. The language is very personal even autobiographical but it is coloured by biblical themes, symbolist literature and poets such as Rainer Maria Rilke.

The sculpture that dominated his art in the 1970s into the 1980s continued to be formally minimal but loaded with restrained energy. One of the most popular of these is 'Suspended stone circle' 1988 (first created in the 1970s but remade in 1988) in the collection of Art Gallery of New South Wales. It is one of a series each of which is unique with quite specific structural parameters. All consist of stones suspended on wires to form a disc or part of a disc.



'Suspended stone circle' consists of 130 large granite river stones worn smooth and roughly elliptical or almost spherical. They had been shaped over centuries by rolling down the Nepean River. Each stone weighed somewhere between 12 and 20 kilograms so the whole piece must be somewhere in excess of 1.5 tonnes. The stones are suspended to form a disc approximately 4 meters in diameter. Each stone is hung with its topmost point in a precisely level plane. They are arranged with a fairly even space between each stone with the largest in the center and the slightly smaller ones making the outer circle. This is achieved by suspending each stone individually from three wires. The wires are tied off to three reinforced attachment points in the ceiling.

When all the stones are suspended at the exact level they seem to be levitating in a force field. The wires form three cones of energy holding the stones in suspension but we tend to see them as a diagram of forces rather than as a mechanical device. I think this is a classic Unsworth piece of pragmatic structural instruction that transcends minimalism to become a work of magical illusion. Other works in the series such as the pieces in Canberra and at Kroeller-Moeller have a single central point of attachment where the horizontal forces are supplied by the stones touching each other rather than being freely suspended. In Canberra the wall is a third factor making the stones form a half disc. In Perth a circle is formed by hanging each stone on three wires. No two pieces are suspended in the same way.



Unsworth's Symbolist paintings first became public as large-scale bitumen works on paper in 1983 when John Kaldor curated 'Australian Accent' an exhibition of three contemporary Australians to show at PSI in New York: Mike Parr, Ken Unsworth and Imants Tillers. There was very little budget so all three took large scale works that could pack up into rolls or in the case of Imants Tillers into boxes of small canvas boards. For some critics who thought of Ken as a minimalist or at least a formalist this seemed like a kind of volte-face and yet as we can see with the benefit of hindsight this narrative strand was the key to understanding all of his diverse practices. From the mid 1980's Unsworth's sculptures had begun to morph into installations that incorporated performative aspects expressing complex personal narratives. The ideas behind these installations and the paintings were very closely related.

Kinetic installations



Rhythms of Childhood 1982 Biennale of Sydney

One of the installations that best captures the theatrical within the formal was 'Rhythms of childhood' in the 1982 Biennale of Sydney. The viewer looked into a room with lowered lighting and the sounds of a child laughing or crying. In the middle of the room was an inverted cone like a fire hood suspended a few feet off the floor. A rubber ball was bouncing from the center of the cone onto the floor and back up again creating what seemed like a perpetual motion. The sound of the ball added to the tension of the image and the child's voice. On the floor near the bouncing ball was a child's doll seemingly tossed aside. Perhaps the strangest thing was a figure sitting on a chair in the far corner. It was the artist wearing a latex mask of his own face. Latex and this mask appeared a lot in the works then and through till today. It is not just a layer of disguise but a kind of doubling. Unsworth usually has detailed personal and cultural reference points for these images but they may as well be dreams and for me it remains up to every viewer to interpret the dreams based on the way the piece makes them feel.

The Piano in Unsworth's art

Two important points of reference for most of Unsworth's ideas are the German artist Joseph Beuys and Unsworth's wife Elizabeth Volodarsky. These two unlikely partners both exerted considerable personal charisma and both had an intimate involvement with the grand piano. It is impossible to separate Unsworth from music and in particular from the grand piano in his life and his work. Elizabeth was an excellent pianist and Ken too loves the instrument although he could never equal her achievement. Elizabeth's son was also a concert pianist as well as becoming a renowned surgeon but he was struck down by a tumor just at the beginning of his career. This tragedy clouded their lives and Elizabeth virtually stopped playing. The Grand Piano that still haunts their home has also become a recurrent theme in Unsworth's sculpture and installation. Beuys also used the grand in his sculptures and performances; he often silenced the piano by wrapping it in felt and installing it in a space lined with rolls of felt. Felt was an important medium for Beuys as it is basically just matted animal fur and has been intimately connected to his adoption of

the role of artist as shaman. He also recognised the transcendent aspiration of music and by muting it acknowledged the limits of transcendence. For Unsworth the silent piano has powerful personal implications.



'In Concert' 1983 was first commissioned for the exhibition 'Presence and absence' that I curated at AGWA. Subsequently it was reinstalled at AGNSW in 1995 for the exhibition 'Through a glass darkly'. A grand piano was caged in a circular steel fence. The chair placed in front of it had a wedge of spikes on the seat in the same configuration as Joseph Beuys' infamous 'Fat stool'. Beuys' hat and cane were also on the piano. Near the fence there was a large black cockatoo made of steel and the piano was apparently being sawed in two by a large circular saw blade embedded in the pointy end. The sound cycle began when the middle C on the piano began to play itself repeatedly, the black cockatoo clanked into action flapping its steel wings and the circular saw began to spin while the recorded sound of the saw dominated the space.



'Rapture' 1994 in the collection of AGNSW is another sculptural work based on a grand piano. In this case the piano doubles as a stairway with multiple keyboards

leading up to the great sounding box that stands above head height. On the glass backing board above each step Elizabeth Volodarsky's name is written in gold leaf. The lid is up and the interior is stuffed and overflowing with straw, plastic mice run through the straw. Unsworth had intended to include live mice but that would be difficult in a museum. Like Beuys' pianos wrapped in felt this is a stairway to heaven that has been silenced forever.



Operatic events



Since Elizabeth's death Unsworth has mainly concentrated on his paintings and on a series of major multimedia performances. The first of these was conceived as a memorial or celebration of Elizabeth's life. 'A ringing glass (Rilke)' 2009 was staged on Cockatoo Island. It took the form of a grand banquet and ball for 250

invited guests who had known Elizabeth and played a role in the couple's lives. Guests were compelled to take dancing lessons in a number of traditional dances. Unsworth has been collaborating with a group of modern dancers for some years now and they helped train the guests. Unsworth did not want any stumbling around everything had to be perfect. We all had to wear formal evening attire and present ourselves at a specially chartered ferry at a precise time.

When the ferry docked at the island we were led in single file through the long tunnel under the cliff where we encountered light and sound installations. This brought us to the rear entrance of the grand turbine hall. In the first bay we were all treated to champagne while we waited to be escorted, a few at a time, by footmen dressed in 18th century livery to the subsequent rooms each of which housed a major installation. Unsworth had constructed these rooms in the vast void of the hall. In the first room a larger than life skeleton lay in a heap on the floor until it suddenly rose up feet first and hanging upside down it whacked the floor with a cane before collapsing once again onto the platform. Each room was a magical experience including one where the starry sky projected on one wall gave way to an image of Elizabeth looking down from a period window frame.



After being treated to these wonders we were lined up ready to make two formal dance lines to enter the ballroom and perform a coordinated routine which went off pretty well, none of us lost the plot too badly. Then we were led to our places in two rows of tables laid out on either side of the ballroom. The great industrial ceiling was hidden above a fabric hanging a bit like a circus tent yet far more elegant. Dinner was excellent and between courses the dancers, singers and the band entertained us. The Dancers had devised their own tribute to Ken and Elizabeth, they had known them both for some years and were able to narrate their version of the life of the couple.

The greatest moment for me was when at the very top of the hall light began to shine through blue smoke emerging from an aperture in the canopy that we had not noticed before. Then the grand piano began to slowly descend from high above our heads to the center of the ballroom. As it came to earth it began to play, it had been programmed to play a work recorded in her lifetime by Elizabeth. As she played she was joined by one of her students on the violin. Many of us could not help crying not so much out of sorrow but out of veneration for this extraordinary celebration of a great love.

Since then there have been a number of astonishing performances or as Ken called one of them a Popera. He has worked closely with the dancers and musicians who are in a very real sense collaborators in the ideas as well as conveying Unsworth's vision. Unsworth built the sets and props with the help of Richard Harrison whose background in staging for theatre has been invaluable. The dancers are Susan Barling, Anca Frankenhaeuser, Patrick Harding, Ross Philip, and Norman Hall. The composer Jonathan Cooper has also created works for these events in collaboration with Unsworth. On many occasions including 'A ringing glass' Natalie Gamzu contributed her extraordinary voice that can tackle opera as easily as Jazz. All of this has been funded entirely by Unsworth out of his life savings.

The apparent contradictions in Unsworth's work as a whole may have contributed to the lack of a coherent critical framework that could have helped promote the importance of his art over half a century. I believe that when such a framework is brought together we will finally recognise what an extraordinary figure Unsworth still is. It is my hope that this short article may assist with bringing this about.