

How to THINK architecture differently? How to think IN architecture, or OF architecture, without conforming to the standard assumptions... between being and building?"

in the wake of gesture

architecture and the handmade

Architecture has long since surrendered the tactile in favour of grander visions. Processes of digitisation, prefabrication and mechanisation have led to the widespread abandonment of the human hand in architectural practice, and private eccentricities are now buried, smoothed over with flatter, more uniform design solutions. Recalcitrant fingerprints and other imperfections have dissolved from all but the vernacular and indigenous architecture of Australasia. The question is, how might we reconsider architecture and our relationship with built matter to restore a direct connection with human experience?

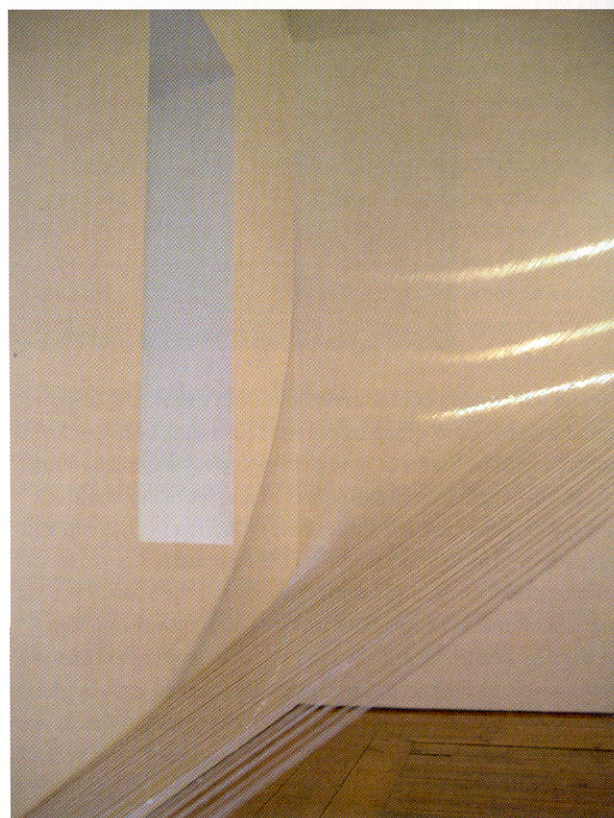
I suspect the clues lie not in architecture, but in contemporary installation.

Sandra Selig's recent work *Synthetic Infinite* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney responds to architecture and the handmade with profound delicacy, understatement and grace. A single line of thread compulsively spans the gallery from one wall to another, repeatedly anchored and redirected via a precise series of wall-bound nails. The linear web moves through space and around a central column as delicately as a surface ripple on water, and the audience is drawn into a meniscus-like space of interiority, exteriority and edge.

first reading : ARTEFACT

In the first reading, *Synthetic Infinite* is seductive and convincing in its fragile physicality. I am drawn to a space that is defined not by inert planar architectural material, but by an alternating, undulating surface of shifting weight and matter. I might be underwater, with lungs stilled, looking up towards a shimmering, refractive surface. The surface bulges, shrinks, stretches and condenses as it navigates the existing architecture of the gallery. As noted in the catalogue, 'the works change with light and perspective, shifting between solid and ephemeral, between visible and invisible'.²

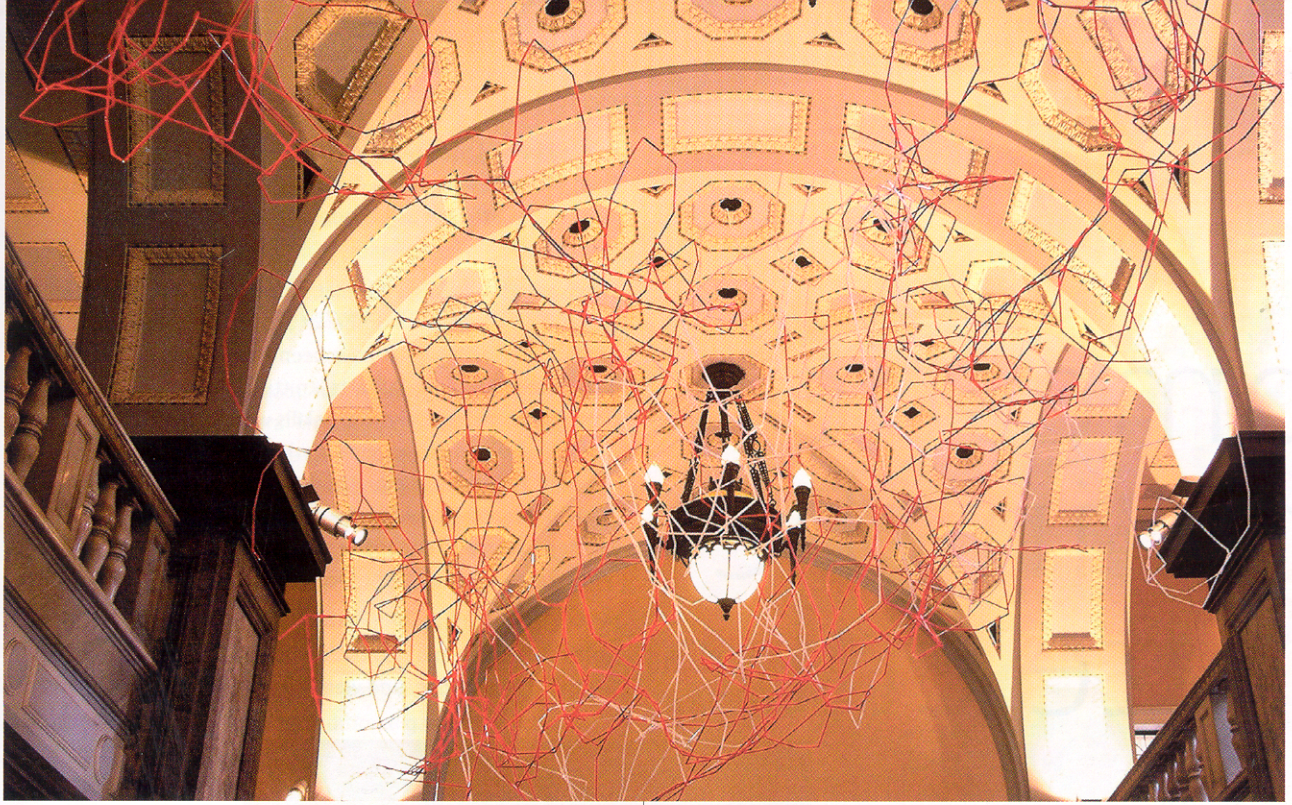
RIGHT: Sandra Selig *Synthetic Infinite* 2004, polyester sewing thread, installation in the MCA, Sydney. **FACING PAGE:** *Modulus* 2004, plastic drinking straws and monofilament, 5 x 4 x 2 m, suspended (variable).



It is achingly distant and insubstantial, as if it could dissolve behind eyelids, and yet carries a sense of staunch domesticity in the use of thread. It evokes the sincerity of the handmade in its very matter; it is a stitching, a binding, a pleating of past technology and value. And yet it is openly declared *synthetic*, possibly referring to more than the thread, possibly masquerading as something more disingenuous. Without a doubt, the tension between extremities is precisely what engages, and as artefact, its schizophrenic qualities captivate, confuse and challenge.

second reading : TERRAIN

In the second reading, I look beyond the physical artefact to consider the process of installation. A single line of thread, eleven kilometres long, has been woven throughout the space, backwards and forwards in an extended repetitious and meditative movement. I begin to see the artefact as a trace of physical motion, where the red thread signifies the wake of Selig's own eleven-kilometre passage. Selig moves across floors,



passes by columns, extends along walls towards ceilings and becomes part of the work herself. The actual making becomes inseparable from the work, and every millimetre of thread generates an associated image of posture and passage. The work becomes the arc of the body as Selig stretches to wind thread about a nail, or the friction between arms in handling tensile thread and spool. The work reads as the cartography of footfall as spatial crossings collapse into each other in simultaneous motion. The sense of the handmade grows stronger in this reading; as Selig notes, she connects with every part of the thread as the entire length is kept taut, like pencil touches paper in drawing.³

Selig makes a single gesture and then multiplies it hundreds of times with only slight geographical differences. Her serial bodily negotiation of space is choreographic; the thread is a materialisation of movement so complex, methodical and strategic that it might well be called architecture. *Synthetic Infinite* speaks of the handmade not in its form as architectural artefact, but as a terrain of productive and generative gestures. In this reading the architecture of the gallery is forced to the background and rendered mute as another, more important architecture surfaces. This second architecture hangs within the gallery space; it is an immaterial architecture carved out by posture, gesture and movement.

third reading : ANTERIORITY

In the third reading, I leave behind all sense of the work as both artefact and terrain and listen instead to the ways in which it extends beyond itself. The gallery stands stable, silent and solemn, playing host to innumerable prior spatial occupations. Selig's animation of space becomes one of many, present and past. The gallery is a stage for an infinite number of anterior gestures, and all who have previously navigated, enacted and gazed within the space occupy it simultaneously.

The human body, human passage and human hand take precedence over physical matter, and it is this precedence that gives rise to an alternative and imaginative mode of understanding architecture.

It is not the gallery wall, the floor or the ceiling that speak of the handmade, not the physical building itself – it is the invisible skin that hangs within the space. It is an active skin that gathers and records prior spatial turbulence; that remembers and activates a human presence in space. It is an immaterial volume that fits within another; unseen, unperceived, but utterly inhabited. It is all around, in every artwork, in every gallery, in every space.

A notion of anterior architecture – the architecture of the prior – is triggered by multiple readings of *Synthetic Infinite*, but seeps beyond the gallery into every context of occupation, dwelling and being. From the cool detachment of public buildings to the enriched chaos of the domestic residence, the intangible space of our own physical gestures contains a temporal depth that we can layer over the physical to articulate the handmade. Perhaps the handmade in architecture is nothing to do with the physical character of buildings, but entirely to do with how we engage with them in our enlivened and repetitious human gestures. Not only is architecture rethought, but the relationship between being and building reconsidered. ☞

1 Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001, p 59.

2 Vivienne Webb, *Primavera 2004 : exhibition by young Australian artists*, Sydney : MCA, 2004, p 33.

3 This point arose during the author's discussions with Sandra Selig during the development of this text.

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