

'CLOSE YOUR EYES, LET YOUR HAND FALL AND SELECT AN OBJECT'

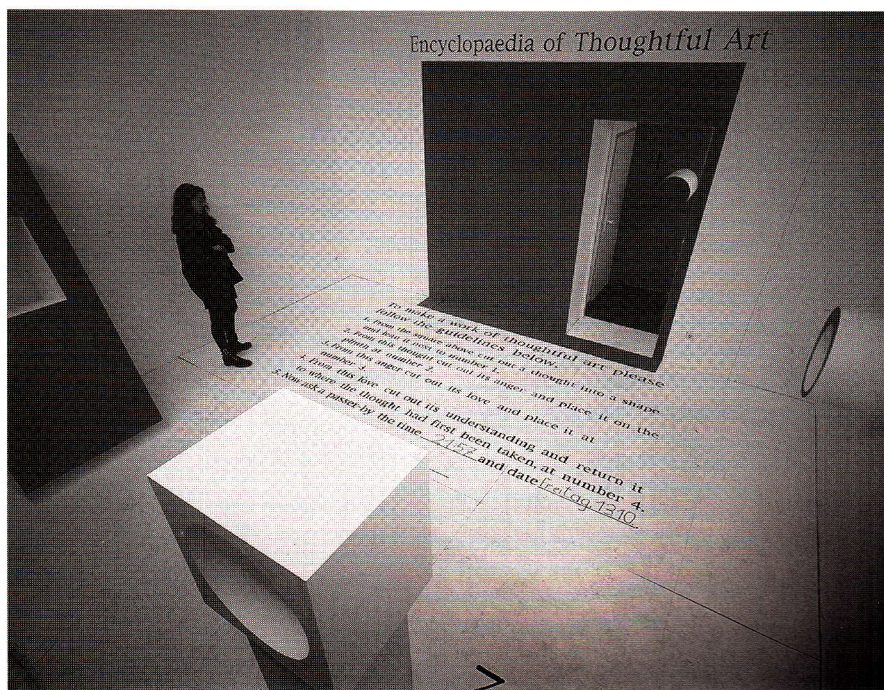
ABOUT SOME OF GAIL HASTINGS' MORE RECENT SCULPTURAL SITUATIONS

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TO MAKE A WORK OF THOUGHTFUL ART

A page from the 'Encyclopaedia of Thoughtful Art' was sent out as the announcement for Gail Hastings' first exhibition in Germany, *To make a work of thoughtful art* (Ausstellungsraum Thomas Taubert, Düsseldorf, 1995). This was an 'introduction' which, in retrospect, was recognized as being an integral part of the work itself. The page reproduced on the announcement card looked as though it has been torn out of a book. It appeared in front of a blue ground in such a way that only the first two of five guidelines on the page remained readable. The page itself was dominated by a red square printed under the title. Visitors to the gallery found this same arrangement in three-dimensional form, covering the front wall and part of the floor as a 'blow up'. Figures, colours and objects produced a clearly calculated, rationally comprehensible constellation of forms that developed out of each other: the red 'minimalist' sculpture numbered 1 leaning on the wall corresponded to the empty rectangle in the red square; the square missing from the rectangle stood on a plinth carrying the number 2; the circle cut out of the square hung on the fourth gallery wall as number 3; the red centre missing from this circle was numbered 4 and placed on a blue wall behind the first 'cut-out' section. This successive 'unfolding' of the objects seemed like a merely formal link, but a plane that could be described as emotional and irrational was introduced for the viewer by an (announcement) text written on the floor:

To make a work of thoughtful art please follow the guidelines below. 1 From the square above cut out a thought into a shape and lean it next to number 1; 2 From this thought cut out its anger and place it on the plinth at number 2; 3 From this anger cut out its love and place it at number 3; 4 From this love cut out its understanding and return it to where the thought had first been taken, at number 4; 5 Now ask a passer-by the time and date.





2

1

Now ask a passer-by the time
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number 2.
ought cut out its anger and place it
to number 1.
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The time and date had been hand-written with a red marker pen into the spaces provided, suggesting that someone had actually enacted this minimalist psychogram of emotions a day before the exhibition began. For the viewer — who in the case of Gail Hastings is always a reader as well, actually a reader/viewer — it was suddenly clear that the rational combination of shapes and colours in the gallery was the result of individual emotional and irrational decisions. But the lucid geometry and formal austerity of the space, and also the colouring, reminiscent of Mondrian and de Stijl, again transposed the individual psychological element back onto a general plane, which allowed the viewer to look at what was there as a model, and to perceive the design in its entirety as an offer made to one's own abilities as a co-creator.

THE CONTINUATION AND REFINEMENT OF 60S CONCEPTUAL ART

Gail Hastings places the process of perceiving, understanding and acting at the centre of her space-related constellations of texts, objects, colours and materially and formally coded systems. Her sculptures or 'sculptural situations'¹ take into account a viewer's aesthetically determined competence and also involve them as emotionally and sentiently capable individuals. Gail Hastings picks up artistic idioms and presentational forms from early Conceptual Art, but gives them a sensual charge. She combines conceptual strategies with the language and aesthetic of action-related non-fictional texts (game instructions or manuals for dealing with everyday objects), and stages both with a markedly material aesthetic. Her works open up a dialogue about the creation, meaning and function of 'works' and hand over the open 'product' for the viewer to reflect and act upon, but without leaving the intellectual and perceptual links between all the elements open.

I intend to address the conceptual echoes of Gail Hastings' work, but can only concretize them briefly as I am unable to provide here the kind of instructive and detailed exposition of the influence of Conceptual Art on Australian art that was achieved by the *On Dialogue* catalogue.² Gail Hastings was unaware of the work of important exponents of Australian conceptual art like Ian Burn (who was a member of the Art & Language Group and lived in New York from 1967-77), until she left the academy in 1988, as no publications were available. It is also significant that in the mid 80s, when Gail Hastings was studying in Melbourne, Ian Burn had already renounced this kind of art and academy teaching was dominated by figurative paint-

ing. Although, in retrospect, it is possible to talk of *handing down* conceptual tendencies in Australian art from the late 60s to the present day in the case of artists like John Nixon, there was no integration in this sense for the younger generation. So Gail Hastings had to develop her position largely independently and something that we could call *re-initiating* conceptual strategies (by artists like Kosuth, Huebler, Wiener, etc.), is in her case a *confirmation, continuation and refinement* of the ideas on a new and independent basis.

TWO CORNERS AND A CUBE

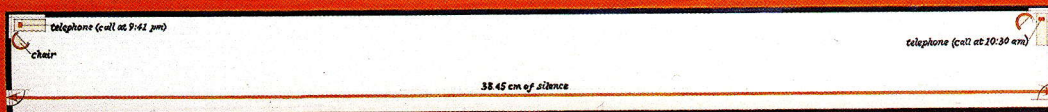
The dimension of time as plastic, sculptural material (as an all-embracing temporary period, beginning with the introduction; as specific time, of the kind that can be recorded in a text; as time passing as a reflective comprehension by the viewer), played an exposed role in the space-related exhibition *two corners and a cube* (Galerie Köstring/Maier, Munich, 1997). Here too the viewer was first of all able to perceive that the shapes, colours and dimensions precisely related to each other. The 'cube' in the exhibition title was a three-dimensional object, painted yellow on top, resting on a shallow plinth-like object on the floor and complimented formally by a yellow two-dimensional plane on the wall. Some distance away on the floor was a telephone, as a second element. In each of the adjacent corners of the room the viewer found a conglomeration of two and three dimensional components that also corresponded to each other. The link between the components was to be found in the function of the telephone on the floor and the sheets of text. For example, page 212 of the 'Encyclopaedia of Silent Art' hung on the wall as a watercolour sheet that required the reader/viewer to go into a room with a telephone, to wait for a call and to answer it, and finally to note the time and duration of the call in the empty spaces provided on the sheet. Instructions were then given for calculating a length that the reader was to cut out of the given area and place on the adjacent wall. Thus the text described the real space for the viewer in which one or more people had already carried out the required actions.

ENCYCLOPAEDIAS, INSTRUCTIONS FOR ACTION AND THE ROLE OF CHANCE

The basic idea of the sculptural situations that Gail Hastings has developed in the last ten years — precisely articulated spatial configurations with objects, minimalist-

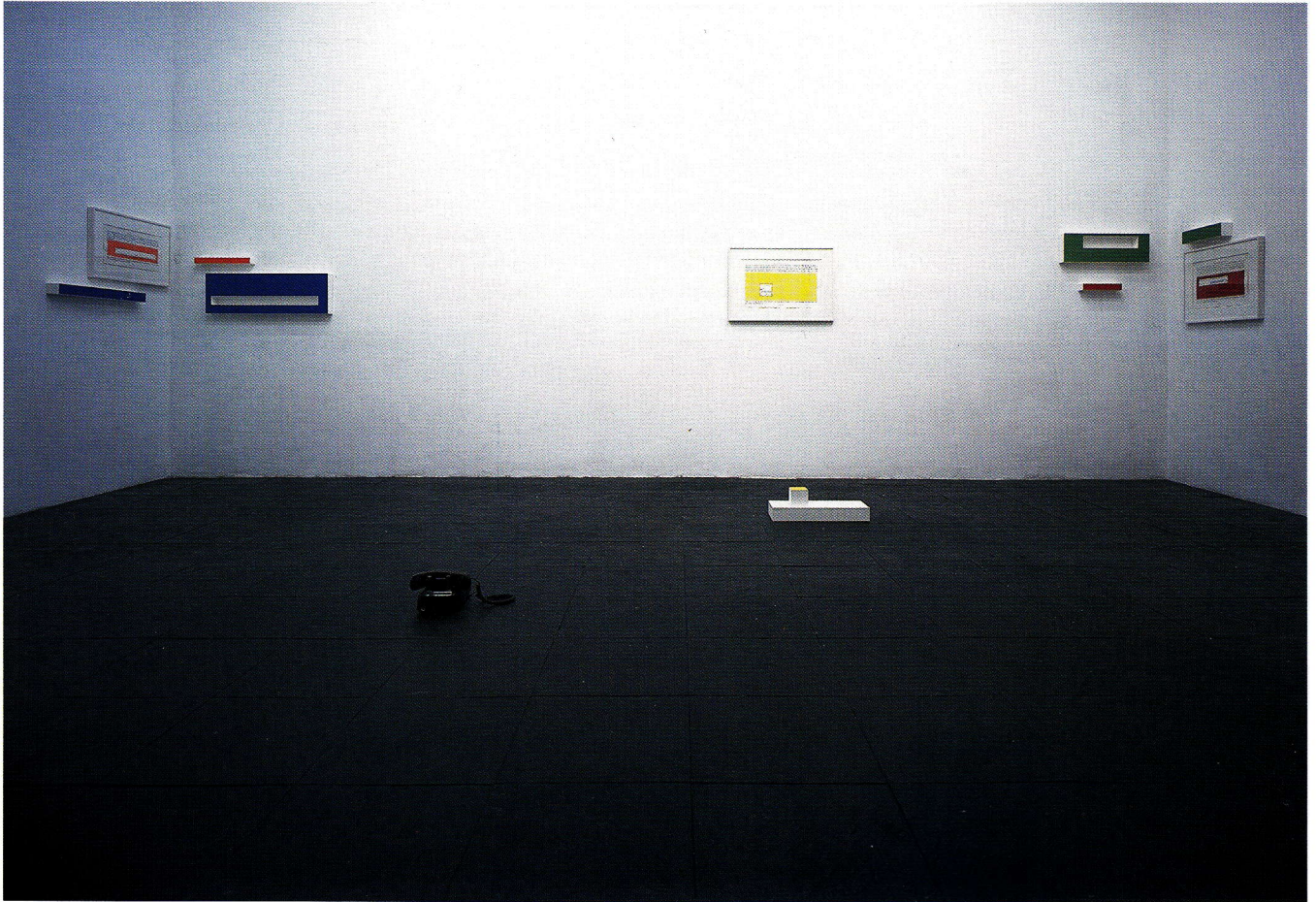
Encyclopaedia of Silent Art

To make this work of silent art you must first enter a room in which there is a telephone. Wait for the telephone to ring, answer it and note the date and time of the ensuing conversation. Tuesday, 25 July '96 at 9:41 am/pm. Wait for a second call and again note the date and time. Friday, 26 July '96 at 10:30 am/pm. Now calculate the length of time that passed between these two conversations by making every 60 minutes equal 3 centimetres. 12 hrs. 49 min. = 38.45 cm.



Take out this length of silence from the orange rectangle above and place it on the adjoining, corner wall. You have now completed this work of silent art.

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geometric sculptures, texts and plans, structured with the aim of empathetic communication with the viewer — is one of the most interesting models for a conceptually oriented approach in contemporary Australian art. This would be the most general and broadest formulation for delimiting and positioning her work. We can approach the intellectual fundamentals and parameters of her view of the function of art, at a time of 'new over-complexity', if we flip through her exhibition concepts of the 90s (using reviews and the available publications). In doing this we will leave out details of the realizations for the time being and concentrate instead on three sets of concepts or language patterns that are used almost as leitmotifs: the encyclopaedias; classifying formulae about 'making' a work; finally, her way of addressing the viewer as a consciously/unconsciously participating subject that is a constitutive prerequisite for the process by which the work comes into being.

If an aspect of knowledge is conveyed to us as an entry in an encyclopaedia, then we are entitled to assume that we have a work in front of us that assembles the total stock of knowledge of its time, or a section of that knowledge, arranges it clearly and structures it systematically. Now, Gail Hastings has devised various encyclopaedias that — as their position in the oeuvre suggests — categorize the 'total stock' of art from the point of view of the aesthetics of production or reception and arrange it within an ideal system that is in itself logical: 'Encyclopaedia of Words', 1995, 'Encyclopaedia of Waiting', 1993, 'Encyclopaedia of Thoughtful Art', 1995, 'Encyclopaedia of Timeless Art', 1996, 'Encyclopaedia of Difficult Art Decisions', 1997, 'Encyclopaedia of Missing Rooms', 1994, and the 'Encyclopaedia of Coincidence', 1997. These are encyclopaedias that seem to offer the power of final definition, but in fact they replace each other with every newly conceived sculptural situation, and thus are allotted only temporary, strictly context-related validity each time. The idea of knowledge secured by an encyclopaedia always remains an *ideal horizon* in Hastings' sculptural situations: formally this is dealt with by their appearance as individual, watercolour pages, which apparently — as they are randomly numbered — have been torn from a complete work that is not present in the exhibition. This conceals a demand that the viewer relate the individual case that is demonstrated to an imaginary whole in the intellectually precise understanding of its part: the (lost) ideal of an art that finds a self-evident justification in a quasi 'organic' set of rules, addressing and embracing people as beings that are determined both intellectually and sensually.

Alongside the regulated, abstract classification systems that are the subjects of Gail Hastings' work, which reflect art's self-referentially confined conceptual apparatus, we find a detailed sequence of action-oriented instructions to the viewer: 'To make a work of timeless (thoughtful/spontaneous/ordered) art' are titles of Gail Hastings' recent works or exhibitions.

Gail Hastings has also introduced the 'bureau' into her work as a fictitious institution of conceptual supervision, keeping watch over the stock and, above all, the legitimate use of definitions and conceptual categories in the context of art, operating like official offices on the basis of texts she has formulated: 'Bureau of a Moment's Encyclopaedia', 1995; 'Bureau of Artistic Patterns (BAP)', 1997; 'Bureau of Artistic Meaning (BAM)', 1998. The way in which these 'bureaux' think and argue, ironically reflecting 20th Century art criticism's apparently absurd demand for definition, has most recently been presented by the artist in the form of interviews between herself and the bureau directors.³ The artist remains a speechless medium in these interviews, initiating fundamental considerations from an abstract authority, and thus addressing individual aesthetic and art-theoretical reflections on a meta-plane.

DIFFICULT ART DECISIONS

References to Minimalism and questions of reception aesthetics were central to the spatial work *Difficult Art Decisions* (David Pestorius Gallery, art forum berlin, 1997). Page 45 of the 'Encyclopaedia of Difficult Art Decisions', again hanging on the wall as a watercolour text and sketch-plan, was a rectangular area of colour. It showed a plan of three labyrinth-like linked spaces and four objects, variously placed in each case: table and chair as a place for recapitulating false (or forgotten/invisible) decisions, a shelf with different kinds of 'Difficult Art Decisions', and two folded 'wall protectors' on the floor. The text from the encyclopaedia, in which it was again possible to record the time and date of the 'specific' viewing of the art, spoke about the following experience in the first person plural: two (or more?) people in the space — which is also the viewer's real space and the intellectual space of the artistic concept — were required by an 'authority' in matters of art to cover the wall on which they were leaning to look at and discuss a work of art hanging opposite, with one of the wall protectors. While they were doing this, the people realized that the work of art and the wall protector seemed so close to being identical in terms of form, colour

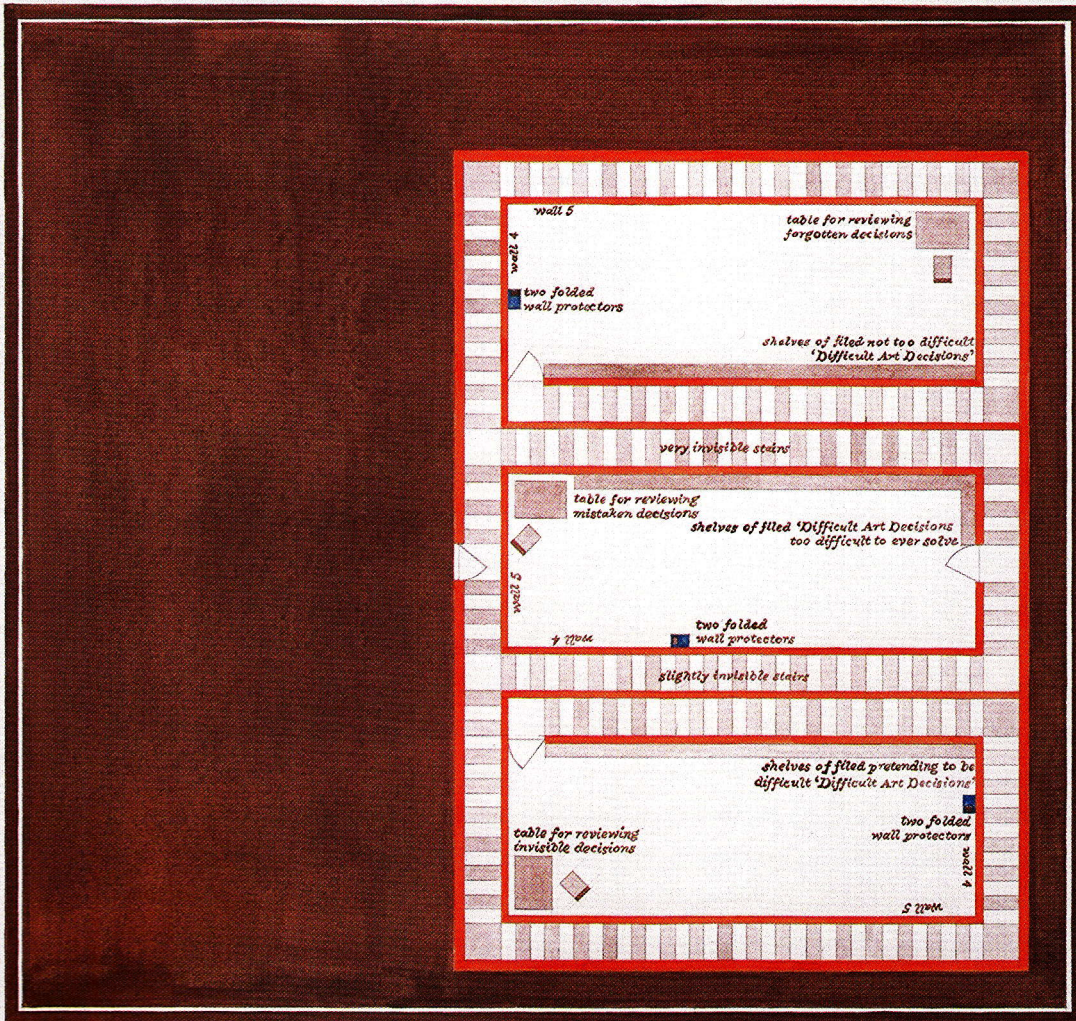
and material that it was practically impossible to distinguish between 'work' and 'functional object'. And more: it turned out that on the two alternative wall protectors there was a rectangular patch in the same form as the minimalist work of art such that it corresponded with the art work as a mirror image. Finally, the people formulate their perplexity and their decision to leave the situation open and to leave the final judgment about the question: what is art? what is merely a condition of the possibility of experiencing art? to the above-mentioned 'authority'. Viewers of Gail Hastings' work found themselves confronted with precisely the objects described in the text and thus had to make a decision about the definition of a 'work' themselves.

CONFORMITY TO RULES AND CLARITY VERSUS EMOTIONALLY HOVERING MEANING

The interlocking of a canon of rules and instructions for action in Gail Hastings' work — and this is one pole of her view of the function/reception of art today — arouses the idea of a pellucidly structured body of knowledge that may require detailed intellectual comprehension from the viewer, but as a whole has no unfathomable depths, uncertainties or unclear meanings. The viewer is confirmed at every moment and at every step as an intellectually aware individual who is competent to act and 'helps to create'. Every detail of the visual appearance of Gail Hastings' work supports this notion of conformity to rules, manageability and clarity: the white rooms, stage-like in their completeness; concentration on a small number of basic geometric forms; reduction to basic colours; frugal use of texts in the context of a visual reference system; finally, the strict semantic linking of all these elements with each other. While this intellectual, consciousness-structuring pole seems to dominate Gail Hastings' sculptural situations at first, reading the texts and instructions opens up a view that is precisely the opposite in terms of the viewer's intellectual authority and total command in matters of action. In almost all these texts there is a passage in which viewers are required to carry out an action with their eyes closed (identifying a random point in a text/on a surface, etc.), and the random result of this unconscious choice then determines the further course of events, even though it always takes place within the conceptual frame laid down by the artist. Certain of the viewer's emotions or memories are invoked as the driving force behind these random decisions, or the inclusion of certain temporal or spatial conditions introduces a random element. For Gail Hastings this introduction — now, of course, crucial — of the 'unconscious' pole

Encyclopaedia of Difficult Art Decisions

We were asked by an art authority to install a wall protector on wall 5, to save the wall from being marked by people leaning against it while discussing the artwork on wall 4. We promptly attended to the task, however upon completing it we discovered that the wall protector, in not only being the same colour as the artwork on wall 4, but also made of the same vinyl material, confused the distinction between itself and the artwork. Now we're not authorities on art, but it seemed obvious to us that this was a matter of great concern, for the general art public might mistakingly connect the art object and the wall protector, as is easy to do, and wastefully attempt to fathom the



meaning of the connection. To avoid this we searched for other protectors and found the last two; however, neither was better than the first, as one was also of the same colour as the artwork, and the other had been patched with a piece of vinyl that was surprisingly a similar size as the artwork, as well as the same colour. We found it impossible to decide just which of the three was the least confusing, and therefore the most suitable, so we filed a 'Difficult Art Decision' report in order for an art authority to consider and solve the matter. Meanwhile, the situation has been left as it is—at this time 10:15am and on this day Wednesday, 8-10-97—until such moment as a final decision is made.

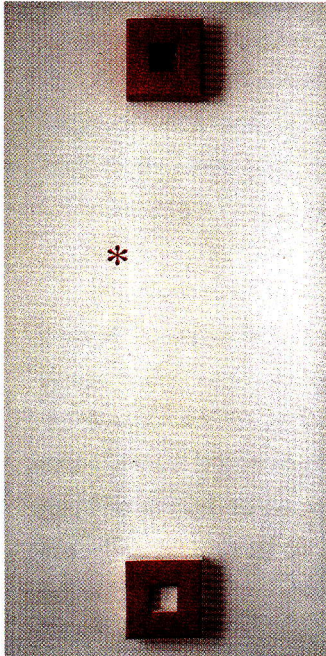


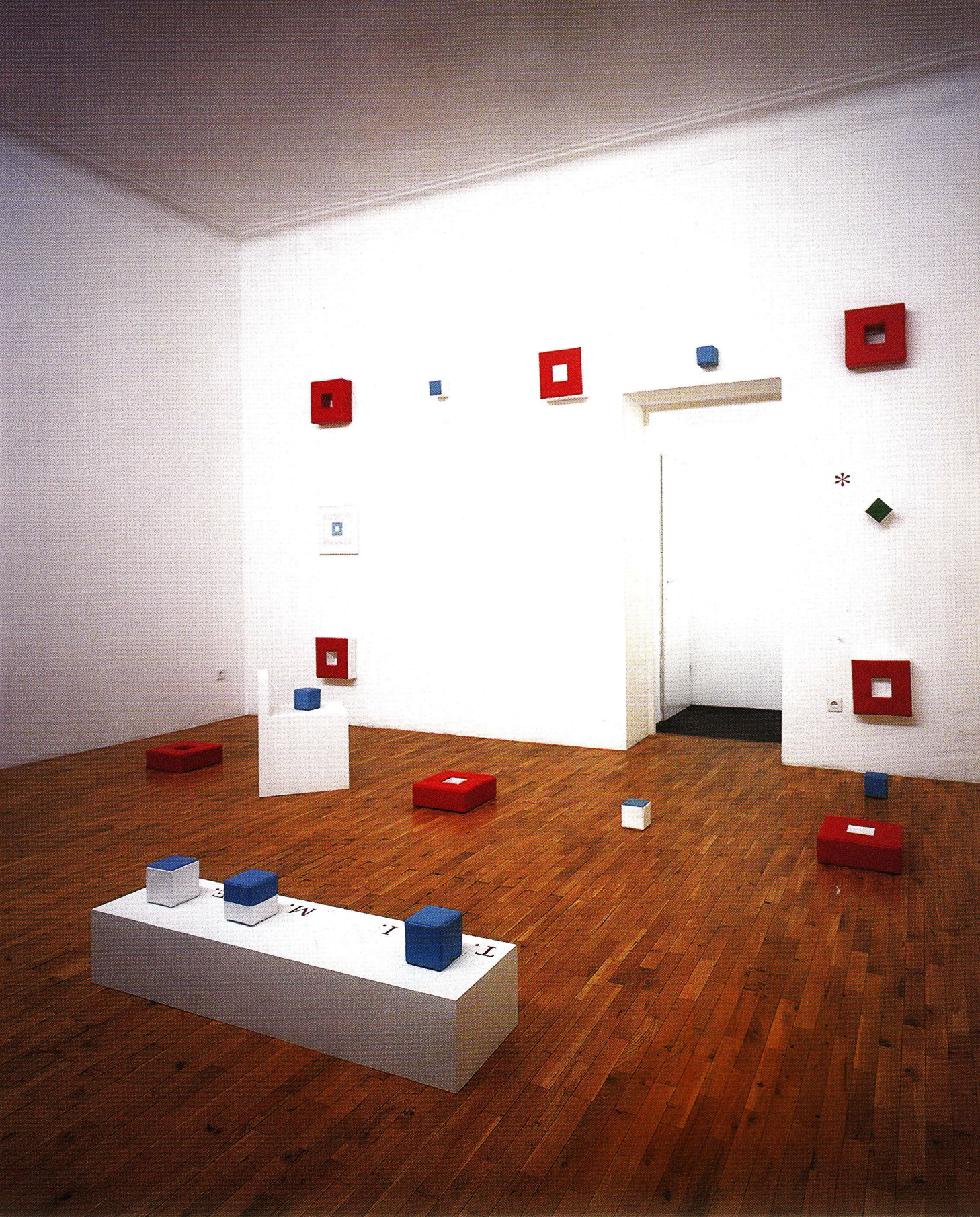
of the reception of art and the emergence of meaning stands symbolically for the distance between knowledge and feeling, their incompatibility. 'Remember', she concludes the 'Rules and Regulations' of her work *blue-burntumber-red Love Poem*, 1995, 'the aesthetic outcome of this exercise is purely due to chance and circumstance. It bears no reflection on you, personally; and will hardly affect the objective measure of distance between knowledge and emotions, generally.'⁴ And in her catalogue essay for the exhibition *four coincidences* (Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne, 1997), she says, again in the form of a concluding remark:

A parallel could be drawn here between this sort of situation and the reception of art, generally. For although it is undeniable that the history behind an art practice and the possible future for it can create a meaningful context within which to receive and anticipate the relevance of a work — and thus accord it due significance — I sometimes wonder just how much this occurrence also parallels the desire to read significance into two unrelated incidents that mysteriously come together, as in a coincidence.⁵

TO COMPLETE A WORK OF CONTEMPORARY ART

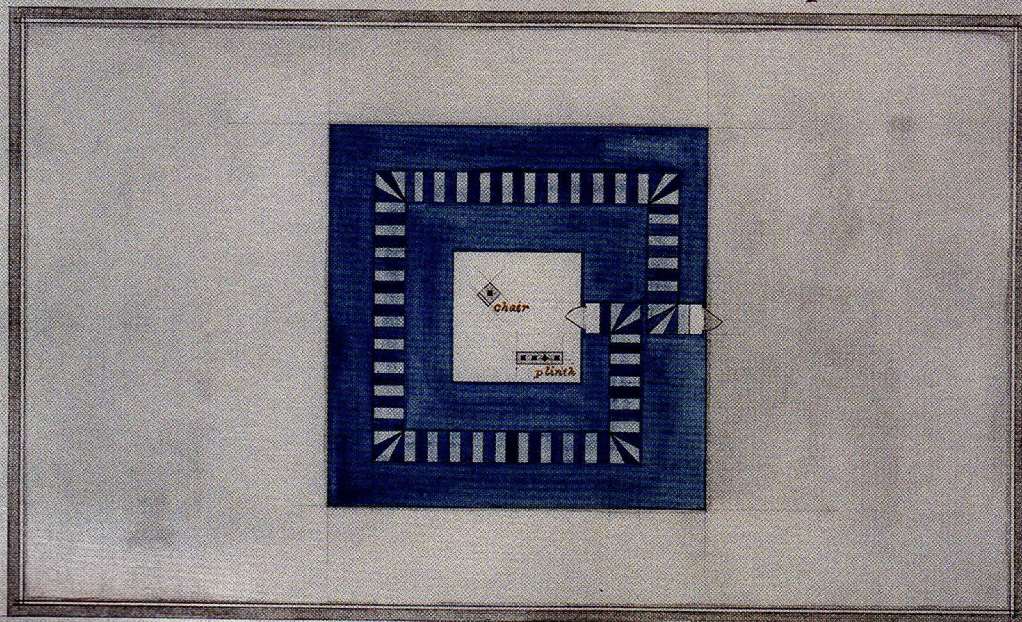
The announcement card for the spatial-work/exhibition *To complete a work of contemporary art* (Ausstellungsraum Thomas Taubert, Düsseldorf, 1997), depicted two red squares, each with a central square section missing, on an empty white ground; between them was an asterisk (*), as used in texts to add an extra idea as an afterthought. All three of these elements were to be found in the exhibition in the context of a geometrically arranged constellation with many parts. Blue and white vinyl cubes, which corresponded in size to the empty centres of the red vinyl objects, were placed equidistantly between them. On the floor nearby rested a plinth-like object with the letters T.I.M.E. painted on its base. On this object lay three more blue and white cubes, as if displaced in phase, allotted to the letters T.M. and E. Missing was the cube assigned to the letter I. Page 3131 of the 'Encyclopaedia of Contemporary Art' hung within and as a part of the constellation with its text functioning as a linguistic consummation of the sculptural situation. When we read page 3131 we discovered that a viewer/reader was directed to select from the plinth-like object the best cube to complete the pattern, and to place this cube next to the asterisk. But whoever followed these directions seemed to have chosen the least appropriate cube, as what was seen next to the asterisk was a green/white cube placed on the





ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF PATTERNS IN CONTEMPORARY ART

To complete the pattern in this work of contemporary art you must first walk into a room in which there is a blue-cubed cushion on top of a white chair. In this room you will find a pattern of repetitive squares that has a missing part (see asterisk*). There is also in this room a plinth with four



objects labelled T., I., M. & E.. Consider each and select the one, the right one, that best accords with the pattern and place it next to the asterisk. You have now completed the pattern in this work of contemporary art. Please note here the time 6:44 pm and date 25.3.97.

— page 3131 —

diagonal unlike those that made up the pattern. The word 'TIME' exposed on the plinth-like object, together with the theme of 'patterns' raised in the title of the encyclopaedia, referred the viewer of the work to fundamental questions of contemporary art: the function and meaning of shapes, colours, textual structures and ordering systems, the meaning of time as material in three-dimensional thinking; the evaluation of formal recourse, in this cases, to Constructivism and Minimalism.

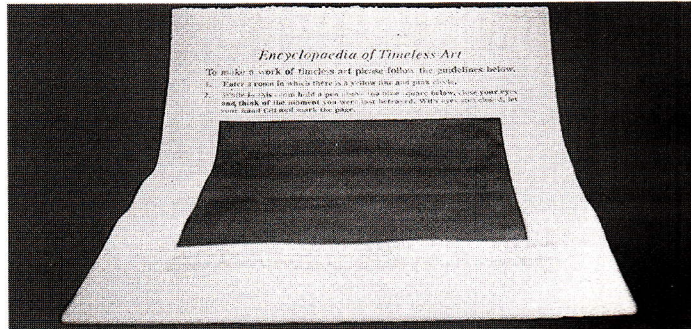
TIME AS PLASTIC MATERIAL IN THE SCULPTURAL SITUATIONS AND THE UNDOING OF GENRE BOUNDARIES

Time as plastic material is a fundamental link in Gail Hastings' work, all-embracing, and combining various conceptual strategies. The artist works with various time

planes, which interlink with each other, forming a complex structure. Within this structure the introduction, the period of the exhibition, and the specific time and duration of the viewer's intellectual comprehension are the time planes that constitute the imaginary time of the work as they operate together. The first thing to be emphasized is the medium of the 'introductions', in the form of announcement cards, book or catalogue pages relevant to the spatial conceptions. These have accompanied the artist's work from the outset and are a fundamental aspect of it. Gail Hastings used pages torn out of trivial romance novels as the announcement for her exhibition *Room for Love* (Store 5, Melbourne, 1990). Visitors to the exhibition found the empty covers of the books on two plinth-like objects, and between them was a sofa — a 'love chair' — for a communicating couple. For the



Room for Love 1990, announcement image (above) and situation (right)



important early work/exhibition *Floor plan: Empty, except* (200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne, 1990), a plan of the space was used for the exhibition announcement and in the context of the exhibition itself this re-surfaced as pieces of screwed-up paper spilling out of a long box-like component of the work. In two other works the artist has been able to use individual pages from exhibition catalogues that were published and distributed prior to the commencement of the exhibition as 'introductions'.⁶ In this way, mere 'reproduction' is replaced by the 'initiation' of the idea of a work, for which the reader/viewer receives a first building block. For the three 1996 exhibitions/works titled *To make a work of timeless art*, visitors received an announcement card on which a page from the 'Encyclopaedia of Timeless Art' was reproduced in such a way that only two of a total of four rules could be read:

To make a work of timeless art please follow the guidelines below: 1 Enter a room in which there is a yellow line and a pink circle; 2 While in this room hold a pen over the blue square below, close your eyes and think of the moment you were last betrayed. With your eyes still closed, let your hand fall and mark the page.

In the exhibition, gallery visitors found the water colour original with a continuation of the guidelines, but now they appeared as having been already acted upon.



For Gail Hastings these 'introductions' are in many respects a fundamental dimension of her work. They open up a temporary and clearly defined local context for reflection. Basic elements or the central argument are introduced. They involve the reader/viewer and direct his or her imagination without fixing a definite direction in which it should move. The media used for announcing an exhibition, which usually has no independent significance and serve only to reproduce or inform, become independent parts of a complex linguistic and textual structure, to which they add another plane of meaning. The reader/viewer receives the intellectual building blocks of the text as an introduction, then encounters them again in the sculptural objects in the exhibition, in the form of a three-dimensional sculptural situation, while the same objects turn out to be parts of a 'text' as the various actions are carried out.

This is where the undoing of genre boundaries that is specific to Gail Hastings' work is realized: language is transformed into a three-dimensional spatial constellation, two dimensions become three dimensions, linear texts take on spatial form in stage-like arrangements, in which language, objects and the reflective action of the reader/viewer form an indivisible union. The 'real' architecture of the exhibition space with its structurally linked objects is read as an architectural plan drawing, as a one-to-one cartography, returning, once more, to the two-dimensional.

FREEDOM FROM DOGMA AND THE ONE-SIDEDNESS OF MODERNISM

In the first Düsseldorf work the determining element of chance — and further the final shape in formal terms — resulted from an interaction that cannot be calculated between thought, feeling and understanding, while in the Munich work it was brought about by the unpredictable frequency of the telephone calls. The question of deciding about the status and possibility of defining a 'work' also has individual and random elements. Gail Hastings charges the reference back to 20s and 30s Constructivism and 60s American Minimalism, which is clearly discernible in the formal vocabulary of all the works described, with subjective impetus: a suggestion that is well worth discussing as a corrective to Modernism and its dogma and ideological one-sidedness. The either-or within the sequence of 20th Century styles and 'isms' — Expressionism or Bauhaus, Dada or party-faithful realism — could, as I understand the vision discernible in Gail Hastings' sculptural situations, be replaced by open communication between artist-ego and viewer-ego *within* the given social, political, aesthetic etc. conceptions. At the core a multi-perspective concept of freedom is formulated, embracing empathy, authority to act and awareness of responsibility. This concept of freedom is sketched out, undogmatically and always with different emphases, as a *model* in Gail Hastings' sculptural situations.

NOTES

1. Hastings, Gail 'A Conversation with Gail Hastings', *On Dialogue* (ex. cat.), Haus am Waldsee, Berlin, 1997, p. 158.
2. *On Dialogue*, Haus am Waldsee, Berlin, 1997, was an exhibition of contemporary Australian art curated by the Berlin curator Anne Marie Freybourg.
3. See: 'A Conversation with Gail Hastings', *ibid*, and 'Another conversation with Gail Hastings', 1998 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art (ex. cat.), Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 1998, p. 38.
4. This work is reproduced in the catalogue *Gail Hastings: Five Sculptures 1989-1995*, David Pestorius Gallery, Brisbane, 1995, p. 18, and in the *On Dialogue* catalogue, p. 163.
5. Hastings, Gail 'end note: four coincidences', *Gail Hastings: four coincidences* (ex. cat.), Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne, 1997, n.p.
6. The works referred to here are *divisions between friends*, 1991, which was included in the *Australian Perspecta 1991* exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, and *To make a work of ordered art*, 1997, which was exhibited in the 'Statements' sector of *Art 28'97*, Basel.