LIMINAL GYMNASIA: Explorations of creative and transformative potential in a sub-cultural sporting facility

Kasia Lynch

A project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

School of Art
College of Design and Social Context
RMIT University
December 2012
## CONTENTS

### INTRODUCTION
- Background 4
- Literature 5

### VISUAL RESEARCH
- Space 10
- Apparatus 14
- Action 18

### PROCESS
- Studio 24
- Field research 28

### WORKS
- Sport Club: The Arena 37
- Exhausting objects 54
- Image making 66
- Conduit Arts Initiative Residency 75

### BIBLIOGRAPHY & REFERENCES 80
INTRODUCTION

This Master of Arts Research project aims to investigate relationships between the body, exercise apparatus and environment within the sub-cultural space of the gymnasium. Using a contemporary art practice to develop connections between the body, objects and space in the context of indoor sporting endeavours I want to illuminate the physical and social geography of the gymnasium as a field of unique creative potential.

Research questions:

Through art making practice how can I uncover the potential for new relationships and means of exchange to occur between bodies and objects within the context of the gymnasium?

How can my art practice redefine the space of the gymnasium as a liminal site?

In my research proposal I set the parameters of the project to be bound by a clear definition of the word gymnasium. This was to mean in an indoor facility equipped specifically for individual athletic activity and small team sporting interactions. This definition would permit the investigation of fitness centers, sports clubs and school halls. Typical activities that take place within the gymnasium might include weight training, cardiovascular training, basketball, badminton and gymnastics.

In the research project I have utilized sporting practice as a means to explore ideas of creative potential, indeterminacy and transformative exchange through an examination of existing patterns in sport where relationships between the body, objects and space are driven by the production of results. Within the gymnasium physical activity is controlled by the regulation and standardization of objects and space, aimed at optimizing performance and achieving maximized results. Through art practice I have sought to develop new modes of exchange and interaction for bodies, objects and space that are motivated by creativity, indeterminacy and transformative potential.
BACKGROUND

I completed a Bachelor of Arts in 2007 within RMIT’s sculpture department. During my undergraduate studies my work made a consistent enquiry about the body and its relationship to objects and space. I made works that interrogated objects such as chairs, ladders, hula-hoops, broomsticks, billiard cues and violins.

When I discovered the writings of Psychoanalyst and Neurologist Paul Schilder, his theories of body-image resonated deeply with what I had been trying to communicate through making sculpture.

Schilder believed that when in contact with objects from the external environment, body-image may “shrink or extend; giving parts to the outside world as well as taking other parts into itself. When we take a stick in our hands and touch an object with the end of it, we feel a sensation at the end of the stick. The stick has in fact become part of our body-image.”

This idea seemed to inform how a discreet object presented on its own could speak quite powerfully about the body in movement and in space, without the body being at all present.

My sculptural practice has engaged with methodologies of Surrealism and phenomenology to explore this idea of body-image. I see body-image as a field of interchangeable meaning and energy that may flow to and from the body as it engages with the outside world.

On completing the Honours year of my undergraduate course I was interested to take this enquiry further. It was at a time my younger sister had taken up competitive bodybuilding and I was also studying a Diploma of Professional Pilates Instruction for which I am now a certified teacher. The gymnasium as a unique sub-cultural space fascinated me. In this environment people worked on their bodies as projects, acting with various objects, carrying out repetitive movements with the goal to achieve and transform.

Sporting equipment offers users the means to self regulate and control the body. Variables such as weight, resistance, speed, time and energy expenditure can be constantly monitored by computers that provide feedback on performance levels in a way that mimics the workplace power structures of modern society. Rotterdam based art, design and architecture collective Atelier Van Lieshout considers this notion in art works such as Sportopia (2002), a two-storey structure built with scaffolding, concrete and other mediums. Paralleling modes of manual labour with manual leisure through the formation of a self-contained utopian system, Sportopia includes a ground floor area for sport and sex activities and a first floor area for rest and recovery. While Atelier Van Lieshout’s work seeks to “manifest the contradictions that arise when the human body serves political ideologies”2 my project will examine these power structures in order to address how they impact connections between the body, objects and space in the gymnasium.

In Design for Sport Akiko Busch provides a critical analysis of sporting technology that includes an examination of real world simulation in the indoor sporting environment. Stating that “machines that enable us to row boats, ski across fields and ride bikes in our living rooms all attest to a radically reconstructed relationship to the natural world”3 Busch highlights indoor sporting apparatus as having evolved to offer the realism of an outdoor experience in a highly controlled and artificial context. Nature in the realm of contemporary sports as discussed by Busch becomes a negotiable and adjustable variable rather than a defining aspect of a particular sporting experience. Unlike Busch’s investigation, my research will be focused exclusively on the space of the gymnasium and will not include home or outdoor based sporting activities.

In Sport and Spirituality: An Introduction sport is investigated as an avenue for spiritual experience that can lead to moments of deep play, states of flow or being in the zone outside the context of quantifiable performance with a focus on lifestyle and extreme sport activities.

Dianne Ackermann discusses activities such as bike riding and swimming as also having the potential to manifest states of flow or transcendence in her reflective text Deep Play. Describing deep play as “containing uncertainty, illusion and an element of make believe or fantasy”4 Ackerman acknowledges this form of intensified human experience as allowing us to take risks and explore new roles. While both texts examine the psychology of particular activities that can illicit a transformative human experience, my project will extend upon this to also address the role of apparatus and environment that may contribute to such sensory experiences.

---

VISUAL RESEARCH

I have collected a large selection of sports related images, as well as photographed objects and spaces of interest. Visual research has always been an important tool for me in making sculpture. The images I have researched are broad and include examples of gymnasium equipment new and old, various gymnasium spaces and architecture, systems of storage for sporting equipment and maps of fields of play such as basketball courts and multi-courts.
SPACE
APPARATUS
APPARATUS
ACTION
STUDIO
FIELD RESEARCH
In 2010 I was invited by Next Wave Festival to develop a site-specific work for the MCG. The work was part of a one-day curated arts event called Sports Club Project: The Arena. This unique group exhibition involved 16 artists working in areas including dance, painting, sculpture, new media and performance.

For a period prior the project outcome we took part in a series of 6 intensive onsite workshops. We also attended an AFL game. Facilitated by the project curators, MCG staff and other invited guest, the workshops informed us about the venue from various perspectives.

During one of the workshops, guest speaker Dr Justin Kemp discussed the varied methods sports people use to become match or competition ready. While elite athletes commit to carefully developed physical training programs to reach peak performance level, they may also follow their own set of personal rituals to psychologically prepare for competition.

I became interested to explore the more private and personal preparations specific to the realm of the players’ psyche.

The outcome for this project was a large-scale installation that explored football players’ pre-game rituals and superstitions. The work was component based and included goal posts, custom made towels, banners, footballs, digital screens, massage tables, warm-up music and a guided audio meditation of a form of body to object breathing.

Directed by text-based banners, the audience members in the space were invited and guided to engage with the installation, going through a type of pre-match mental warm-up.

In planning the work I communicated via email with a family friend who plays football at a regional level to ask him about the types of mental rituals he would engage in to prepare for a game, and if he knew of other behaviours his peers might follow too.

I learnt that a players’ pre-match routine is a way to manage anxiety and exert some sense of personal control over a highly pressurized situation where they feel they have a limited power to direct. This work was titled ‘Performance anxiety: the internal external continuum’.

Developing this project work I felt very much outside of my comfort zone. The space measured more than 11 x 8 meters and the install was a window
of just 5 hours on the day of the actual event. There were many constraints to the work, and the planning and making process was a constant test of my problem solving skills. This was to be the first instance in my practice where I was inviting the audience to physically interact with the work. In doing so there were practical elements to consider such as audience safety and durability of the objects. Next Wave had estimated up to 1000 people to visit the event in an 8-hour timeframe.

These factors saw me using materials and objects that I feel would have otherwise not entered into my practice. I also felt it was important to consider how I could still make this work accessible to audience members who were not comfortable to interact directly with the space and objects presented. This led to my decision to use text, also a first in my work. The event day was a positive outcome and I felt that the work achieved some of what I had hoped. The audience participated in the work from young children through to adults and I felt that the work and it’s content was accessible to this broader audience.

With the intensity and planning required from this project I followed on to work in my studio with more immediate making methods. I needed to work in a way that required less planning and problem solving. My supervisor encouraged me to explore image making techniques as a way to develop ideas that didn’t require the same type of material resources that sculpture sometimes can. From my visual research I began to develop small digital collage works that utilized images of sporting equipment and sporting spaces. These images show several of the resolved 2D works.

At about half way through the duration of my Master project I decided that I would like to explore further the possibilities of audience participation in my work. This is clearly linked to my project for the MCG, where I drew from aspects of group activities that the dancers and choreographers in our Next Wave group led us through in our research workshops.

My goal was to make a series of sculptural objects that related to the gymnasium environment. I planned schedule workshops where I would invite volunteer participants to engage with the objects presented. I proposed that each participant’s interactions should be based on his or her own individual impulses and intuition as inspired by the object presented. I would not direct the participants’ actions in any way. I wanted to explore the possibility of intuitive play and the potential for creativity it might encourage.
My role as researcher would be to facilitate the environment and objects as well as digitally record (video record and photograph), the occurrences between the participants and the objects. Because I planned to make visual records of the participants in the workshop setting this project required approval by RMIT’s Human Ethics Committee.

Groups of between 2 to 8 people would take part in each workshop event and they would register in advance via email. Participants would register as volunteers and there was no specific target audience.

Despite that the project was in the end approved, I am disappointed to say that I did not execute it. I decided still to mention it today as I spent a lot of time working on the planning and application for its approval. From the time of applying for Human Ethics Committee approval to then receiving formal approval papers to proceed with my project idea, it took roughly 12 months. The drawn out process of trying to explain every possible aspect of the intended research diminished my momentum and creative interest in the idea. I completed many forms and questionnaires that were clearly geared towards science based research projects and I found it difficult being asked to detail what would happen in the workshops when the whole premise of the project was to encourage intuitive behaviours.

At this same time I was producing work for a solo exhibition called ‘Exhausting objects’, for Seventh Gallery in Melbourne. The exhibition was proposed to included aspects of audience participation through a led workshop event, however it was presented as an installation of component based objects and structures that were not interactive. This was due my workshop events still pending approval from RMIT’s Ethics Committee, and also in part because of the materiality of work and it’s final install at the gallery.

The exhibition raised interesting questions for me as to whether I really did want to engage the audience on a physical level. Much of the sculptural work I make, aside from the MCG project, often involves fine detail and finish such as hand beading or hand-sewn leather upholstering. The objects may be sturdy but would not necessarily hold up to strenuous use. If I was to invite an audience to interact with the object on an intuitive level I felt that I could not then warn them to be careful not to break the work.

Interestingly in this case, at the opening night of the exhibition several people picked objects and move around with quite enthusiastically. This
was not my intention. I feel that this work was more about reductive shapes and form and the types of possible combinations of objects and fixtures in relation to each other. Movement and fit with the body here is suggested rather than invited. The platforms constructed from marine ply and industrial rubber tiles act as a type of spatial barrier to zone off the objects from the audience. They made a clear division between the proximity of the audience to the object components of the work.

I think at this time in the Masters I was feeling as though I wasn’t sure where the research was really heading. As the avenue of audience interaction seemed less important.

I was invited to make work for a group exhibition that would explore the phenomena of flags. Working from the premise of flags as unique and powerful markers that can stake out spaces and occupy them physically, geographically, socially and personally I began to research sporting banners and fan flags. My initial plan for the show was to appropriate fan banners and flags from my visual research. I would then present them in a context that displaced there meaning in some way and made them more suggestive when removed from the sporting realm.

As it turned out I was not happy with any of the work I produced. I was trying to force the outcome to fit within the premise for the show but also stay within my Master research framework. The final works show a significant shift from my intend work. The images are photographs I staged with a model wearing a garment I constructed from an Australian flag. The final works are digitally altered photographic prints.

I believe there is some link here to where my research has been progressing. While my first research question is focused on investigating objects, bodies and space, my second research question is asking to uncover some sense of liminality in the gymnasium space or within sporting practice.

In an essay titled ‘Marginal Play: Sport at the Borderlands of Time and Space’, Bradd Shore discusses that which is liminal as violating neat categories and being neither inside or outside, neither here nor there.

Shore also discusses the concept of ‘marginal play’, that is - where a game overflows its own constituting boundaries, entering a space and time frame somewhere between that of the game and the world of the non-game. In the final stages of my research I have been drawn more towards the parallels between sport and religion. The connections are ones I could
identify from early on in my research but did not directly begin to address through my work. That is, the idea of sport as a modern day religion, where people seek a type of belonging through ritual whether it is actively as a participant or passively as a spectator.

Referring back to the book, ‘Sport and Spirituality’, here the spiritual experience of sport as is described as ‘flow’, ‘transcendence’. I think that my most recent work has started to address some of these ideas.

In August of this year I was part of a 4-week artist in residence program at Conduit Arts Initiative. For a 3-week period, alongside two other artists, we had access to the gallery space to utilize as a studio. At the end of the third week we presented the outcome to the public for viewing.

The project was presented under the premise that the work presented was an exploration of process and was not necessarily finished works.

The work I presented was made from a timber pole, a hoop, rope, leather, glass beads and thread. As a finished work it explores form, surface and potential. I see this work as a sculptural drawing that suggests possibility and transformation. The apparatus can never be installed or presented as it was before. It has the constant potential to transform into new form. The line of the rope is random, it falls and flows on the floor as its material properties and gravity determine. The surface of the object components of hoop and pole are from a distance seemingly plain but on closer view they transcend this initial impression to become more detailed and complex.

I am continuing to make object based work that explores this type of potential. For my final examination exhibition I am working towards presenting a collection of objects that will describe the ritualistic themes of sport from a spiritual perspective. The display mechanisms used to present the objects, as well as how they are positioned in relationship to each other will be aimed at presenting sporting apparatus and sporting practice as being liminal and as possessing the power to transform.
Body to Object Breathing Exercise – A Guided Audio Meditation.

Take hold of the football and come into a comfortable and relaxed position, lying on your back on the floor.

Close your eyes and be guided by the sound of my voice.

Hold the football ends between both hands & the let ball rest comfortably on your stomach. Keep your hands gently in contact with the ball.

Your legs can be straight or slightly bent, take the position that is most comfortable for your lower back.

Close your eyes as you begin to focus on your breathing.

Let the energy of the room fall away as you start to bring awareness to your body and its connection with the ball.

Breathe with normal relaxed breaths ...... inhaling through your nose and exhaling through your mouth.

Bring your awareness to your body in its 3 dimensional form. As you breathe in, the shape of your body is filling up with air.

Feel the back surface of your body resting on the floor.

Become aware of the front surface of your body, located on the floor beneath the space of the room above, and above that, the space the arena.

Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Feel your breath beginning to slowly lengthen. Your eyes remain gently closed.

Breathing in you begin to feel the oxygen filling the lower part of your lungs and further down into your belly. Gently your body shape expands with the breath as it moves downwards. Consider that the ball resting on your belly is part of your body’s shape. Feel the ball rhythmically rising and falling with the movement of your breath. As you breathe in the energy of your breath expands to your belly and travels through your navel to the ball. Feel the force of your breath gently energizing your connection with the ball.
Keep your mind focused within, centre your attention. Breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth.

Slowly and smoothly as you inhale, the air travels to your belly and further down to your pubic bone. Feel the energy of your breath expanding into your lower back and both the front and back of your pelvis. Your lower back and hips are slowly filling with air on each breath in.

Pause – silence

As you inhale the breath begins to travel down through your pelvis, through to your legs. Continue to focus on your breath as it begins to move further down your body.

Breathing in, feel the energy of your inhale stimulating and inflating your legs all the way down to your feet. As you inhale feel that your toes are now breathing.

Feel the energy of your inhale now as it inflates your whole lower body. Breathing in through your nose and out softly through your mouth. Your whole lower body is breathing.

Remain focused with your eyes gently closed. Let go of any attachment to what may be happening in the room around you and the arena above you. Focusing on your breath, your body and the ball, you are preparing for the demands of the game ahead. Continue to breathe slowly and deeply with relaxed steady breaths.

Feel the weight of your body is heavy and rested into the floor. On each breath in and out, feel the surface area of your body, including the ball, gently lifting and then softening in a slow rhythmic motion.

Breathing in, your whole lower body is energized by the intake of oxygen.

As you continue to breathe deeply, feel that the air now starts to travel upwards towards your heart. As you inhale, your chest and shoulders are softly expanding.

Your taking deep relaxed breaths as you lay comfortably on the floor. Feel that your neck, the back of your head and your face are all softly feeling the uptake of air. As you breathe in you scalp, your ears and even your hair are all expanding with the energy of your breath.
Feel your body being energized by the uptake of air as this energy now begins to move through your shoulders towards your upper arms. Breathing in, feel both of your arms are expanding with air, from the upper arms, through to your forearms, your wrists and right to your hands. As you breath in you sense the air moving all the way down to your fingers and even into your finger-nails.

Feel the surface of the ball in contact with your palms, feel the air of your inhale travelling right into the palms of your hands. Notice again the rhythmic rising and falling of the ball as it moves with your body shape, gently rising and falling with each breath cycle.

Feel your left hand holding the end of the ball. Feel your right hand gently touching the end of the ball. Breathing in, feeling your hands lightly move in unison with the ball. Keep your awareness on the surface of the ball and the movement of your breath.

Breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth.

The surface of the ball sits in contact with your belly and the palms of both left and right hands. Beneath the surface of the ball there is air.
With your RIGHT hand touch the bash rock for 20 seconds before every game

At 11am on match day morning eat
3 poached eggs on toast
without butter, salt or pepper

Under your team socks wear
your special debut game socks
but don’t let them be seen
SPORTS CLUB PROJECT – THE ARENA

And respected by our foes

We’re courageous, stronger, faster

Admiration of the nation

Risking head and shin

If we’re behind then never mind

We’ll fight and fight and win
We're gonna roll them and we'll rock 'em

And if they get up we'll do it again

We'll never stop, stop, stop

We're gonna send them to the bottom

Our team will stop at nothing, nothing!

Till we're top, top, top
There's history here in the making

Till the flag is ours for the taking

Shake down the thunder from the sky

We'll never give in

Lift that noble banner

Whether the odds be great or small
We’ll go in and win for all

As we fight the rugged battle

The flag will be our own

Our nerve and skill will see us through

Our commitment ever grows

All for one, and one for all
We will answer to the call

You’ll hear our mighty roar

Win or lose we do or die

We’ll keep our end up

Hear the barrackers shouting

Side by side we stick together
Oh, the premiership's a cakewalk

Our boys who play this grand old game

Are always striving for glory and fame!

The other teams they don't fear

Hit 'em real hard, send 'em down bellow

And if they get up we'll do it again
With your RIGHT hand touch the bash rock for 20 seconds before every game

At 11am on match day morning eat
3 poached eggs on toast
without butter, salt or pepper

Under your team socks wear your special debut game socks but don't let them be seen

During the car ride to the ground sing TNT on repeat play, because your dynamite

On game day avoid stepping on any cracks or lines marking the ground, toe the line but don't touch it

Before team drills start in the players room, lay on the floor to focus your breath into the football

EXACTLY 15 MINUTES BEFORE RUN ON TIME
START LISTENING TO YOUR PUMPED play-list
AND DO YOUR PERSONAL WARM UP DRILL IN FRONT OF THE ROOMS MEDIA CAGE

WALK UP THE RAMP COMING ONTO THE FIELD, DON'T MAKE EYE CONTACT WITH ANY FANS AND START JOGGING ONLY ONCE INSIDE THE BOUNDARY

Hurdle the boundary line coming onto the field

NEVER touch the fan banner jogging onto the field, always stay at the back of the pack

Join the on field warm-up group that starts furthest away from your change rooms

Lining up for goal imagine that the goal umpire is your friend and aim for a mark on the spot
With your RIGHT hand touch the base rock for 20 seconds before every game.

At 11am on match day morning eat 3 poached eggs on toast without butter, salt or pepper.

Under your team socks wear your special debut game socks but don’t let them be seen.
With your RIGHT hand touch the half rock for 20 seconds before every game.

At 11am on match day morning eat:
- poached egg on toast
- without butter, salt or pepper

Under your team socks wear your special debut game socks but don't let them be seen.
EXHAUSTING OBJECTS
IMAGE MAKING
CONDUIT ART INITIATIVE RESIDENCY
BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

Allen, Jennifer. 2007, Atelier Van Lieshout, NAi, Rotterdam.
Horn, Rebecca. 1993, Rebecca Horn, Guggenhiem Museum, New York.