THE

YIELD

PRINCIPLE

an antigen to interior rigor mortis

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As a radical standpoint, perspective, position, "the politics of location" necessarily calls those of us who would participate in the form of counter-hegemonic cultural practice to identify the spaces where we begin in the process of revision... I locate my answer concretely in the realm of oppositional political struggle. Such diverse pleasures can be experienced, enjoyed even, because one transgresses, moves "out of one's place." For many of us, that movement requires pushing against oppressive boundaries set by race, sex and class domination. Initially then, it is a defiant political gesture. Moving, we confront the realities of choice and realms of power relations - do we position ourselves on the side of colonising mentality? Or do we continue to stand in political resistance with the oppressed, ready to offer our ways of seeing and theorising, of making culture, towards that revolutionary effort which seeks to create space where there is unlimited access to the pleasure and power of knowing, where transformation is possible?1
My first reading of this text by bell hooks occurred while monitoring a full bed computer-numerically-controlled three-axis router. (Fig 2) The machine had been triggered by a relatively simple code to run a file that it calculated would take twenty-eight hours to complete. My research assistant and I took shifts “babysitting” this monster, our perch located at the periphery of the room out of the way of flying debris generated by the process and within arm’s reach of the (red) panic button that would shut it all down. Ear muffs softened the noise of the cutting tool as it encountered the resistance of the sheet material. The longer I listened the more attuned I became to the subtle shifts in sound when the tool changed direction or speed. Its drone repeated a hypnotic lullaby. I recall wondering if we were there to protect the life of the machine or issue an authority (marked by my official lab coat) over its possible anarchy. From the centre of the room, it exerted a power far greater than the 240 volts it drew from the electric wall outlet, the switchboard down the hall, the substation on the waterfront and the hydroelectric turbines stealing energy from a stifled river in the New Zealand wilderness.

Reading hooks’ text to pass the time, I sat covered in dust, mesmerised by the machine, isolated by ear muffs and sound-insulated walls, in the bowels of the basement workshop. I realised how hooks’ call to choose the margin as a space of radical openness made sense of my ambitions to operate from a feminist perspective on another kind of marginal space, interior environments. To occupy the margin is not to be deprived or in despair but quite the contrary; it is a “site of radical possibility, a space of resistance … not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives.”

According to hooks, inhabiting the margin fuels one’s capacity to resist oppression, exploitation and colonization. In the wake of this resistance, new worlds can be imagined. When silence is unhinged, as hooks suggests, space is “interrupted, appropriated and transformed through artistic and literary practices.”

In this chapter, I narrate an emerging feminist interior practice situated at the confluence of gender, politics and technology. The wedge/shim is exercised as a multi-purpose low-tech building device, to emphasise the instrumental nature of tools to “make work.” The act of driving, shoving, sliding, slipping, tucking or jamming this cutting lever into place is metaphorically linked to civil disobedience and shown to be politically significant when applied to seemingly inert, banal interior finishing materials. Two creative works, SHEAR and SWELL, are explored in light of the wedge/shim’s instrumental facility to employ feminist strategies that help to imagine what an interior surface can do.
Tooling

One body with two planar surfaces converging towards a common (sharp) edge or two planes veering away from one another as if taking flight towards different infinities, not a perspective, but a common ordinary unassuming sliver of material fashioned to cut/fill a gap, to shore/split something up, to prey/prop something open or to lever/level it away: this is the wedge/shim. (Fig 3)

When you stop and look, you will find the wedge/shim everywhere. I do. I did. In 1996 Emily and Mike Donovan purchased a house on the fringes of an historic neighbourhood close to the centre of Des Moines, Iowa. The house and its immediate surroundings were victims of the urban blight that to this day still plagues the city. The house was but a frame without full enclosure, heat, windows, doors, plumbing or internal linings, effectively a carcass of a past inhabitation. After braving the elements and the local drug scene, the Donovans were informed by council that, as a historic landmark building, any improvements to the house must comply with standards of preservation, the cost of which was more than ten times the purchase price and beyond the owners’ means. As architects themselves, the Donovans invited fourteen artists to make installations within the house to wage a public and productive protest; subsequently, the policy minders decided it was better to have the house renovated and occupied than empty and derelict.

Furniture designer and sculptor Deb Scott and I were one of the groups of artists invited to contribute to this protest. Our collaboration adopted a grass-roots approach where many small acts (and voices) serve to overwhelm a dominant power structure. Figured as political irritants and conciliatory structural details, two hundred pewter-capped timber wedges and shims were inserted into the dilapidated house to literally pry open gaps and shore up walls, stairs and flooring. (Fig 4) This approach employed two notions of tolerance simultaneously: political tolerance and the tolerance factored into joining two or more materials together. While the house could have easily benefitted from thousands of these tools, the reflection of silver caps on the exhibition opening night spoke to the distress of the situation. Each individual cap signified a point of political contention and material weakness. Collectively, they signalled the extent of repairs needed to simply stabilise the frame by virtue of their cutting (critical) edge. (Fig 5)
Fig 4. A second floor plan noting the most significant points of the structure's weakness.

Fig 5. Wedges/shims were strategically inserted into cracks and crevasses that required attention to bring the house back to a level of inhabitability. Each site was embossed with either '(' to mark a place of prying apart or ')' to signify a point to fill up.
Our installation, entitled "()+)(, included a poster plastered to a piece of plywood temporarily serving as a front door, traditionally the site of public notices such as quarantine, eviction, condemned or, more familiarly, "go around to the back," "door bell not working, please knock" and "please leave the package on the porch." The poster was a copy of the historic landmark mission statement rewritten phonetically in order to emphasise spoken (immediately present) over written words (officially sanctioned), as well as to locate the wedge/shim as a tool shaping a protest language and a political and economic argument. (Fig 6) Each hyphen, accent, long and short vowel sign and parenthesis marked a detail of similar weakness to the house.

This is my first recollection of feminism's presence in my practice as an architect, builder, interior designer and artist. This is the story of how the wedge/shim got added to my material and conceptual repertoire. The relation it has to language, especially punctuation, is something that still lingers in my practice. So is its sense of aurality, the spatiality of language. The wedge/shim operates with positive friction. I keep one with me at all times in my "feminist survival kit" which holds a needle and thread, a wad of beeswax, a rubber band, an aspirin and a piece of chalk. (Fig 7) The wedge/shim is the most useful tool in the kit, the best a girl could have to "make work." Its effect is directed by intent managed by the force of the hand that wields the mallet behind it. It makes up or it makes the difference.

Making the difference does not by any means occur in a singular way in feminist theory and activism. One of the strongest points of contention amongst feminists is whether or not one can work within an existing context, organisational system or regulatory process; whether the existing context is susceptible enough to be undermined, sabotaged or even simply used as the foundation for its own critique. This point appears to mark the difference between radical feminists poised to wage public protest and overturn political establishment for a cause (working in opposition to a system), and liberal feminists, who deal with matters within existing processes of dispute or grievance (working within a system). I explored the limits of these two feminist strategies in the context of a project called SHEET GOODS, which consisted of a series of sculptural objects linking actions of civil disobedience to standardised unit materials specific to interiors such as plywood, Medium Density Fibreboard (MDF), T&G flooring and gypsum board.

With each material, I sought to operate with the parameters established by the material's physical character and with reference to its common use as an interior surface as a means of subverting it and possibly replacing it or even revitalising it. In this case, the wedge/shim tool served as...
a conceptual mediator between complete destruction of a material’s structural integrity and a posture of subservience to dominant cultural norms.

Like most post-industrialised countries, New Zealand’s building industry is still geared to standardised unit materials that, by virtue of their modularity, uniformity and pre-designed integration, reduce production costs (theoretically). And just like many other nations, the country’s economy is driven by the construction industry, in particular the housing sector, for as a small nation with a small manufacturing base, we rely almost exclusively on importation of these unit goods. (Fig 8) And in turn, as a result of New Zealand’s idiosyncratic adherence to a second degree of thriftiness and expediency, our built environments, particularly interiors, tend to attain an aesthetic rendered as a consequence of material sheets goods joined by generic details. Speaking very generally, I observe that the interiors in my everyday life as a New Zealander harbour an overpowering trace of the 1200 x 2400mm sheet – a smooth, rigid and homogenous surface applied in uniform thickness to a structural frame. Such interiors are ordered visually and experientially by this unit. The sheet material merely mimics the regulating lines of code, structural efficiency, thermal bridging and property boundary setbacks. In the zeal to maximise floor area, the difference between inside and outside is reduced to a functionally driven membrane. As a reiteration of industrial tenets, interior space becomes anonymous and unresponsive to inhabitation of the particular. In this scenario, design of the interior is at risk of becoming the mere specification of surface appearance, a threat I observed in my former life as an architectural intern where I spent most of my time copying approved generic details from catalogues and writing construction specifications, most of which included the phrases “as equal,” “equivalent to” or “as required,” legal short-hand for the status quo. (Fig 9) I don’t believe this phenomenon is exclusive to New Zealand; it pervades most developed countries.

In this project, smooth, rigid and homogenous are more than formal qualities of manufactured goods; they present an acculturated presumption about material as inert substance. This project inquires about interior finishing materials as affective sites of political resistance. It pries into the material in search of what might be suppressed in the surface and tamed by normalising processes. SHEET GOODS sought to express a dimension to material surfaces typically assumed to be without depth, superficial, ornamental, without meaning and therefore without consequence. To find depth in an interior finishing material seemed to confound what “surface” is typically understood to be; surface depth is something that goes against each term’s identity and

Fig 7. “My feminist survival kit” (2010): a match box, a tinder box, a tool box ready at hand.
yet, suggests that “surface” and “depth” might co-exist as an “intra-action”. As feminist theory writers Stacy Alaima and Susan Heckman state, “We need ways of understanding the agency, significance, and ongoing transformative power of the world – ways that account for myriad ‘intra-actions’ ... between phenomena that are material, discursive, human, more-than-human, corporeal and technological.”

Handbooks on civil disobedience highlight several forms of non-compliance and protest. The most instructive piece of advice stated in the Civil Disobedience Manuals put out by ACTup is to “Go limp”, a posture which makes carrying a protester away more difficult and, in many political states, it is not interpreted as a crime. (Fig 10, 11) This tactic has been used throughout history by individuals and groups refusing to co-operate with injustice, yet “the fusion of organised mass struggle and nonviolence is relatively new.” Feminist movements have successfully employed this tactic; in boycotts, non-cooperation, limited property destruction, civil disobedience, mass marches and demonstrations, filling the jails, and disruption of public ceremonies to make their causes publicly visible. The transformation from a rigid and upright state to a limp, supple and yet heavier state (thus making it more difficult to arrest and transport a protester) is not a sign of giving in or being without power. On the contrary, it is deemed as an effective force of resistance that allows the anger and emotions of injustice (another sign of life) rise to the surface in healthy expression. Curiously, in feminist literature, Canadian academic and feminist Ursula Franklin equates violence with resourcelessness and English Quaker feminist Jo Vellacott aligns nonviolent civil disobedience protest with the agency of resourcefulness. Seeking to extract the “source” of power that knits women with peace, Vellacott rejects what the world tells her power is and opts for a power source kindled by personal belief and strengthened through collective effort. “Power does not come from focusing ... on our disabilities. Power is more likely to come by just going ahead and doing the thing in which we fear our inadequacy.” I wish to add that resourcefulness also carries connotations of thriftiness (economy) and cleverness (creativity), skills often credited to women in general and more often skills linked to survival.

The resistive yet yielding principle “Go limp” resonates deeply with the iterative performances entitled CUT PIECE where Yoko Ono kneeled willingly, patiently, trustingly, vulnerably, subserviently and perhaps stoically on stage as audience members used a pair of large shears to...
cut her garments. This performance, produced iteratively between 1964 and 2011 as nuanced variations, inspired — maybe even invaded — me to add "Go limp" to my feminist tool box. What power it must have taken to sit there so serenely, unflinching, and unconcerned with what a pair of scissors is capable of doing! Furthermore, this performative work of art enabled me to situate my creative practice in relation to what Daniel Barber calls militant architecture, a term he borrows from Antonio Negri “who uses the term to describe the activity of being inside history, of ‘doing, making, constituting history.’” Militancy, in this sense, is not based on duty and discipline, on fidelity to an ideal plan, but rather on the insistence that social conditions are constantly constructed with and by our everyday actions and formalised practices. Within architecture this concept has particular relevance: every project is based in specific social, political, and environmental conditions. The work of the militant architect is to identify and respond to these specific conditions rather than conform to a pre-existing model, to extract from these conditions the political goal most relevant to them. Militancy is the organisation of constituent power, power from below, “capable of crossing all borders and reaching everywhere.”

No matter how persuasively these concepts are intellectualised or how they mirror my overall intent to bring interior environments into political discourse, the pacifist in me will never accept their overriding link to war and violence. I simply assert that acts of un-doing tender forms of emancipation.

Power itself is not derived through violence, though in governmental form it is usually violent in nature. Governmental power is often maintained through oppression and the tacit compliance of the majority of the governed. Any significant withdrawal of that compliance will restrict or dissolve governmental control. Apathy in the face of injustice is a form of violence. Struggle and conflict are often necessary to correct injustice. Our struggle is not easy, and we must not think of nonviolence as a “safe” way to fight oppression. The strength of nonviolence comes from our willingness to take personal risk without threatening other people. It is essential that we separate the individual from the role she/he plays. The “enemy” is the system that casts people in oppressive roles.
If the nonviolent civil disobedience motto “Go limp” suggests an affirmative bodily protest action, then other acts of un-doing lend fruitful avenues for finding feminist agency in material processes and practices. This relational mode of thinking led me to employ processes such as draping, distressing, cutting out and relaxing to sheet good materials that I saw as unjustly suppressed and oppressed. Primarily used by fashion and textile designers, these material processes induce a greater degree of pliability, tactility and variable density to a given textile whereby structure, pattern and surface texture are indistinguishable. The process of increasing weight and vulnerability while exponentially increasing surface area, selectively slicing threads to tinker with the structure of the weave, and bringing “a perfectly good material” to the brink of failure with the intentional application of heat and chemicals offer modes of fertile protest. This process exemplifies the transfer from a protest carried out primarily through social action to a protest lodged specifically in materiality. It anticipates my own protest against material inertia, a pervasive notion that renders material substance as lifeless – rigor mortis.

Japanese textile manufacturer NUNO produces fabrics called BORO BORO that embody this attitude toward material un-doing. They use techniques that, as they claim, translate emotional states into new textiles: ragged, tattered, worn-out, dilapidated, shredded, cut to ribbons, rumble, brittle, fragile, falling (reduced to pieces), worn to a frazzle, frayed (at the edges). The textile processes challenge the fibres’ structural integrity and at the same time elevate their expressive qualities exponentially. “It’s not that our fabrics are bad as woven, but that stresses and hardships bring out character in even inanimate objects ... [they] tug at our hearts with a mysterious emotional warmth.” Though I am dubious about the link between emotional states and textile design, I am keen to expand their use of such processes to reveal the animate in supposed inanimate materials. Contrary to being described as “cruel and unusual treatments” by the NUNO designers, I consider these un-doing processes as part of a non-violent transformative course of action aimed at liberating inert substance as live and expressive. They are simply applications of the yielding principle which employ creative tempering acts not to anneal or align molecules for ultimate strength and virility, but relax, drape and wear in affirmation of the weak and fragile.

Such subtle shift in thinking and intent registers with Katie Lloyd Thomas’ discussion of Aristotle’s differentiation between the “hylomorphic” material as inert and undifferentiated, the servant of form which gives material presence, and a prime matter called “hypokomenon,” located in the substrate, literally lying beneath the surface – “it has the sense of something
behind, something perhaps which can be deduced rather than touched." Aristotle is partially responsible for establishing form’s tyranny over matter’s chaotic nature and geometry’s privilege over material’s plurality despite its plastic nature, a prejudice that Lloyd Thomas states is deeply and persistently embedded in architectural practice. Material is fixed, supplementary, interchangeable and superficial, all attributes that signify it as inert and, in the case of my project, relegated as mere interior surface decoration.

TREAD, the first in the series of SHEET GOODS, represents my first effort using the yield principle to expose the tactile voice of a material surface such that the surface is not divorced from the material as a finish or appearance. I tapered the ends of a section of tongue and groove pine flooring using a spoke-shave tool. Removing material in this way translated a structural engineer’s equation called the modulus of elasticity into a physical reality – the tampered end started to droop. These thin and fragile tips behaved as if they were heavy. Because TREAD was situated as a plateau positioned just above the floor, this yielding surface obfuscated any effort towards ascension or, in feminist terms, “immanence,” a hierarchical goal associated with patriarchy. (Fig 12) It asks anyone who seeks to “step up” to surrender to the material. At the local level of interiors, TREAD highlights the artificiality of interior floor surfaces and the inappropriateness of considering floors as stable and level or even synonymous with ground.

Of the five sculptural objects created in the suite of SHEET GOODS projects, SHEER and SWELL offer the most critical and visceral response to what an interior surface can do given a feminist interior practice and a standardised interior sheet good material. They were conceptualised independently from one another but made in tandem which revealed a curious relationship bound up with assumptions of material standardisation and homogeneity. The following sections bring detail to this dialogue.

Shear-ing

A uniform 10mm thickness of gypsum plaster is sandwiched between two paper sheets which counter the plaster’s brittleness and contribute to its global mobility. The edges are tapered ever so slightly in anticipation of its joining with another like edge. If you run your fingers to the back edge of the sheet you will feel where the two paper faces overlap. They are different surfaces.
One will entrap the dark dusty space between studs with its slightly furry surface and the other will, over the years, flaunt a multitude of slick coloured coats. I have an intimate relationship with gypsum wall board, one that is kindled by a fascination of its plastic, rigid, fragile and forgiving personality and a gut-wrenching repulsion over the way it sucks moisture out of everything living thing around it; demands constant attention (maintenance) and always mirrors my flaws (as a builder) in its blemishes. This mixture of matters of fact and matters of concern introduce my creative sculptural work SHEAR. (Fig 13)

Filleting a sheet of gypsum board is counter-intuitive, even counter-productive, to the practical properties the product offers contemporary interiors. (Fig 14) It negates its fire-resistant property. It propagates a dust-filled atmosphere. The energy to make it smooth is over-ridden by coarseness reminiscent of (unrefined) exterior rubble walls. However, the acoustic value increases and the surface area coverage is doubled with the use of gypsum wall board. At the start, all of these were good reasons to cut the sheet in half, “the wrong way”, to render it unusable (I was told), to go inside the sheet and turn its insides out.21 Such misuse of a perfectly good sheet of material afforded a contemporary twist ot philosopher Elizabeth Grosz’s now well-worn postmodern catchphrase “there is no outside (of discourse, patriarchy, history, power)” inside is everything.22

I could never figure out if it was the way the filleting raised a cloud of dust in the workshop that settled on every surface and clogged the air filters, or the persistent whine of the oscillating saw probing the (dry) fatty tissue that caused a fuss. Day after day, five to be precise, I worked tediously to unfold, unfurl, this dead sheet of calcified velvet. (Fig 15) I admit that there were moments it felt less like shearing a sheep and more like an autopsy than I preconceived. This being the third of five works in the series SHEET GOODS, I could already see a trend; undoing was my form of resistance and the economy was one of gift and sacrifice; all I had to give was my body, my labouring body. Artist Ann Hamilton’s guardian sitting in the gallery amongst the work oblivious to any other human presence, tediously reading a book line by line, burning each line in the process, consuming the book literally and conceptually - this image stood fast with me as I persevered.24 (Fig 16) That was my gift to the cause: to undo, cross out, cross over inertia, to work and write over lines demarcating fortified boundaries between women, men, material, property and space. Over and over again, line after line, working left to right, the saw dug into a horizon line that slowly bore a (radical) openness to the sheet such that, in the end, it hung as

Fig 13. Hung and draped as a freshly shorn supple skin, SHEAR presents a fragile opacity, perhaps a weak architecture, amongst a score of calibrated calculating instruments.
Fig 14. Filleting the sheet of gypsum board the long way meant negotiating its 10mm internal plaster flesh with an oscillating saw. This gesture found me bifurcating what appeared to be an endless horizon of matter.

Fig 15. As I cut, the sheet peeled away from itself (with the aid of a pulley system), confronting me as a new wall surface.
an argument against the perils of industrial manufacturing processes. In addition, these actions bore out an advocacy for weak architecture, a term coined by Ignasi de Solà-Morales, which in its rejection of classical mimesis and monumentality, links to the gesture of "the diagonal cut" to render the world (and architecture) not as a totalised, closed and complete universe but instead, as non-linear, plural, multiform and complex experiences. Through Solà-Morales speaks to the act of detection and excavation from an archaeological perspective linked to recollection, a trajectory not aligned with my research project, his notion of weak architecture promotes processes of decomposition and decoration away from the sense of ugly, vulgar, trivial or mere embellishment towards the secondary function linked to the aesthetic of the accident rather than substance. Solà-Morales argues:

This notion of a deeper or 'embodied' form of knowledge, arising out of the body's interaction with physical "things", is something to which an expressive and articulated architecture can help provide access. The key is to re-establish the link between the eye of the perceiver and the hand of the maker, by inscribing in the surface of the material the 'story' of the making process – restoring the dialectical relation between the 'construction of knowledge' and the 'knowledge of construction', implied in the word technology's coupling of techne and logos. Paradoxically, it is the surface of a material that reveals its true importance for the issue of a narrative dimension in technology. Just as poetry makes use of a kind of 'thickening' at the surface of language in order to heighten the awareness of its own materiality, a poetically articulated technology can help renew our sensibility towards the particularities and pleasures of bodily experience. It is here that the possibility of a symbolic technology begins to emerge, as the full implications of the "lost" language of tectonic expression become apparent.

The surface thickens. My concerns for liberating an interior finishing material with the actual and metaphoric aid of a wedge/shim had not yet taken responsibility for the aesthetic language it was bound to produce. This became ever so apparent when I considered the "deconstructed" fashion designs by Martin Margiela, included in an international fashion trend often referred to as "unfinished", "coming apart", "recycled", "transparent" or "grunge." Margiela creates new garments from linings extracted from vintage dresses leaving their interior structural details

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Fig 16. Ani Hamilton, "tropos" (1993). A reader sits undeterred by gallery visitors from the task of crossing out the text with a soldering iron line by line as she works through the book.
of seams, darts, zippers and interfacings exposed. (Fig 17) In much the same way that sheet materials such as gypsum board plaster are used to line or “fit out” an interior space, Margiela’s fashion aesthetic showcases an investment of labour hidden behind the surface, a visibility Alison Gill names the “structur- ontology” of the garment “... given to the simultaneous bidirectionality of the labour that the garment-maker and clothes perform – i.e., the garment-maker is simultaneously forming and deforming, constructing and destroying, making and undoing clothes.” Curiously, Gill reminds us that the etymology of “garment” includes “garnir”, French for furnish, equip or fit out. Clearly I am bearing vestiges of a postmodern penchant for deconstructionism that has many times over been used to assemble alliances between various acts of assembly: writing, making and theorising.

This is something I struggled with throughout the project – this reliance on language, obsession with the written text, word play and how language insinuates patriarchal dominance. At every turn I tried to channel that way of thinking back to a material language or process, hoping that text would translate as a texture, something one could feel rather than read. For example, another SHEET GOODS project: HUNG plunges towards the floor as a bundle of fragile wafer-thin strips compressed by a horizontal beam recalling the decorative figure of curtain, drapery, pelmet and valance. (Fig 18) This furnishing reconstitutes a sheet of cabinet-grade birch veneer plywood, 25mm thick x 2500mm long x 1200mm wide, successively ripped into 1.5mm strips, the finest slice before the alternating layers of ply start to disintegrate. The veneer plywood sheet’s structural value, married with its natural wood grain surface, lends to its prudent and judicial application as an interior finish. And yet it also serves as a mask behind the thickness of its face such as in a built-in storage cabinet or partition wall. Such economy is not specific to New Zealand. The fact that more than 65% of the sheet was lost to the dust extract system and it took two people more than eight hours to slice the sheet upset the New Zealand building ethics associated with its extravagant $400 price tag. This project reinforced my (human) inability to replicate what machines are supposedly so apt at doing perfectly and repetitively –y laborious tasks – only to underscore Irigaray’s call for a shift of economy, as architectural theorist Jane Rendell eloquently writes:

An economy of the capitalist market is based on pricing mechanisms – specialisation, efficiency, scarcity, maximisation of profit and utility, and on principles of homogeneity, rationalism and calculation. This masculine economy
Fig 19. This image registers the path of the CNC cutting tool across the MDF sheet surface, a drawing that appears anything but logical.

Swelling

A 1200 x 2400mm sheet of Medium Density Fibreboard (MDF) lay prone on the router bed. The router’s gantry surveyed its surface, back and forth, back and forth, up and back, the logic of its path far from legible or predictable. (Fig 19) The cutting bit spun indifferently to the sheet’s matrix of homogenous fibres bound in agreement to be planar by resin, heat and compression. MDF is a standard material used prolifically in interior building construction. Its relative low cost (because the fibres are ground wood waste), workability (because it has no grain) and its versatility lend to its application for cabinetry, furniture and wall linings throughout the industrialised world. Its suitability is linked to its internal make-up which serves a now well-recognised lingering modernist desire for smooth surfaces. This same structural characteristic beaks its Achilles’ heel: MDF cannot withstand strain at the site of fixings (hardware) or, most importantly, moisture.

requires strict delineation of property from the ownership of one’s body to the ownership of the fruits of own labour, it is an economy of appropriation and of the self-same. This exchange economy of masculine subjects involves the pleasure of appropriation, ownership and exchange of women’s bodies in space. Within the masculine economy of patriarchal capitalism women are feminine products of exchange.

Irigaray rejects the masculine libidinal economy and gestures towards a female libidinous economy – a gift economy based on generosity and not lack – endless and without closure. From women’s ability to have a child within her body and yet allow its existence, comes an image of positive giving, an ability to embrace difference and the other, not to dominate and to incorporate. The ability to sustain this diversity contradicts the phallic desire for unity and appropriation and stems from a woman’s closer links to the imaginary, where the difference between mother and child has not yet been established. The economy feminine could be described as a theoretical construct or poetic utopia which can inform practice – showing that profit maximisation is not universal and inevitable in all spheres of exchange.
Having been milled by the CNC machine, the sheet was supine on the workshop table, a portion of its body had been ground to dust and sucked up into the extract system. What remained was a firmly disciplined material body in the formalised image of a Victorian dining room panel complete with a textured wallpaper pattern borrowed from the William Morris collection. (Fig 20) Those who know how such wall panels are crafted would not be impressed with the pristine homogenous surface of this fake wall section, a simulacrum indeed! For they would see the rounded corners and the ridges left by the ball-tipped router bit, a geometrical trace of the technology, less superior to the hand that would have selected every piece with concern for its colour and grain, milled the pieces to meet precisely at 90 degrees angles and lovingly tapped the mouldings into place with fine brads. And yet, it was a technological feat to get the computer file, the tool bit and the machine’s passes and speed working in unison to carve a mundane sheet of MDF into something other than a smooth rigid and practical shape.

The reference to domestic scenes of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, at least those dominating interior design history and theory, was critically purposeful to build a network of associations between interior design’s emergence as a professional discipline, its historical identity linked to decoration and domestic environments, its changing relationship to technology, industry and feminism for social change. The panelled wall would have witnessed most of this flux. A wall panel would have certainly graced the interiors that Walter Benjamin dubbed as phantasmagoria, the English bourgeoisie interiors full of social proprieties and boredom, heavily gilded and draped by linings that protected a private retreat from the external urban realm of soot, crime and finance.31 Panels such as these participated in Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s redesign of the typical American house with concern for health, industry and economy from a Christian woman’s point of view.32 They would have flourished amidst the antics and totalising creativity of the Bloomsbury group.33 Panels such as these would have been at the scene when the Garrett cousins became the first professional interior decorators rather than home-makers.34 Edith Wharton employed, amongst other elements, timber-lined wall panels to bring social, moral and economic order to the home.35 It is out of these same interiors that Elizabeth Wilson coaxed women to inhabit the city for its liberating potential.36 And Jane Rendell’s critical texts opened the door to London’s panel-lined men’s clubs, dark, leather-bound and panelled as they were (are).37

The sculptural object SWELL brings that history of the interior in contact with contemporary...
manufacturing technology to critique its craft and revel in the transformative potential it realised. (Fig 21) At the same time, SWELL raises environmental concerns where the interior is no longer a private retreat but complicit with global well-being. SWELL is a wake-up call to the huge contribution MDF interior furnishings, cabinetry and wall linings make to landfill each year. Its use in interior construction persists despite having been proven as carcinogenic and in spite of the short life of any product made of it.

Over the course of a week, a wall paper steamer infused the MDF sheet with moisture. Sections of the surface blossomed as particles freed themselves from the hold of resinous glue. (Fig 22-25) They extolled the non-homogenous quality of the sheet’s interior at a macroscopic scale. A hideous beauty emerged akin to Robert Polidori’s photographs of New Orleans After Katrina. Both works register the entanglement of forces both human and non. Polidori’s images speak to the conscious of everyone associated with the building of the levees, the re-enforcement of poverty for the sake of capital gain, the development of disaster preparedness schemes and the convenient ignorance which kept these interiors out of sight until Katrina struck and Polidori ventured inside. (Fig 26-28) SWELL is purposefully beguiling and contentious. I watch people encounter it; their first impulse is to poke at it, ruffle the surface, rub the gritty particles between their fingers, marvel at the artificial growth as if the material had gone wild and then shudder at the risk they might be putting themselves in upon remembering that airborne MDF particles have been linked to cancer; the particles are so small that when inhaled, they lodge themselves into the smallest pockets of the lung and cause obstructions to oxygen exchange. The dryness of its material body equals its political candour. The sense of beauty conjured by SWELL turns to an emotionally charged sense of horror. So, while women have expanded their horizons beyond the household to the academy, the office, the factory, the board room and parliament, the environments they inhabit consume them, and the planet.

Yielding

My feminist interior practice did more than emerge in the duration of creating these works: it advanced, raised doubts, circled back, reinforced, shed and produced. What grew out of naivety has stuck hard and fast. (Or should I say soft and yielding?) First, directing my energy to interiors and the materials commonly used to line them, finish them, to initiate that first decorative gesture,
was initially intuitive. I quickly identified the quagmire of trying to qualitatively or quantitatively measure the impact interior environments have on those who sleep, eat, clean, work, bathe, entertain, procreate and yes, die within them. That I could formulate some kind of thesis that equates the liberation of women to interior surfaces seemed foolhardy many points along the way. It was a hang-over from my education in the 1980's where behaviourism induced a cause and effect relationship between that which was social and that which was material, people and environment. I have now cast that way of thinking aside along with any pretension of answering questions about the gender of space. When asked if a space could be feminine or whether the architect was a man or a woman, Elizabeth Grosz calls for the focus to shift to "ways of occupying space and producing places that somehow contest, challenge, and problematise the dominant modalities of organisation, of space and place." 39

Second, I am keenly aware that SHEET GOODS started as a quest to figure out what kind of feminist I was and identify how to liberate women from some evil oppressor, as if something or someone was holding me, us, them, back from some kind of utopian dream of democracy and free will. I came to realise in my own terms that feminism is not a singular identity or political marker. Throughout this project I have witnessed it as a label that has the power to unite but, more usually, it shuts down conversation; people stop listening as if "the fight" is already over or it was never worth fighting for to begin with. I now understand the criticism levelled at how it has been pigeon-holed into three waves, a convenient and simplistic framework that denies its messy internal tensions and nuanced practices from surfacing and multiplying. My own intellectual and making practices were equally as messy, non-uniform, and showing no allegiance to a single platform of feminism but certainly veering towards an emerging model Alaimo and Heckman call "material feminism" which explores "the interaction of culture, history, discourse, technology, biology, and the "environment," without privileging any one of these elements.40

Rather than represent the body, material feminism considers bodies as multiple and corporeal and having lived experiences and biological substance as part and parcel of the concrete world in which they inhabit with other bodies, human or not. This approach is significantly different from postmodern feminist theory dominating the scene for the past two or more decades, effectively a shift away from the textual, linguistic and discursive concerns focused on overturning gendered dichotomies and a move towards bringing material concerns to the fore. In the instance of my creative practice, the body is not a concept, it is a body, a material, sensing, fleshy, live bundle of physical, chemical and psychological forces.
SHEAR and SWELL mediated between and mediated on these distinct paradigms. I see this as a tension in the work. Language still plays a significant role in shaping my practice as does the cultural and critical analysis that makes up the majority of theory on the interior. I would struggle to abandon these familiar forms of social construction yet I feel the pull of the new material ontology insisting on co-constitution of mind and matter, in many cases, matter-minding. My hesitancy to leap towards material feminism rests in the way it is situated primarily in the social sciences, territory not often traversed by artists, poets and designers. With my carpet bag of postmodern feminist theory in tow, and the wedge/shim tucked into my feminist survival kit, SHEAR and SWELL lent me the courage to venture into this new discourse.

Such a shift of focus enabled me to stop worrying if feminism was politically savvy to my doctoral project, my academic career or my creative practice. It spurred me to consider how practicing as a feminist I might not be defending the cause of women specifically, i.e. where women are the subject, but instead how I might use feminism as the agent of liberation in general. bell hooks’ bold statement “Feminism is for everybody” has refreshed meaning. This enabled me to reconcile my fears of embracing feminist philosophy such as those espoused by Luce Irigaray where the dominance of patriarchy is denounced in the same breath that women as equal (or better) is pronounced.  Though persuasive on many counts, this seems to me to only reinforce dualities. Surely the notion of two is not ample enough to represent the diversity of the world. (Fig 29) What I learned in the project SHEET GOODS, in particular SHEAR and SWELL, is that my feminist interior practice was to extend ethical care to materials that we live amongst and to attend liberally to the surfaces that negotiate the threshold between intimate and immense. This is what this project has affected and where my practice then journeyed.

Fig 29. SHEAR and SWELL appropriately displayed in the industrial site of their making and meeting dusty-shorn face to dusty-swollen face.

Fig 2-6, 8-9, 12-15, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 29. Julieanna Preston © 2008, 2009 or 2010.


Fig 10. Still image from video from http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-16267436 Image in public domain.


Fig 16. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

Fig 17. From Maison Martin Margiela défilé Spring – Summer 2008. Courtesy of the designer.

Fig 20. Wiki commons.

Fig 26-28. With permission from the artist.

1 bell hooks, “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness,” in Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990), 145.

2 hooks, Yearning, 149.

3 hooks, Yearning, 150-1.

4 hooks, Yearning, 152.

5 The exhibition opening of Re: BIRTH occurred at 905 Eighteenth Street Des Moines, Iowa, USA, November 16, 1996.

6 Chapter 3: Voice Lessons within this Appropriate Durable Record for a discussion on my project futura, nor so which tests this concept.

7 “This is my feminist survival kit” (J. Preston, 2010) was shown at the 13.5% exhibition, WASH Gallery, Pasadena, California 2010. This exhibition considered the contributions women have made to the practice of architecture since Lucy Lippard’s 1973 landmark exhibition that contested a statement that there were no women making art at the time and also structured by the use of manila folders.


10 Actup, 2.

11 For example: “In 1980 women who were concerned with the destruction of the Earth and who were interested in exploring the connections between feminism and nonviolence were coming together. In November of 1980 and 1981 the Women's Pentagon Actions, where hundreds of women came together to challenge patriarchy and militarism, took place. A movement grew that found ways to use direct action to put pressure on the military establishment and to showcase positive examples of non-violent ways to live together. This movement sponsored women's peace camps at military bases around the world from Greenham Common, England to Puget Sound Peace Camp in Washington State, with camps in Japan and Italy among others.” See Actup, 3.


Daniel Barber, “Militant,” 246.

“Actup, 5.


Lloyd Thomas, Material, 4.

In creative work especially that undertaken as research study, one is always searching to take the work to the limits. In the early stages of SWELL I took a hiatus from the filleting to literally tunnel my way into a sheet of gypsum wallboard. Working from either end, my research assistant and I mined the plaster from the rigid sheet using electric oscillating saws and Dremel tools. It took us more than 3 days to get to the point where our torsos were enveloped by the leather-like paper membrane, at which point I found myself unable to go any further: the sexual and cultural associations the act of mining conjured for me met my limit.


Though I came to this concept through my own making, credit is due to Jane Rendell’s essay “The Undoing of Architecture” for enriching my practice and offering a conduit to her world where architectural construction and feminist philosophy meet. Rendell’s essay takes on at least three different iterations between 1998 and 2010. This excerpt is specific to the iteration published in ed. Jonathan Hill, Occupying Architecture: Between the Architect and the User London and New York: Routledge, 1998, 229-246.


HUNG was curated by Volker Albus to feature in the international group exhibition “somewhat different: Contemporary Design and the Power of Convention” held in 2010 at The Museum Building, Wellington, New Zealand.


See for example Christopher Reid, Bloomsbury Modernism: Modernity, Subculture, and Domesticity (New York: Bard Centre, 2004).


Edith Wharton and Ogden Codman Jr. The Decoration of Houses (London: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1901).


Alamo and Hekman, Material Feminisms, 7.

For example see Lisa Ingrey, The Sex That is Not One (North, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).