Chapter 2

Voice Lessons

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Abstract

How does an interior surface participate in the politics of neutrality? In 2009 I repaired the wall surfaces of a small institutional office space as a creative form of protest against the pervasive use of neutrality to uphold a political position and a material quality without bias. This performative installation, entitled Neutral, not so, tested the political agency of a generic interior surface. A script, scribbled on the wall, structured a typical nine-to-five work day as a one act play with eight scenes that prompted a repetitive sequence of work tasks.¹ The performance cycled through acts of repair (cutting, filling, sanding, wiping and painting seventy-nine holes left in the walls by the removal of shelving), oration (reading aloud from texts on topics associated with neutrality) and documentation (archiving each scene through still and video images). Through these acts I was exploring the capacity of these walls, these interior surfaces, "to speak."
This chapter is directed by several senses of what it means to demonstrate. As instruction, to demonstrate means to impart practical knowledge, in this case, to disseminate information about several industrial construction products, specifically, a standard partition wall, gypsum wall board and white latex interior paint. (Fig 1) Here, demonstration offers instruction on how to carry out a procedure or activity. Such instruction is typically offered to provide basic understanding and optimise end results, the foundation of “do-it-yourself” pamphlets and videos. Demonstration also refers to the exhibition of rhetorical expression, such as communication calling for resistance as protest often taking the physical form of flyers printed and distributed en masse “to the people” in good proletariat style. The graphic quality of these flyers plays a strong role in their message - short punchy bullet points, clear legible fonts, slogans and logos. And finally, demonstration is found in a persuasive argument relative to a political issue, specific to my cause, the capacity of neutrality to be oppressive. One finds persuasive arguments most notably in the context of editorials and most formally in a speech such as in a political campaign or a legal summation to the jury or, as I demonstrate here, in the written form of an essay. Eloquence mixed with logic and relevant case studies, perhaps even a touch of the Socratic Method, render the essay as a far more narrative form of demonstration than the others. The essay builds the case, tells the story, lures the reader in and levies a position with convincing effect.

Fig 1. The scene of a script on a hole-ridden wall. Preston ©2009
Neutral, not so, itself a demonstration in several ways, cast aspersions on two dominant notions central to interior design and contemporary culture. First, that the smoothness, seamlessness and uniformity of industrial processes and products are motivated solely by economies that link industrial nations. Consider how design history has situated the advent of streamlining as a style aligned to evolution: “... sleek shape and its attendant qualities of maximised efficiency and hygiene ... streamline designers embrace the goal of producing ‘ideal’ product types ... that would, at least in rhetoric, contribute substantially towards the realization of an imminent utopia.” The smooth surfaces and organic forms found in nature offer inspiration for design’s functionalist drive to minimise air resistance and energy expenditure—or, at the very least, appear to. Such economy is not just mimetic; it practices streamlining as design’s alignment with evolutions’ “paring away of ‘parasite drag’ caused by ‘the unfit’” ... to serve “a modern aesthetic suitable for a ‘civilized nation.’” Given that building construction industries in general operate on the premise that producing quantities of the same item (goods/products) are designed to respond to the needs and use of most of the population (market), another kind of smoothness is articulated: the homogenising effect that the pervasive use of such products has on the constitution of interior space. Every smooth plaster wall surface registers a desire for complete control over a material, a desire that leaves no room for blemishes or idiosyncratic traces of the maker. While labour intensive, the mass-
produced products and construction systems offer no space for the labourer's creative investment.

The second notion that this essay will address is an assumption that to be neutral is to be without colour and bias, i.e. to be white. As estate agents confirm, neutral coloured interiors are more attractive to buyers. This assumption emphasises the degree to which prevailing tenets of modernism serve to discipline interior environments and their occupation.

Ostensibly, this essay is about the office's two opposing white walls which are framed by timber studs, sheathed in gypsum wall board and finished with several coats of paint. Do not be fooled by this matter-of-fact description; as neither a know-how/can-do manual nor homage to material science, this essay uses such data as a rhetorical platform to link conventional interior materials, finishes and installation processes to the seemingly uncontentious position of neutrality. Though I am utterly convinced by Bruno Latour's case to become the poet that follows the bird beyond the transparent window glass: to question, put aside to even abandon the idea of "letting reality return to our speech" in the search for exactness, truth, proof or other forms of quantifiable knowledge a dominant mode of inquiry. I remain committed to the interplay of facts and concerns as mutually entwined currents of recording and reflecting.
Instructing

The scene of the performative installation was nothing more than a room measuring approximately 3 x 7 metres with an east-facing window. A cellular space amongst many in an urban environment, it is what one might call normal for a university workspace — nothing flashy, just standard issue. The performance began several days before the actual event as I shifted all my personal belongings out of the office. The need to vacate the office was the result of a dispute surrounding equity in the workplace, a situation that at the time was volatile and personal to me, but for the sake of this story, is only peripherally significant; it merely incited the opportunity to protest. Removal of all the metal bookshelves left ruptures in the walls that drew attention to the fact that they had not been safely secured to the internal structure, a frightening realisation considering the weight in books I had just removed from them. With nothing else in the space to distract me, I mused on what made these holes offensive so as to require that they be filled up and the surface continuum resurrected. Other than re-instating the shelves in exactly the same configuration, did the holes not offer any further possibilities? Could it be that the holes revealed breaches to the wall’s interior where fumes, debris, and dead space had been banished? Did the holes insinuate a form of social neglect, abandonment or state of impoverishment? Or did the holes impart traces of occupancy too viscerally laden, like the
odour of used footwear or the stains on mattresses found at the op shop? Inherently I knew the answer had something to do with cultural codes of propriety, a sense reinforced by the fact that every time I shifted house as a child (thirteen times in the space of eighteen years), my parent’s insisted that we leave the house in a better state than that in which we acquired it. This was about duty and obligation, respect for the next occupant and the fine print of tenancy agreements. In academic terms, this impulse to repair the wall served to uphold what I have come to learn as lingering traces of a modernist ethic linked to simple forms, clean lines and smooth surfaces. To repair and repaint was to (hygienically and aesthetically) cleanse the space and dress it in the uniform of standardised interior building products.

Interior design construction manuals provide a glimpse of what that standard uniform is. (Fig 2) A typical interior partition wall consists of timber studs or light-gauge steel units assembled as a flat, even and rigid plane. Structural members are located 16” or 24” on centre depending on the thickness of the drywall in order to maximise the efficiency of a standard sheet nominally measuring 4’ x 8’ (1200 x 2400mm). According to New Zealand Building Standards, gypsum wall board, a.k.a. dry wall or plasterboard, “is a sheet lining material renowned for its properties of stability, fire resistance, acoustic control and bracing. It consists of a plaster core of gypsum encased in a durable face and backing paper.” Sheets are fixed in a horizontal orientation
directly to the skeletal frame. Screw or nail heads are sunk below the board surface to enable smooth rendering with a plaster joint compound. The wall is then “primed” with a paint designed to saturate and unify the pores of the paper coating with the spackled plaster, a process followed by several coats of finish treatment, usually acrylic white paint with a flat, satin or low-sheen texture. A flawless wall surface is dependent on the coincidence of an industrial fabricated material, an installation process prefigured on modularity, power tools and the attention of a “semi-skilled” labourer to maintain a low degree of tolerance throughout installation.

In building construction, tolerance has become quantifiable — a part of science’s role “to render everything measurable, to attach a number to it, and to make sure each thing keeps to its assigned class.” In this case, tolerance is the accuracy of fit between two or more components in a material join. Good fit takes into consideration how materials respond to heat and moisture, how they will be assembled together, and anticipate manufacturer’s deviations in size. I tend to think of it as the sociability factor between detail elements and the processes that bring them into a working relationship. More components equate to more meeting points and hence greater tolerance. Less tolerance yields a better detail, i.e. a detail cheaper to build. This is why buildings with fewer components, details and surfaces are less expensive and it follows, why generic details dominate building construction drawings as “tried and true” examples with less risk of failure.
due to variation or deviation, in other words, points of difference. In exterior building details, more components mean more places that water is likely to get in. Interior details, however, are those that tend to keep the dirty outside out, as Shonfield calls it, “architecture’s project against matter out of place.” (Fig 3) Note that the word tolerance means “1. the capacity to endure pain or hardship; 2. sympathy or indulgence for beliefs or practices differing from or conflicting with one’s own; 3. the allowable deviation from a standard,”12 curiously, a word reaching well beyond the mastic caulking and joining edges, faces and margins of structural elements measured in millimetres.

In construction, common sense prevents your asking ‘why’; the practical leaves you endlessly trying to find out ‘how’. Books on construction are often presented in the form of a handbook, as something that is practically useful, like a guide to motor mechanics...[Their] bland, matter-of-fact style is singularly effective in eradicating controversy and loss of faith – the presentation in the...manual makes the search for belief systems absurd. The details are drawn mechanically, with a constant line and a straight edge. Handwriting is eliminated, and with it any notion that circumstances might call for changes, adaptation or amendment. There is no reference to when or where they will be built; they are ahistorical, incontrovertibly valid for all time.13

Fig 3. Katherine Shonfield and Frank O’Sullivan, Dirt is Matter out of Place (1993), a subterranean public lavatory in Commercial Street London covered in white goose feathers.
The closer regulating standard practices are followed, the nearer a wall comes to a minimum level of tolerance. As Shonfield points out, ideology promoting an economically driven notion of what it is to be natural, rational and sensible takes the guise of product literature from the building-supply industry to reveal that “Common Sense, the Practical and the Classifiable, are alive and kicking.” The instructional practices put forward by “do-it-yourself” literature support uniformity, i.e. to assume an air of perfection in terms of standard contemporary construction. Such instruction is promoted by the state that regulates health and safety measures and the manufacturer who distributes not only the product but communication on the means by which to install and maintain the product. Such instructions are written into the building code as performance indicators, pre-approved and sanctioned installation methods and construction documentation and specifications, and legislated in the guise of product warrantees.

As manufacturer advertisements attest, this is a good product! (Fig 4) Gypsum wallboard is relatively inexpensive, lightweight, easy to install, readily available, thermally and acoustically sound and if that is not enough, it helps keep you safe in the event of fire! What appears as a reasonable and innocuous promotion of material “goodness” translates as a rhetorical construction of the “conception of the good”, a notion usually associated with social politics and the debate on if, how and to what degree a government should regulate independent choice and action.
In recent years, many who call themselves liberals have maintained that the state should not favour, promote, or act on any particular conception of the good. Instead, it should simply provide a neutral and just framework within which each citizen can pursue the good as he understands it. To provide this framework, a government must sometimes interfere with liberty. It must restrict its citizens’ options in order to insure security and stability, promote prosperity and efficiency, and make available various public goods. Also if justice requires more equality than unconstrained markets can provide, the state must intervene to equalize opportunity or resources.

Gypsum board’s abundant presence in the marketplace extends to most home and workplace environments. Such is the reciprocal nature of supply and demand in a free-market capitalist economy. But what does it mean to construct an interior partition that is as generic as the drafted detail that represents it? What level of choice, expression or situated specificity does the industrial system afford? How does such a managed system discipline the labouring body that builds it, or in this case, the labouring body inhabiting the office interior? The above quote suggests that there may be some liberty at stake. If the construction of a simple and common gypsum board interior wall partition is bound up in the political economy that Sher describes, how is the wall and the act of building the wall anything more than compliance to those forces and confirmation of gypsum’s branding as a neutral product?
Acting within these insidious constraints, I felt obliged to repair the holes in order to bring this office space back into line with conditions illustrated by prominent examples of proper surface decorum. Such obligation gained prominence when weighed against the responsibilities between a person or state taking a neutral stance and that of an aggressor in the case of war:

One of the fundamental doctrines of the modern law of neutrality is that a belligerent must refrain from committing hostile acts within the jurisdiction of a neutral power. Correlatively, the neutral is under duty to prevent the commission of such acts. A belligerent's failure to respect the neutral's right makes it liable to respond in damages to the neutral. A neutral's failure to carry out its duty makes it in turn liable to respond in damages to the injured party.16

Surprisingly, my sense of duty was slightly unwarranted. While the Residential Tenancy Agreement17 outlines a legal obligation to “not damage or permit damage to the premises” and to “leave a property clean and tidy, clear of rubbish and possessions at the end of tenancy,” I found no mention in policy or contractual agreements towards the physical maintenance by staff of their university office spaces. Motivated by custom and conscience, I referred to a local building supplier’s installation pamphlet for guidance on repairing these holes:
For holes between 50 and 150mm in diameter a plaster board patch will be required. 1. Cut away the damaged area to a neat rectangular hole. 2. Sand the area around the repair to ensure the best adhesion between the compound and the painted surface. 3. Cut a piece of plasterboard that is slightly longer (approximately 20 mm) than the hole, but small enough to fit through the hole. 4. Place a 60mm flat head nail through the centre of the plasterboard and coat the ends with GIB Tradeset 20. 5. Insert the patch into the hole. 6. Pull toward the front using the nail. 7. Once hard (approximately 1 hr) gently push the nail back through the patch. 8. Using a broad knife, fill the hole flush to the surrounding area with GIB Tradeset 20. 9. Leave to dry for approximately 48-72 hours. This longer time is required because the plaster is very thick. 10. Apply a thin coat of GIB Plus 4 over the patched area. 11. Leave to dry and sand or wet sand the area smooth. 12. Decorate the area as required.

These helpful instructions facilitated a straightforward do-it-yourself task. However, these instructions also signified an allegiance to standard industrial building material products and systems, which, according to editor, typographer, writer and critic Robin Kinross, stem from the dream of “an ideology-free or ideologically neutral world made possible by advances in technology, by an abundance of material goods, by the spread of representative democracy and the eclipse of rival
political systems, and by mass education.”19 Like Kinross, I am highlighting a binding relationship between material attributes and social politics such that building a simple wall is understood in a wider social context and regarded as a critical act no matter how banal the situation. What appeared to be a simple mending task, proved to be vestiges of “... the faith of modernism: the belief in simple forms, in reduction of elements, apparently not for reasons of style but for the most compelling reason of need – the need to save labor, time, and money, and to improve communication.”20 Such uniformity tends to infiltrate social norms through three modes of diffusion: information disseminated via mass media, sharing best practice in an innovative environment, and imitation in an effort to blend in or gain status. The level of uniformity is factored by the number of people who have access to the information, the relevance the standard has to potential users, the degree of interpretation embedded in the standard, and the effectiveness of their implementation.21

In their raw state, the holes spoke of the ways that this material had been manipulated to achieve its pristine and uniform state. (Fig 5) After having been quarried, crushed, dried and ground to a fine powder, crystalline hydrous calcium sulphate is heated to 175°C where it loses most of its water content and gains its ability to fend off threatening flames.22 A slurry of calcined gypsum, starch, water and sizing admixtures such as rosin and alum is poured between special paper faces and passed between sets of rollers that reduce
it to the desired thickness. The passage from a wet formless substance to a semi-dry stiff plane culminates as the continuous ribbon is sheared into desired lengths and sent to cure in a high temperature kiln. Stacked and bundled on palettes according to grades of moisture susceptibility, these uniform plates prefigure a future interior.

In contrast, my semi-unskilled labour highlighted plaster’s propensity to elude regulation: the fine plaster dust permeated my pores, caked my nasal passages and infiltrated every nook and cranny of the room. There was no escaping it, no containing it; it was feral. Shallow reliefs of plaster (also known as “holidays”) made visible in the low angle of the morning sun exposed my inexperience at wielding the trowel. Trying to comply with but subvert science’s glee to classify, to establish a taxonomy for everything, I gave each hole a hand-lettered name according to its unique location on the wall, a process which formed the basis of organising my photographic archive. (Fig 6)

Such up-close and personal scrutiny of each hole made me appreciate each one’s point of difference from the rest. And yet, as the performance progressed, each hole was absorbed back into the matrix of the wall in allegiance with the normative values inculcated by the dominant forces of an industrialised economy and the social mores of the workplace; a proper office should have smooth white walls, no holes. In this way, the performative installation’s gesture to restore the wall’s smooth, flat and seamless surface

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Fig 6. A photographic sample of a sequence of hole repairs.
was an act that erased difference as it upheld the status quo, an act I saw as a critical rehearsal of everyday events with the material, in the office and in the world, in general. The critical commentary extended across scales of space and concern.

Neutral, not so was guided conceptually by Hans Haacke’s site-specific artwork *Shapolsky et al, Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971*, an exhibition displaying factual data taken from public records on a prominent New York family-based corporation The Shapolsky Group’s real estate operations related to the sale and acquisition of large numbers of impoverished housing buildings in The Lower East Side and Harlem. (Fig 7) Citing the risk of subsequent legal action for “revealing the identity of private individuals and the clear intention to call their actions into question”24, the Guggenheim Museum director Thomas Messer (at the decision of the Museum’s Board of Trustees) cancelled the show only to have the issues made public in the media shortly thereafter and the exhibition content find its way into a subsequent exhibition in 1985 at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, NY. At the time, Haacke was one of a group of artists intervening in public institutions and discourse while testing public reception of works of art. Haacke was prepared to let the public draw their own conclusions as to the relations between slum lords, urban development, real-estate practices, the right to information and the role of the museum in mediating, supporting, defending or standing at arm’s length from the reality of a heated political situation.” Rosalyn
Deutsche highlights it as a sign of art’s severance from economics and of art’s retreat into the private autonomous and harmonious domain of the bourgeois interior (of the museum) sequestered from the conflicts and collision of interests of capitalist society, in her words, a shelter and citadel. Deutsche claims that the specificity in Haacke’s art work “militates against neutrality,” the kind of neutrality that “interrogated modernist assumptions about the museum’s status as a neutral arena cleansed of social and political concerns” signified in the white walls of the institution and the kind of neutrality that deflects engagement in deference to the consequences or the implications of aesthetic impropriety. Haacke assembled maps, created charts, photographed buildings and plans and displayed them in the museum, effectively letting them speak for themselves. Ultimately this art work was a demonstration on and of the museum as a politically-charged but repressed public, but seemingly privatised interior. I learned a lesson from Haacke’s work and Deutsche’s essay: Raw data is telling; facts have the capacity to be more than archival records; when assembled in systematic ways, they have the power to be hard-edged political instruments, just like the raw surfaces of the office interior of Neutral, not so. I acted directly on and with those white walls.
“Speak. Say everything that comes to you. Just as it comes to you, right here, now. Don’t omit or exclude anything. Don’t worry about contradictions or conventions. Don’t organize what you say. Etc.”

During the performative installation, I read aloud excerpts from various texts on the subject of neutrality and allied topics of whiteness, standardisation, uniformity, generic, normal, equity, universality and so on. Donning a white dust coat, I stood at the far end of the room, back to the camera and window, face to the door and anyone that might (dare) enter. The video audibly recorded these readings and visually recorded the surface of the white coat animated by my breathing and speaking. (Fig 8) At first my reading voice was edged by angry protest. Despite publicity generated by posters, email invitations and word of mouth, I was very much aware that I was shouting to an un-gathered audience. As the day wore on, I grew increasingly weary and indifferent to whether anyone was listening at all. I took note of the words I was expressing — how my mouth shaped them, how my breath regulated their flow, how enunciation changed their meaning and how my hand movements embellished their articulation. The surface and volume of the room echoed, absorbed and rattled in syncopation with my voice which was now lighter, more coy, more varied in intonation. Like a variant of the circular breathing technique developed by jazz musicians to inhale and exhale while simultaneously playing a saxophone, I gradually...
became more aware of the interplay between my body, its breath, its transmission of the text through speech and the role the room and its surfaces had in that exposition. Visitors entered, lingered, even leaned against the walls to listen. I would like to think that these orations practiced Irigaray’s call to use speech as enunciation machinery against a form of gendered neutrality hidden in language.29 Using the room and its surfaces as a site to pitch a verbal protest privileged “the mother tongue” where the voice of speech is an “instrument of (re)production, as vehicle, or as object...” that crosses from the inside to the outside of discourse.30 The room and I were neither occupant and container nor human and environment, but instead a network of coupled and entwined interiors sharing resonant wave lengths across surfaces that vary by corpuscles, coarseness, vibrato and reverberation indexes.

In like manner, the readings were no longer texts written for academic consumption in the detached, disinterested and disengaged voice of proper social science research. They transcended their typographic bodies as black text, usually Times Roman or Arial font, on white paper. They were no longer harnessed by objectivity’s aspiration “to knowledge that bears no traces of the knower – knowledge unmarked by prejudice or skill, fantasy or judgement, wishing or striving. Objectivity is blind sight, seeing without inference, interpretation or intelligence.”31 I subverted the neutered language of these texts through the accent, amplitude, range, inflection, intensity, timbre and volume of speech projected
from my body into the room, onto the room, its surfaces acting reciprocally to absorb or reflect it. Such is the plain and simple stuff of acoustics.

At times this enunciation machinery (Irigaray’s term) extended out into the corridor and the studio space beyond the office; the room became a megaphone. This transition of voice demonstrated Gui Bonsiepe’s statement, gendered as it is, “As soon as he begins to give it concrete shape, to bring it within the range of experience, the process of rhetorical infiltration begins.” If rhetoric is the art of using language so as to persuade or influence others as well as the body of rules observed by a speaker or writer in order that she may express herself with eloquence, it must necessarily extend to communication via aesthetic visual and material objects. Though Kinross speaks specifically to information design, he reinforces my reasoning:

[This is] a simple reminder that nothing is free of rhetoric, that visual manifestations emerge from particular historical circumstances, that ideological vacuums do not exist. In the context of the present rather intensely charged and volatile political atmospheres of even the “stable” Western nations, it may not be necessary to labor such truths. The rhetorical interlarding that these cultures effect in their material and visual production hardly needs decoding. That is certainly so if one thinks of the more blatant products of the Western cultures of consumption... Therefore,
we need to keep awake, applying our critical intelligences outside, as well as inside, ... questioning and resisting.33

It follows then that even a wall surface is capable of rousing a political rally, a useful realisation when the neutrality of commonly accepted design aesthetics is in question. So—how might an interior surface speak? Does it do it at the bidding of a human hand, the maker, who, in the making, invests meaning into mute or dead materials? Or does this action summon expression latently residing in a product’s material interior substance? Jacques Rancière assists in arguing the point:

A ‘surface’ is not simply a geometric composition of lines. It is a distribution of the sensible. For Plato, writing and painting were equivalent surfaces of mute signs, deprived of the breath that animates and transports living speech. Flat surfaces, in this logic, are not opposed to depth in the sense of three-dimensional surfaces. They are opposed to the “living.” The mute surface of depicted signs stands in opposition to the act of ‘living’ speech, which is guided by the speaker towards an appropriate addressee ... In opposition to the Platonic degradation of mimesis, the classical poets of representation wanted to endow the ‘flat surface’ with speech or with a ‘scene’ of life, with a specific depth such as the manifestation of an action, the expression of interiority, or the transmission of meaning.34
Engendering eloquent surfaces, manifesting a “scene” of life, I profess, is one of the mainstays of an interior design practice. The selection and specification of fabrics, paints, textures and materials occupies the normative activities of the discipline. Orchestrating the spatial arrangement of these surfaces is a craft that draws on professional expertise. These attributes of interior design target more than competent provision of services; these are interior design’s oratory tools. For example, what could be more rhetorical than the use of colour? As Robin Kinross exclaims, “Color is perhaps like music: It can play on our senses. How, we do not quite know. But suddenly we are seduced. And is not this a rhetorical manoeuvre, in the sense of a set of rules for making information eloquent and more easily understandable, and then — more than this — for sweetening it and slipping it down our throats?” Though Kinross’ statement emphasises the power of colour to invoke pleasure, it also has equal capacity to influence and punctuate social values including prejudice as a persuasive political tool.

The seemingly benign use of neutral colours in interiors then is cause for concern. Citing a tactic to increase spaciousness, sales and “create a blank canvas”, Diana Young’s article “The Material Value of Colour: The Estate Agent’s Tale” reveals the depths to which neutrality as a preferred aesthetic language permeates popular culture. (Fig 9) It is here that the neutrality insinuated by shades of grey in Western science has been overturned for a fashionable hue of impersonal whiteness in Western

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Fig 9. Anything but white, a page from 2009 The Resene Whites & Neutrals Colour Chart.
interior environments. As Young’s interviews with estate agents attest, those hues signify a state of cleanliness associated with good morals and a high level of maintenance. Young writes:

The ‘blank canvas’ nature of walls of beige, white, magnolia or cream minimizes their material presence ... In the critical discourses of modern architecture, white surface first becomes ‘natural’ and then gradually becomes just surfaces, all references to colors ceasing. Whiteness has become a ‘given’ of modernist history ... At the point of sale or rent, colour is too personal, too emotive, and too problematic and can only mar the product, making it appear unnatural and irrational compared with the socially acceptable, genderless, given currency of neutrality as well as producing the unfortunate effect of binding the property to its vendor.

This practice of using colour as a rhetorical tool to erase the particularity of human presence incites a collection of critical descriptors: efficient, sobering, serious, frugal, fearful, oppressive, subduing, passive, tranquil, undemanding, “hovering on the brink of disappearance” and most germane to my protest, “embodying a socially constructed rationality.” To say the least, it makes me wonder about what was actually in play while cleaning all those houses I live in as a child. More importantly, how might the colour one chooses (innocently or not) to paint a room invoke gender, ethnic, cultural or
racial bias to future inhabitants (however temporary their stay might be)?

Many passionate arguments have been made around race as a dominant form of whiteness, a convenient construct of deep-seated discriminating economic and material practices that are “designed to ensure long-term survival of the culture’s worldview.” While the use of neutral colours may prove liberating within a housing market, the perception of skin colour has quite a contrary effect. Speaking to the subject of architecture and equity with a specific focus on whiteness, Craig Wilkins identifies “whiteness as a historical and socially produced concept that works to grant or deny different life opportunities. It is argued that whiteness is a form of cultural capital, similar to economic capital, and concludes that becoming aware of the advantage that whiteness provides is a necessary requirement to challenging it ... As such, whiteness is often discursively hidden within concepts like neutrality or universality.”

Whether the pigment of paint or skin, it appears that colour is far from just neutral. As the preeminent tone of assumed neutrality, white and whiteness are shown to mask dirt, prejudice, imperfection and political values operating behind and on the surface.

A trip to my local paint shop confirmed what is obvious to every interior designer faced with specifying colours: white is more of an idea than a reality. Every white or neutral paint sample I looked at had a hint of another colour in it. Each sample I tested on the room’s existing walls...
incited a phenomenal riot as it reacted with the colours in the carpet, my jersey, the façade of the building across the street and so on.

Persuading

What was contentious in this performative installation?

The installation was a protest against neutrality as a common and unquestioned brand in contemporary culture. At a personal level, I was protesting a mandate made by my employer which used workplace equity policies to withdraw support for my individual development as an academic researcher. This form of neutrality endorsed equal treatment for all at the expense of the pursuit of excellence for one; it supported mediocrity in the disguise of fairness. At a professional level, this performative installation sought to expose the degree to which interiors are governed by the standard industrial materials with which they are constructed. Twenty-nine years of experience as a design practitioner and educator reinforces my position that the specifying of construction materials, installation processes, fixtures and finishes does not typically include consideration of their political inclinations nor question the ethics or the values on which they are grounded. These processes and products are so readily available and frequently upheld as exemplars of “good design” in popular and professional journals.
that the will-power to resist employing them is weak. This protest was about bringing this issue to bear, making it apparent and obvious, making it a political issue specific to interior design but symbolically relevant to a larger audience entrained by assumptions over the neutrality of neutrality.

**Neutral, not so** was an experiment using my labouring body and the surface of the interior to mount a public and spatial demonstration. To do this necessitated re-enacting the forms of neutrality at play in the use of simple and banal building products, repairing them in line with the manufacturer’s instructions and matching the colour through trial and error. (Fig 10) In one sense, my performance was not unique in that all around the world on any given day the same task is repeated by many other labourers yet without the spectacle of academic discourse orated as if it were poetry.

As I reflect on **Neutral, not so**, I recognise the value Mark Wigley’s book, *White Walls Designer Dresses*, had on theorising the event. Re-charting canonical histories of modern architecture in relation to whiteness, surface and fashion, he uncovers the spatial politics of suppression and oppression in the guise of cultural codes to what is ordinary, standard and apparently acceptable. His cause, in part, was for architecture to recognize that it is clothing and that the default “fragile coat of white” was a dissimulation of “architectural discourse’s institutionalised opposition to dissimulation.” He writes:
It is not a question of the idiosyncratic and suspect desires of particular architects and historians. Rather, it is a question of the institutionalized logic that they simply reinforce and exploit. Indeed, it is the very ordinariness of such statements that marks their force. It is the taken for granted status of these structural biases that is aligned with the white wall. They are its props. The wall can only be taken for granted when these biases are operational.42

I am reminded of my own fragile white coat visually sounding its own chorus of voices, those heaving, gesticulating and twitching voices spewing discourse, delivering a lesson.

Despite enduring efforts to render neutrality as fair, equitable, and unbiased, the evidence suggests neutrality may at best signal non-commitment, refusal or inability to make a choice or it may offer a place of safe hiding. This is not the essay that will rectify that situation by introducing a new definition or big idea, nor is the installation meant to offer a solution in terms of an aesthetic design practice. What it does do, however, is augment existing literature, and more importantly, design practice, with more doubt and disbelief in neutrality’s dominant character — to be distant, uninvolved, dispassionate, without opinion, non-positioned. It underscores the fact that interiors are political environments and their material
construction and historical interrogation are anything but neutral. Though written with specific regard to the context of race and whiteness, I wish to invoke Lesley Naa Norle Lokko’s question as a closing: “What are the implications — and alternatives — for both the maker and the product, if the vision [of neutrality] is no longer shared and the language no longer tolerable?” It is unlikely that this essay will change the face of prejudice that concepts of neutrality promote. That is long term work much more demanding than filling holes in a wall. If it were to persuade interior designers to reconsider how and what materials are specified, how built environments reflect but also promulgate paradigms that reinforce nominal, generic, standard, homogenous space and therefore extend those qualities to the occupation of those spaces and places, this demonstration would have been heard.
Neutral, not so: A Performance Script

- Gather tools/supplies, put on coat/mask, set up computer/web cam, lay drop cloths
- Photo series 1
- Open door, 9:00 am
- Scrape
- Photo series 2
- Sand
- Oration 2: [FAD-Architecture] (email) Message from David Bibby, Thursday, 26 February 2009 10:14 a.m. sent by Diane Brand.
- Photo series 3
- Wipe
- Oration 3: Victoria University of Wellington Staff Development Policy, Human Resources Policy Group, Section 4.4 [internal document], (1 May 2008), 4.
- Photo series 4
- Fill
- Photo series 5
• Sand/ wipe
• Paint
• Photo series 6
• Close door
• Remove tools, supplies, step ladder and drop cloth
• Photograph room
• Exit office 5:00 pm

Image credits
Fig 1, 5, 6, 8, 10. Julieanna Preston © 2009.
Fig 2. from Mark Burry and Julieanna Preston, Construction Primer (wellington, NZ: VUW Press, 2000), 153. Primer © 2000
Fig 7. © 2012 Hans Haacke / VISCOPYL. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.
Fig 9. Courtesy of Resene NZ.
The script including the references to the orated texts is included at the end of this essay.


Cogdell, “Product or Bodies,” 45.


Shonfield, “Purity and Tolerance,” 37.


Shonfield, “Purity and Tolerance,” 37.


25 Deutsche, Evictions, 162.
26 Deutsche, Evictions, 165 and 192.
27 Deutsche, Evictions, 161.
28 Luce Irigaray, To Speak is Never Neutral, trans. Gail Swab (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), 137.
29 Irigaray, To Speak is Never Neutral, 138.
30 Irigaray, To Speak is Never Neutral, 140.
42 Wigley, White Walls Designer Dresses, 361.
43 Naa Norle Lokko, White Papers, Black Marks, 27.