



NIGEL HELYER

**BIG A
THE
BELL**

BIG

BELL

BIG BELL BETA



Dedicated to Fionn and Zoë

Thanks to:
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The Residency



Nigel Helyer was artist-in-residence at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts when it began activities in a century-old boys' high school in downtown Perth. The building comprised a library, twenty two classrooms, and a large main assembly hall vaulted by a twenty metre high ceiling. During the time of Helyer's residency - Oct. 89 to Feb. 90 - two opposing views of how to modify the old building as a suitable venue for the arts were under consideration.

One view held that the building should be gutted, erasing all evidence of its past function. The opposing view was that the building was almost a good enough art venue as it stood - a challenge! Just sweep the floors! Various funding delays made the latter option became fact and this allowed artists, through an open access programme that lasted for over a year, to work out the spaces in practice before the final brief was agreed with the architects.

Since so much contemporary art addresses the physical context of its installation, either working in harmony with or deconstructing the ambience (the shorers-up and the tearers- down as Seamus Heaney has it) any attempt to predict appropriate built-structures for all possible future art practices seemed misbegotten by definition. However many of us involved in setting the architectural brief believed that what was special, even eccentric, about the space configurations of the old high school should be preserved as they seemed to offer the promise of new

information. (At least certain installations would engage location problems that were specific to the PICA site and disclosures might offer more than a generalised account of 'the container' and the controls of modernist 'architecture for art'.)

The scale and location of the 'Big Bell Beta' installation in the central area of PICA created a pivot around which spectators - in order to get the work - moved through the spaces at both levels of the building and the height of 'the bell' lifted the gaze to the distinctive fenestrated ceiling which seemed to reflect from above, in fold-out pattern, the form of the three dimensional skeletal 'bell' below. 'Big Bell Beta' was among those first experimental installations at PICA to confirm that the character of the old high school building, of itself, could contribute to the richness of certain art projects. The architects managed to preserve much of the character of the original building in the final plans while opening out many of the old classrooms to better accommodate art and the public.

Besides testing the building as a venue for art, PICA believed that Nigel Helyer would create a work for Perth that would have relevance to the cultural history of Western Australia. The artist had lived in Perth, he had explored huge tracts of the immense land-mass of the state and he had an interest in the history of its development.

'Big Bell Beta' not only brought the past into the present but foreshadowed, in some ways, a crisis that would strike the state of Western Australia soon after Helyer's work was completed. A Royal Commission exposed the hubris of boom-town politicians and the cupidity of high-flying financiers in the matter of, among other things, the mining industry. The dolorous litany that comprised the daily reports from the hearings of the Commission took on something of that



Big Bell, W.A.

air of interminable woe which characterised the voice texts discharging from Helyer's 'bell'. If one merged the art and the life events in one's mind, a resonating local epiphany was generated to toll in memory - for as long as that might last. *Wasn't Alan Bond's company called Bell something or other?* But that was yesterday and the Dreamtime of Perth resides in the future, in the distance. When life beckons, with all its boom-town promise, it is inevitable that art is left with the sometimes somber task of remembering.

Big Bell Beta. Perth.



"....this land wealthy and casual as a holiday".
John Berryman.

Perth is a singular city, a distant city; the myth of distance is central to Perth's singularity. It is not just that Perth is physically distant from other cities but its sustaining historical myth; Pastoralism and Goldmining - the Frontier! - lies outside the city. The source of the city's affluence; the distant mines and the outlying wheat belt are, for Perth and for the most part, faraway abstractions.

Occasionally these abstractions are brought to vivid life when farmers dump dead sheep on the steps of Parliament to protest the falling price of livestock, or block city traffic with tractors to remind Perth that wheat is a staple of the city's ontology. For a few days the outback invades the city until the city stalls, baffled by this extrinsic other. Eventually, and uneasily, the city pays the price - and 'the Strangers' disappear. In the aftermath the Casino hums: Perth incorporates, faxes, deals, services,

consults, liaises and advertises as, once again, a white mythology of everlasting, retrievable, rock-bottom, material wealth, - somewhere out there - stabilises.

Helyer's 'bell' installation, a simulacrum of industrial mining, brings to a city gallery all the eerie surrealism of a real life pastoral protest. Within the main space at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA) the spectator/auditor encounters a skeletal bell structure some eight metres in height by some six metres in diameter. Mounted on a massive rocking base, the 'bell' slowly relays a series of sound texts, punctuated by the ubiquitous voice of a talking clock; counting down time every five seconds. The main 'bell' structure might be a central motor - all that remains of a once ceaseless and repetitious means of production - now winding in, recalling its history, being itself wound in, and down, by an implacable entropy. This lumbering, alien metaphor from the *Realms of Catatonia* confronts the manicured surface of the city: it speaks of subterranean events allowing us to glimpse, perhaps, the sorry unprotected heart of a world without myth, without history.

Perth itself grants strange disclosures whenever workers excavate its main streets. Every city, agape in this way, confuses the mind with its tangled world of cable and conduit but Perth, in addition, stuns comprehension by uncovering the ominous, local and explicit knowledge that *down there all is sand*! To the technologically uninitiated the very actuality of the city can begin to partake of myth.

For a painter the greys, pinks and creams of Perth may seem to rise naturally as secondary and tertiary colours from this sandy ochre base - an ice cream palette of simple desire - a benign, shimmering city, but for Helyer:

Counting construction cranes is the best way of keeping in tune with this city. The tip of the mechanism is a sure index, pointing vertically downwards to a place of scraping away.... a site of massive reverberation, pumping liquids, and gases, and signals, and energy to fuel the functions of the superstructure. Men are working here, feverishly as surgeons, opening and closing the viscera as fast as possible so that this other city is exposed for the shortest period only.¹

Helyer likewise excavates; unearthing alternative narratives, sounding out unremembered texts. The artist's soundings sometimes bring him to the threshold of the neo-Gothic (Stephen King and J.G. Ballard work this territory) while the symbolic voice of 'Big Bell Beta' relaying 'time lost' from the world of myth seems to evoke certain ironies and nostalgias from the post-modernist itinerary, but Helyer's practice so assiduously appropriates the historical concerns of Russian Constructivism that the radical modernist voice is dominant; sustaining the possibility of an art that can redress and heal.

Because his 'Big Bell Beta' enterprise was difficult, its aims ambitious and because he aspired to retrieve the memory of a region of Western Australia apt to be forgotten by its capital city - adept at forgetting - Nigel Helyer was welcomed to PICA as artist in residence.



CONIC/SONIC

Nigel Helyer

In 1904 a farmer was following the sound of a condamine bell. These cow bells, cut from old circular saw blades, had such a piercing sound that farmers could track stray animals five miles away. It was hard for a horse or cow to get lost when it was wearing a condamine bell.

The man climbed to the top of a hillock to get a better view. As he stood there looking around, the bell sounded again - still far away. From then on, the farmer always called the hillock "Big Bell". The name spread and stuck.²

Noel Sheridan ~ Where exactly is Big Bell? When and how did you first come across it?

PERTH - 31° 57' Latitude South. 115° 52' Longitude East.
BIG BELL - 27° 19' Latitude South. 117° 39' Longitude East.

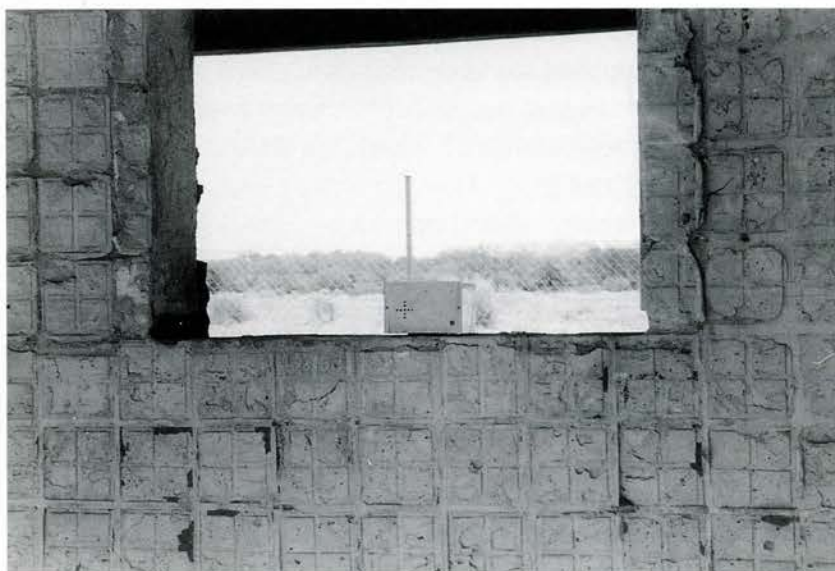
"All my stories about Big Bell involve maps. I am one of those rash travellers who refuse to believe in being lost, rather I find it difficult to locate myself on a map. So it was during a period of (temporary) disorientation, enroute to the ochre mine at Wilgamia, that I came upon one of those handmade bush signs, flaking white paint and uneven black lettering, bearing the legend "Big Bell". It was pointing nowhere in particular, but then it had a name! In an even more anecdotal vein I must mention that as a child I practised campanology (bell ringing) and so this sign board seemed to have been placed as a special message for me. I found myself in a ghost-town and simultaneously located myself on the map **Big Bell. (abandoned)**. My position was now identified - I was 'nowhere'.

"From that first visit I can recall two strong reactions. The first was an overwhelming sense of déjà-vu upon encountering a large decaying Art Deco hotel (carrying the painted message 'The Pub With No Beer').

CHAPTER 2



3. Big Bell townsite, ladies bar + bottle



4. Big Bell townsite, talking box on window sill



5. Big Bell townsite, view of hotel from rear

Dèjà-vu is a very distracting feeling. Why should I be plagued by it in this unknown situation? What was the architecture of a 1930's English sea-side town doing here? Why was such a recent example of architectural history in ruins? Norman castles are easy to cope with, the occasional bombed cathedral in Europe, fine, but an Art Deco ruin in the desert was much too difficult to countenance! But the most disturbing aspect of this situation was that despite its decayed condition I was familiar with this building.

"The secondary response, which compounded my confusion, was derived from the apparent size of the township. Walking the street pattern and the old rail-road bed produced a sense of vertigo in which the evidence of my senses refused to match my understanding of normal processes of history and decay. How did such a recent and obviously large community vanish? Where did it all go? The only structures rising above ground level were the remains of the hotel, a chapel, a water-tower, the odd wall and the ubiquitous rusted Dodge sedan (fine cars in their time!). The scenography was perfect but the timing was all wrong. The alternative scenario, which granted me previous existences did nothing to release me from this chronological and spatial impasse.

"Several months later my dèjà-vu flooded back in a form of resolution as I drove past the Scarborough Beach Hotel - dead ringers! Identical architectures simultaneously manifest in two polarised (but equally sandy) locations. The beach and the desert had been joined by an architect's blueprint long before the era of fast-food franchised architecture!

"Several years later, a friend in Sydney gave me an old school atlas. Turning to the page for Western Australia I found only four towns marked within the ochre coloured outline. Perth, Albany, Kalgoorlie and Big Bell!



6. Big Bell Hotel



7. Big Bell Beta - construction detail



8. Big Bell Hotel, Graffiti of girl + soundbox

Dear Noel,

The following notes will give you a general conceptual structure and an outline of the technics involved for the planning of "Big Bell" a twin site sculptural installation to be realised during my Artist-in-Residence at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (Dec 1989-Feb 1990). The two sites are the main gallery space of the Institute and the abandoned townsite of Big Bell, located some seven hundred kilometres away in the Murchison goldfields, bridged by a conceptual sonic text.

In brief the project considers concepts of what I term the "Boom Town/Ghost Town" cycle in which architectures, generated within specific socio-economic and historical boundaries, are inscribed with maps of their own redundancy and which inevitably drift toward an entropic zero.

The work will span the geographical and historical divide established between the materiality of Perth's urban centre and its phantom and mythologised hinterland. Digitised voice-texts installed at both sites will puncture the convenience that "the tyranny of distance" has become.

The synthetic voice of the talking clock, the town-crier of capital, will be manifest as stand-alone electronic mechanisms physically embedded within the eroded fabric of the Big Bell Hotel - the principal remaining structure of the township. This vocal outpost is reiterated within the city by establishing a massive image of "production" - a mechanism that is within "full-view", in contra distinction to its habitual removal to the interior/to elsewhere.....³

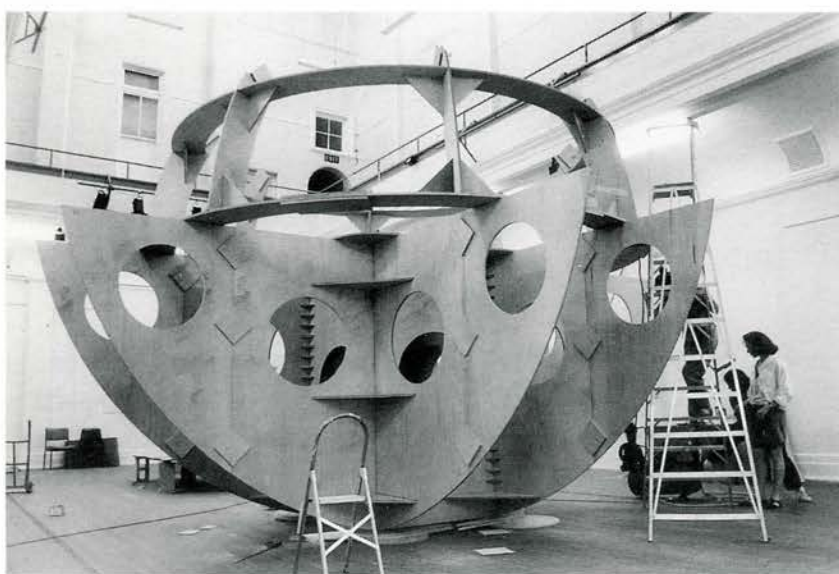
"Perhaps I should try to establish a context for the Big Bell project by outlining some of my general preoccupations. One of the driving interests that underpin my practice is a fascination with metaphoric structures. In simple terms these structures are generated through the juxtaposition of volatile elements which are coerced to enter into an uneasy symbiosis of difference. The conceptual material(s) need not necessarily be in opposition but I enjoy the process of mutualising contradictory or conflicting situations; taking physical and philosophical elements normally intolerant of one another and compacting them to form a resonant conceptual structure. This process is analogous to the

fabric of a joke or pun, in which one sign or one icon is asked to adopt several (and frequently irreconcilable) meanings, to act as a hinge point joining two or more incompatible narratives - so we arrive at the idea of polyvalent structures which shun linear narrative by developing a matrix of potential meanings.

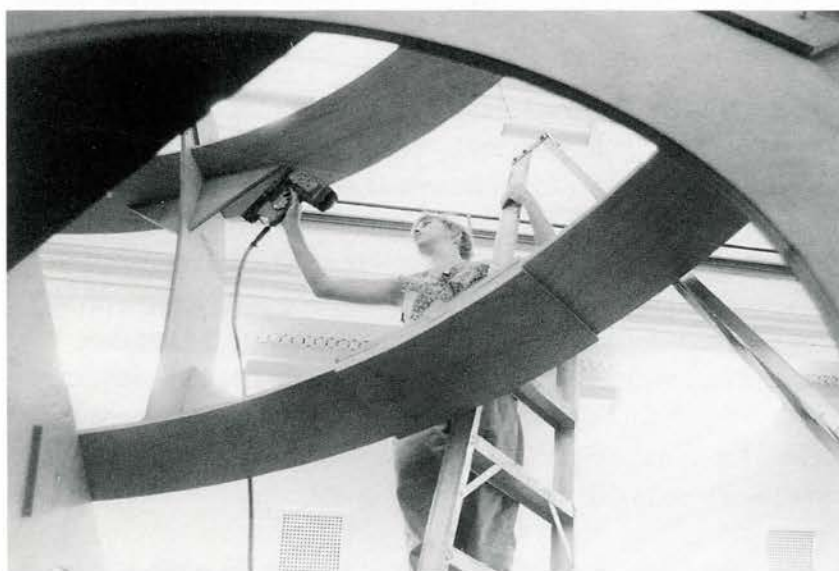
"To create a work which spans more than one physical site, or which allows a transference of material from one site to another, is an important development of this metaphorical process, into the domain of the spatial, the geographic.

"For me there is a high level of irony in the idea of linking the two sites - the ghost town and the boom town, - because Big Bell itself was a boom town, then a ghost town and now, once again a (re)version to a boom town with the current reworking of the mine on a massive scale. What I'm pointing to is that every structure, every architecture, every urban fabric has, encoded within it, a trajectory and design for its own decay. Thus the multi-storey, curtain walls of down-town are the transient re-enactments of the abandoned mine-towns in the desert. Redundancy and destruction are acknowledged as necessary within our economic cycles. This is naturally not the nostalgia of the neo-classical ruin - it's more like the second law of thermodynamics!!!

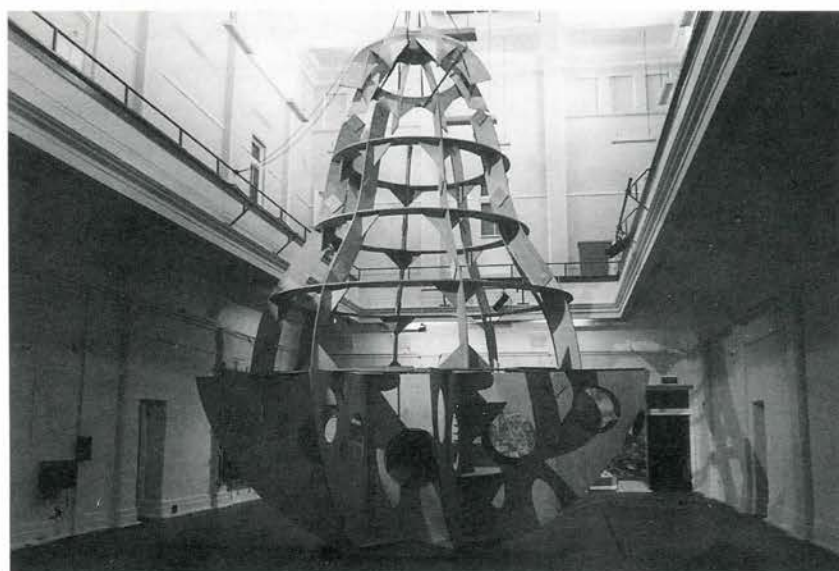
"While some might associate an ominous tone with the synthetic form of the voice-texts, their semantic content is on the contrary open and poetic. Their address of an urban condition suggests a constructive and historically informed position. In selecting the synthetic voice I intentionally pursue a critical relationship with the domains of electronic time, electronic speed and electronic space, linked, as they are, with the military industrial complex. Electronic communications are to a great extent divorced from our quotidian 'metabolic' life. The digital world is shielded from chaos, the talking clock will naturally speak while the city is burning down. We have attempted to establish a technological immune system, buffered from external influence, scanned for infection, backed-up, pass-worded and air-conditioned. It is a vascular system which cannot and does not share the chaos and flux which we 'enjoy' on the street. This lack of biological frailty forms the basis of the sinister



9. Big Bell Beta - construction detail.



10. Big Bell Beta - construction detail.



11. Big Bell Beta - construction detail.

and de-humanizing aspect of the digital process, but by the same token we are fascinated by a network which lacks density but which operates at infinite speed. Our speech now exists beyond metabolism."

*The land of darkness flamed but no light and no repose.
The land of snows of trembling, and iron hail incessant.
The land of earthquakes, and the land of woven labyrinths.
The land of snares and traps and wheels and pitfalls and dire mills.
The voids, the solids, and the land of clouds and regions of waters.*

*Kick a tin can down the street, you know that empty vessels
make the most noise.*

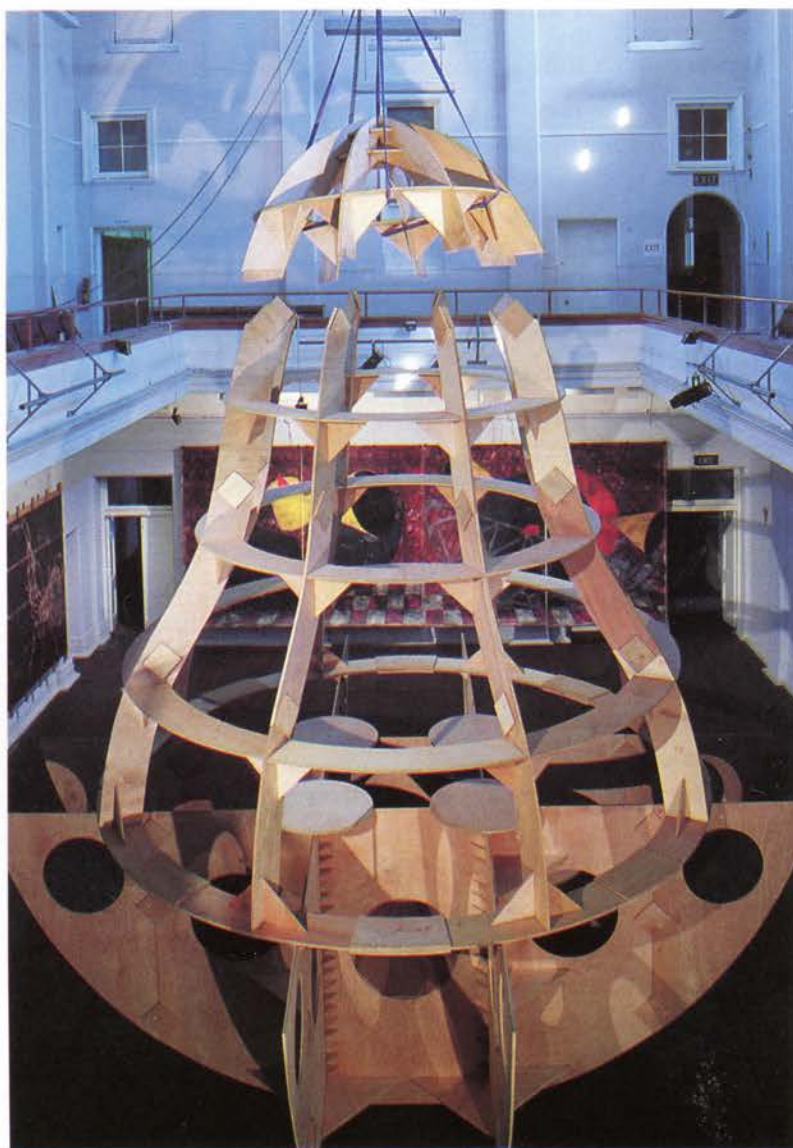
What is it when we whisper, a flow of breath carrying a tiny message, but a message directed entirely within the cavity of another's ear. There are always two texts, the exhaled message, humorous or intimate, carried together with the omnipresent, silent message that reiterates "Noise is power", that each sound carries within it both a record and a command to re-order the world.

The drum beat and the chant are a sublimation of the thunder-clap and the howling of the storm. This is a husbandry of noise, the erratic and unpredictable bellows of nature, chained to time, to rhythm and metre. A raft of song floating in chaos.

The foundry and the smelter are a sublimation of the drum-beat and the chant. Song is now forbidden on the shop-floor. In its place is a silence totally occupied by the continuous explosion of the furnace and the reports of transformation, as nature is recreated upon demand. Here concepts are bought to their ultimate conclusion, noise equals power, and power produces noise. Whispers could now operate only as subversion, but here to whisper is to shout above the din, full in the face of a comrade who can no longer hear, for whom bird-song is a childhood memory.

*Kick a tin can down the street
Empty vessels make the most noise.⁴*





13. Big Bell Beta (construction detail)
Central Space, PICA

NS ~ Speaker cones feature in much of your work, talk about this.

"From a material point of view speaker cones and sonic broadcast systems have become a recurrent leitmotif. Their frequent appearance within my sculptural work indicates a firm understanding of the highly ideological and political function assigned to the sonic form within our society. One of my principal interests has been to investigate the relationships between 'poetics', 'politics' and 'techniks' within our political economy. I am very interested in the historical processes which allow the political co-option of cultural form and its subsequent reconstruction to form a virulent strain of 'ideological culture'. This is a phenomenon we have seen worked heavily in the twentieth century to inspire nationalistic sentiments.

"My interest extends far beyond the semantic of the particular text to embrace the areas of the scenario and production, together with the entire apparatus of transmission and delivery (reception). As a sculptor (nursing a latent interest in text and music) I have been able to gradually put these elements together within my large multi-media constructions and address increasingly complex areas of cultural production.

"A very good technical illustration of these general concerns is located in the recognition of the political power of radio (see Lenin, Stalin, Mussolini, Hitler and Churchill, to name but a few worthies). The most poignant example being found in the brief history of the Peoples Radio (Volksempfänger) developed in Nazi Germany under Hitler. At the centre of each household the Volksempfänger combined the functions of emotional masseur, policeman and high cultural forum. The device was constructed with a capacity to receive only one station (the transmitters were local with a range of some 50kms). In effect the radio delivered a soliloquy (and naturally it was illegal to tune into 'other' stations). The original Volksempfänger was manufactured with a large bakelite cabinet, adorned with golden eagles. As the war progressed their physical stature reduced from these rather grandiose Third Reich collectables to end as small cardboard austerity radios. I have always been fascinated by the way in which the semantics of the message and



14. Europa Da-Da Dumb 1986



15. Europa Da-Da Dumb (detail)



16. Diagrams for the Theatre of Production (detail) 1987

the semiotics of the delivery system (the software and the hardware in contemporary terms) are so perfectly matched in their futility.

"I am conscious of working across a threshold which on one hand acknowledges a huge pool of available cultural/historical forms but which on the other hand is desperate to avoid them. Perhaps the best way to illustrate these conflicting drives is to look at two of my works made one after the other in 1987.

"'A Symphony for Other Cultures' contained the first of my large bell structures. The work was constructed to relate site-specifically to The Performance Space galleries and contained, in the first space, a giant industrial organ pipe (7m x 2m x 1.5m) tuned to 25Hertz and operating with a massive amplitude. In the cross-walk, two industrial turbines forcing air at high speed across the viewer/listeners' path, and in the final gallery a huge silent bell form, fashioned of cracked adobe. I would like to focus on the organ pipe. The essential point of making this instrument was that its frequency (with a fundamental only just above the threshold of hearing) and enormous volume which literally shook the building, were intended, first and foremost, as an experience for the whole body. Manifest as a singular event (i.e. located in one space and at one time) the signal could not be recorded, nor could it be transmitted or reproduced, so within the prevailing conditions of reproduction, quotation and repetition, this pipe formed a resistant benchmark located in the unique event. As an instrument tuned to a particular architectural envelope the work argued strongly for a sculptural practice that values the experiential mode over the representational mode, engaging the entire gamut of sensory functions. Through this kinaesthetic method the sonic form approaches the density of a sculptural material, and argues that the sonic mode, perhaps more convincingly than the visual, shapes our sense of spatiality.

"Immediately following the production of 'Symphony' I constructed 'Die Melodie der Welt; Bringing Home the Bacon' for the Bicentennial Perspecta. Although this was also a very large sound-structure (mixing a strong kinaesthetic potential with a high level of culturally located audio-texts) the work both produced and invoked an orientation



17. A Symphony for Other Cultures (pipe detail) 1987



18. A Symphony for Other Cultures (bell detail) 1987

radically divergent to that of 'Symphony'."

"In its generation the work issued more from a seed-bed of ideas and interests in history (not art history I should add!). The main conceptual framework developed around some seemingly disparate historical and political events, principally Roger Bacon, the 12th century English alchemist who is reputed to have invented gunpowder, spectacles, but, of particular interest, an automaton, a talking head which possessed oracular functions - a kind of medieval early warning device.

Compressed alongside Roger Bacon are two movies and two symphonies. The movies share a common production date and were of interest for their divergent sentiments (or so I then assumed). The Wizard of Oz lent the work the central head motif (from the Tin-Man, which links tangentially with Bacon's talking head). The second movie is Eisenstein's Alexander Nevsky (with musical score by Prokofief). Alexander Nevsky was made in 1937 to warn the Nazi's to stay away from the Soviet Union. It depicts the 12th century conflict in which the Teutons are repulsed, catalysing the emergence of the Russian nation. The music of Prokofief was specifically designed to characterise the aggressive qualities of the Teutons (to do this he intentionally used faulty recordings of Germanic horn music) and emphasise the robust nature of the Soviets, (by including many folkloric themes). As it happened Hitler and Stalin signed a non-aggression pact, and the film was withdrawn from circulation. Then followed the inevitable invasion of Russia by the Nazis and the re-release of Alexander Nevsky!!! "

"In the work the central 'head/oracle' with its four faces, transmits (from the four enormous horns) the first two bars of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. These two groups of four notes approximate to the morse code letter "V" and were used by Radio London throughout World War II as a Victory call-sign beamed at occupied Europe (sweet irony!). Standing in the intervals between these speaker cones are four 'radio-towers' from which issue computer modified loops of Prokofief's sentimental Russian themes."

"So in some way my job has been to de-contaminate works hi-jacked to serve political agendas, I get to re-insert them into the world of poetics!



19. Die Melodie der Welt; Bringing Home the Bacon 1987



20. Die Melodie der Welt; Bringing Home the Bacon 1987

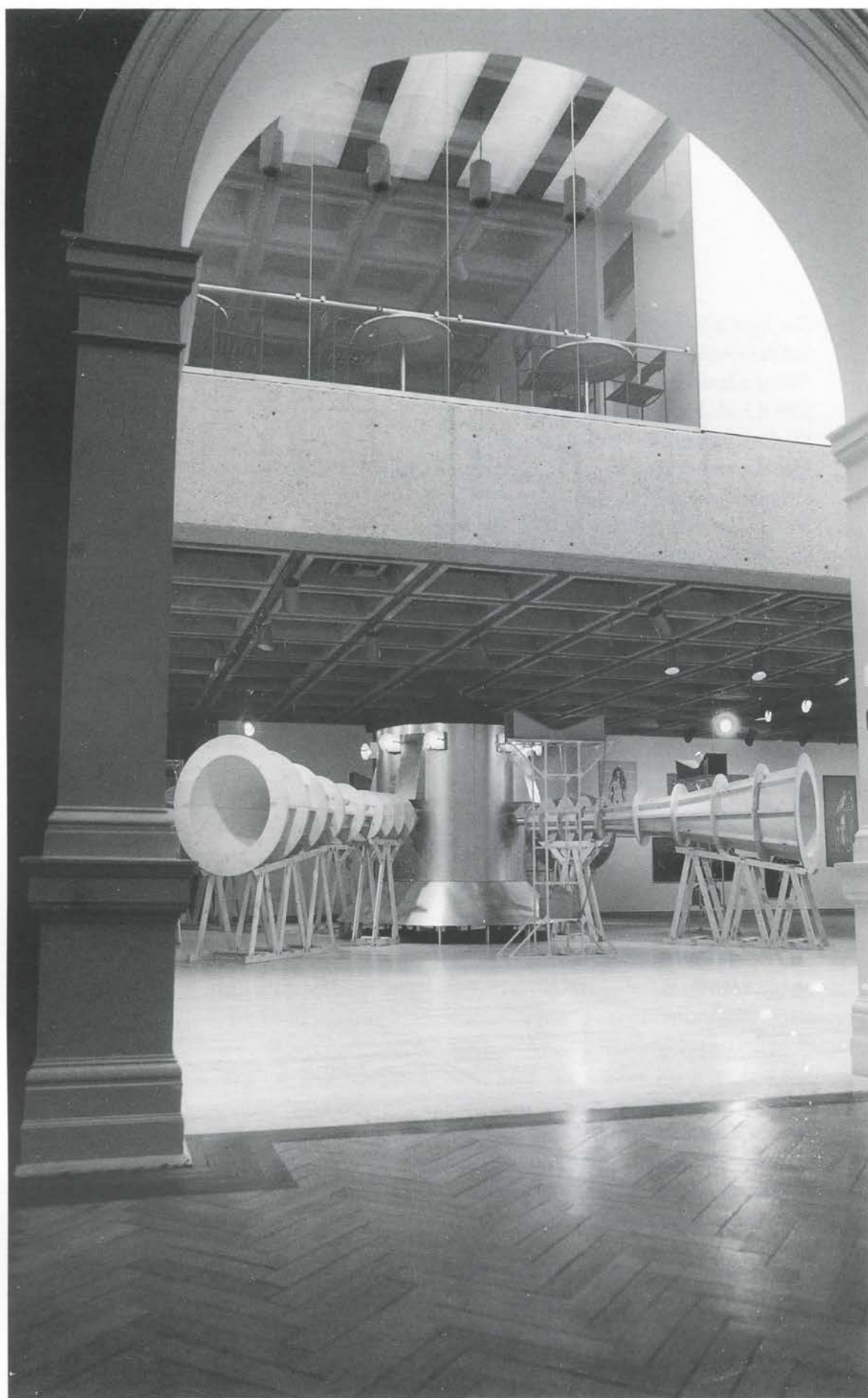
Also with regard to the material which the work references, it is simply not a form of post-modern quotational drifting - rather I see it as a form of cultural/historical research which puts together disparate strands in order to synthesise new meaning. My desire is to place my hands with Dorothy's as she pulls back the curtain to reveal the old Wizard."

*A bell not yet a bell must be a manikin for a bell's body, a clay memory of an adobe cathedral and a signal for what must eventually be a call sign and a discipline device.*⁵

"Each of the three works which contain bells have an underlying dialectic. The first bell (A Symphony for Other Cultures, see above) occupied a silent role within a sound-installation. It was in fact a bell mould, formed of clay and abandoned to crack - the silent void of a still-born bell. I was attracted by the concept of duplicity between industry and spirituality and the role that the bell has played historically within western societies. The bell is an extremely complex accoustic object, with a long history, as device for marking spiritual centres. Their sounds are centripetal in that although physically the sound radiates outward they function to attract people, they beckon, they are call signs. They also function traditionally to mark territory. The bells of a parish delimit an accoustic topography/demography resonating not simply physically, but in terms of a cultural fabric.

Bells were used in the late-medieval, early-renaissance proto-industrial system as the markers of secular time, expanding on their use to indicate sacred functions. Increasingly the bell was fused with the clock mechanism and frequencies of the engines used to drive and meter time-pieces. In effect it is the (50 Hertz) flux of the motor's electrical system which traces time rather than the bell which symbolically strikes every hour.

I am interested in the relationship between motor and bell as a metaphor which bridges the emotional and intellectual, the spiritual and the technical."



21. Die Melldodie Der; Bringing Home the Bacon 1987

Our desire is for speed. The footfalls which beat twice each second still share in the biology of bird-song. The motor running at 3000 R.P.M. drinks power at 50 Hertz. Rhythmic impulse plus speed equals pitch, and pitch the index of our desire. The sound of our desire is a flat tone, continuous and without interruption or modulation. The duration of the keynote is infinite. It pervades each space; occupying it as a viscous fluid; without direction; drowning the particular with the indiscriminate. The idiosyncrasy of the bell has found its antithesis in the drone of the motor which regulates its pealing. In our system time is always running out. The bell has always punctuated this fact with its complex acoustic signals, but at a subliminal level the operations of the regulating motor constitute the real meter of time, penetrating further and for longer than the pulse in our wrists.⁶

"The second set of bells was made as part of a permanent sculpture at the Seoul Olympics in 1988. This work was structured to address the dual nature of Korean culture - one in which a strong traditional Buddhist cosmology lives symbiotically with a rapacious industrial system. I was able to develop the linkage between a world of poetics and a world of technics by fusing the physical image of Buddhist Heaven Bells with industrial crucibles and flasks. The architectural scale of the work and its design as a "place" rather than a "thing" have allowed people access to an image of their culture in which contradictions, if not resolved, can co-exist in a mutual space."

I hear a bell in every fog horn, auto horn, air raid and fire alarm. The telephone rings, the crossing gate falls, I am awakened, warned and informed as the sonar scans, scans my body, my social body, my physical world and the air sings with discipline as the atoms are constantly re-ordered.⁷



22. Korean Bell, Din; Ding, Dang, Dong 1988

digital origin, one spinning relentlessly from the centre of a skeletal bell (or was it a reverbatory furnace?) filling the architecture of PICA with the breath of the metropolis."

*This city is large. It is composed of large structures. Large structures in small spaces. Its systems are massive. Huge masses move through the city's air-spaces. All movement is percussive. All motive power is based upon the serial harnessing of explosive forces. Trapped within the heart of each mass, moving or stationary, lies a kernel of violence, radiating motion, heat and sound. Each heart gives up to the atmosphere the glow of hydro-carbons and the staccato of respiration. The chorus of hearts permits the city to speak. To reveal its thoughts, to expose its inner nature. This city is large. Large not through the accumulations of history, but large through newness. This city has never learnt the songs of childhood. It is still trying to articulate its first word. Its mouth is filled with roaring. Its narrow air-spaces resonate at the lowest pitch. The pitch of pre-oral culture.*⁸

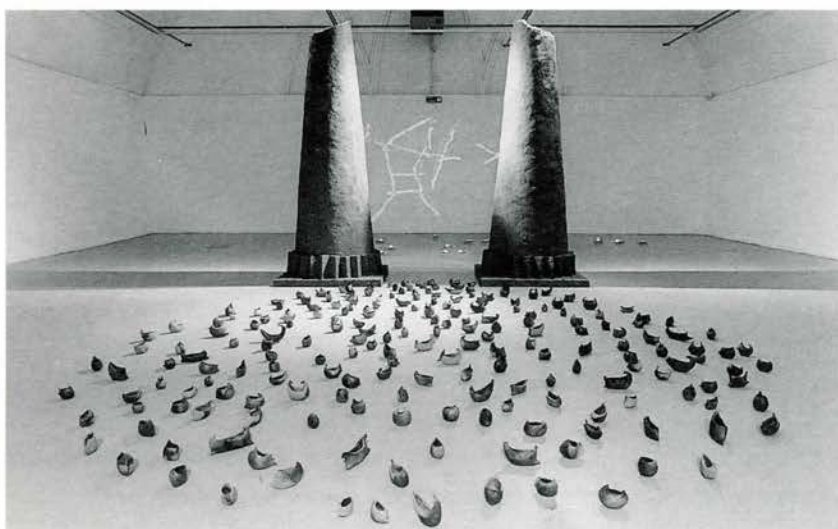
"Then within the ruined shell of the hotel (which at one time boasted the 'world's longest bar' as any self respecting outback pub should) a chorus of electronic town-criers announced the exact time in an arrhythmic beat. At night lying on my swag in the crumbling chapel I was visited by these dislocated voices drifting across the scrub on the slight desert breeze. Mythological time bleeding slowly into digital space; an allegory for virtual realities!"

There is a special place - a low mountain range in the western desert. Rocky slopes on which to do nothing - I have spent a good deal of time there doing just that. It takes two whole days for the tyre rumble to subside from the ears - for the nerves to reset to zero. Then at night listening becomes possible.

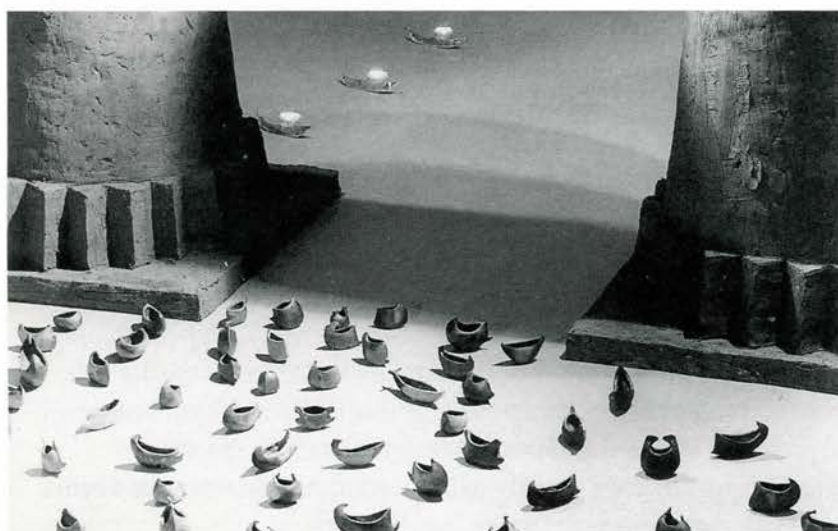
It becomes possible to hear absolutely nothing. As for the tape-recorder, it inscribes its own irrelevant hiss. Here is an immense quiet; a quiet resting under the luminescence of the Milky Way; a full quietness. The rocks are singing away the day's heat at some inaudible pitch, the heartbeats of reptiles are slowly rolling down thermal gradients - it is a quiet of solid repose.

But then there is another form of silence. An unstable silence that peels away behind the stereo voice, drawn into a vacuum of inky and dimensionless space. Arrayed across the horizon, and appearing both proximate and distant are the voices - voices which address us, which converse without falter. Somehow they simply appear, hovering at coördinates plotted into radio-phonic position - whilst all around them the architecture has been demolished. All surfaces, even the very ground, has slipped over the edge of a cataract of silence. That which remains is the space of the promised after-life; a life in which quiet does not exist.⁹

Hard-bitten travellers normally avoid returning to sites which hold very specific associations - the flux of time never fails to assault memory! Naturally the project was conceived in the light of my memories of this isolated area, which I assumed was enjoying an entropic drift towards oblivion, into non-memory. But two major changes - firstly, the original conceptual axis of the work, the Boom-Town to Ghost-Town cycle had developed a strangely ironic twist with the (re)opening of mining operations at Big Bell on a massive scale. The original town-site remains mute, by-passed by A.C.M. Gold Ltd and Pacer Pacific who are forming a crater of inconceivable dimensions - large enough, it seems, to accomodate an entire city as land-fill. But an even more poignant change is reflected in the destruction of the conceptual 'bridge' formed by the shared architectures of the Big Bell Hotel and the Scarborough Beach Hotel. The powerful sense of déjà- vu which I felt so strongly in my first encounter with the ruined Art Deco structure of the Big Bell Hotel was amplified by the knowledge that the original had been razed to provide a site for Alan Bond's 'Observation City'. So the doppelganger outlives the original, and the desert proves to be a better haven for modernist architecture than the city!



23. Voyages from Eden to Utopia; Hercules 1984



24. Voyages from Eden to Utopia; Hercules 1984

POETICS/ TECHNICS

Anthony Bond

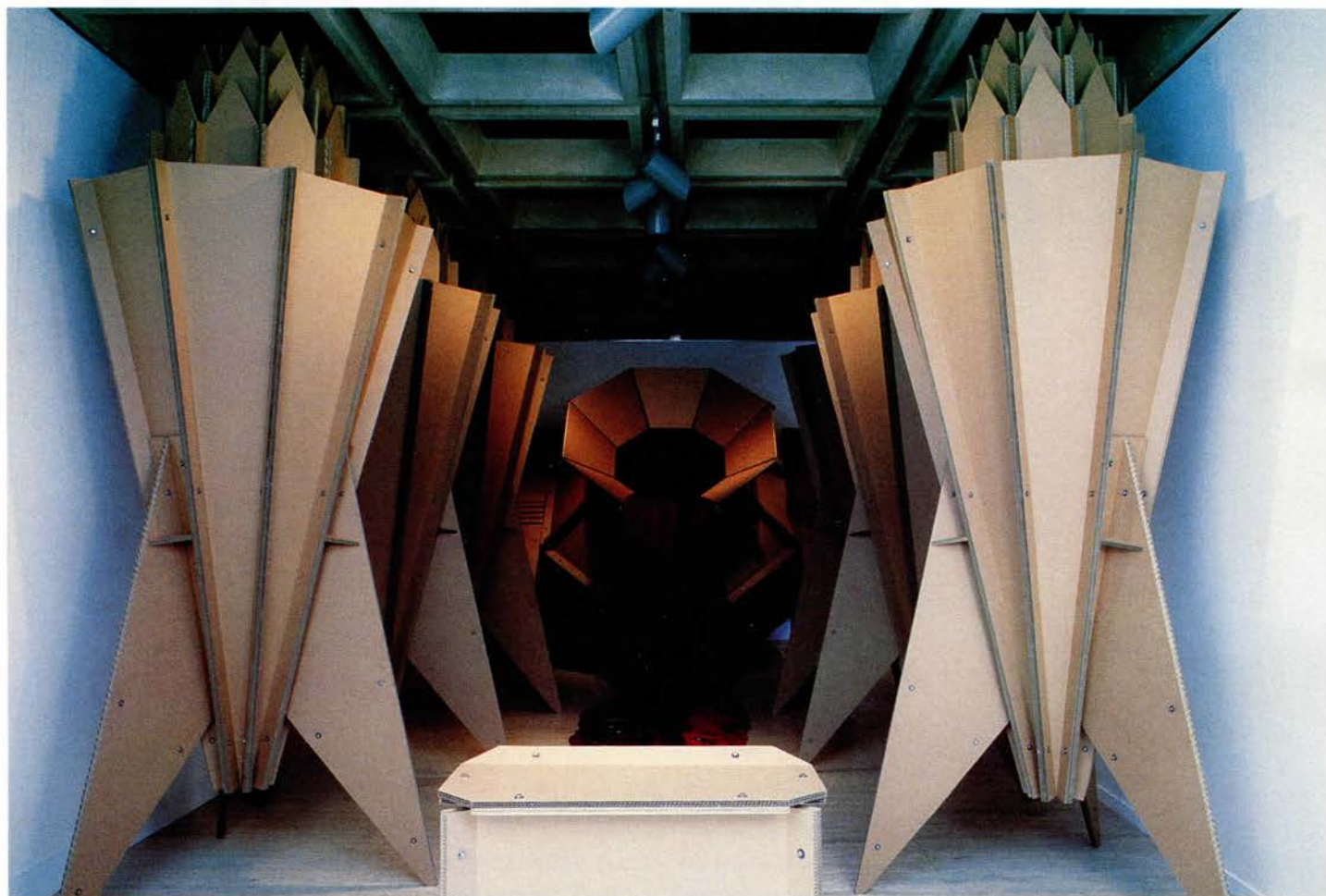
Knowledge has been a source of power since human society evolved. Once power could be held by secrecy, now it is broadcast.

The priests of the White Goddess founded Sumer and other empires in the fertile crescent. They were not of the people but they controlled them, their language was not that of the people, their cities were not built to house the nomads who became their tillers and herdsmen. When the land was failing they moved on, founding new civilizations, leaving the indigenous peoples to continue as before on ruined soil. The memory of their passing became myth, fragments of their culture remained as evidence of lost glory.

Wherever they went they used their knowledge of basic mechanics, trigonometry and cosmology to build monuments which calculated the seasons, charted the stars and predicted celestial events. From the Mediterranean coast and the Danube they came to enchanted Albion not as Romans, Saxons, Jutes, Angles and Norsemen raiding and establishing force of arms, but as small bands of seaborne emissaries of an ancient culture, possessors of the power of science. Their power was never again as great as it was on Salisbury Plain when Stonehenge was erected but survived the changes of the millenia underground. Christianity anathematised the fragments of scientific power which continued only as memories in alchemy and the occult peddled by Romanies (gypsies), until the advent of 'Enlightenment' and the dawning age of technology. Today the power of the covert is traded for the influence of the subliminal.

In his earlier Australian installations, Helyer frequently invokes the metaphors of ships and journeys and explores the relationship between power and knowledge. As a European living in Australia he is particularly sensitive to the imposition of one culture upon another and to the apparently disembodied threat of an atmosphere hopelessly polluted with information. He also seems to prefigure a silence or a void that sooner or later must replace the noise of culture. In this continent

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25. Preaching to the Convertor; the Cartons that Culture Came in 1985

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the illusion of empty space is still accessible. Even though we know it to be a false experience, it plays upon our sense of impermanence.

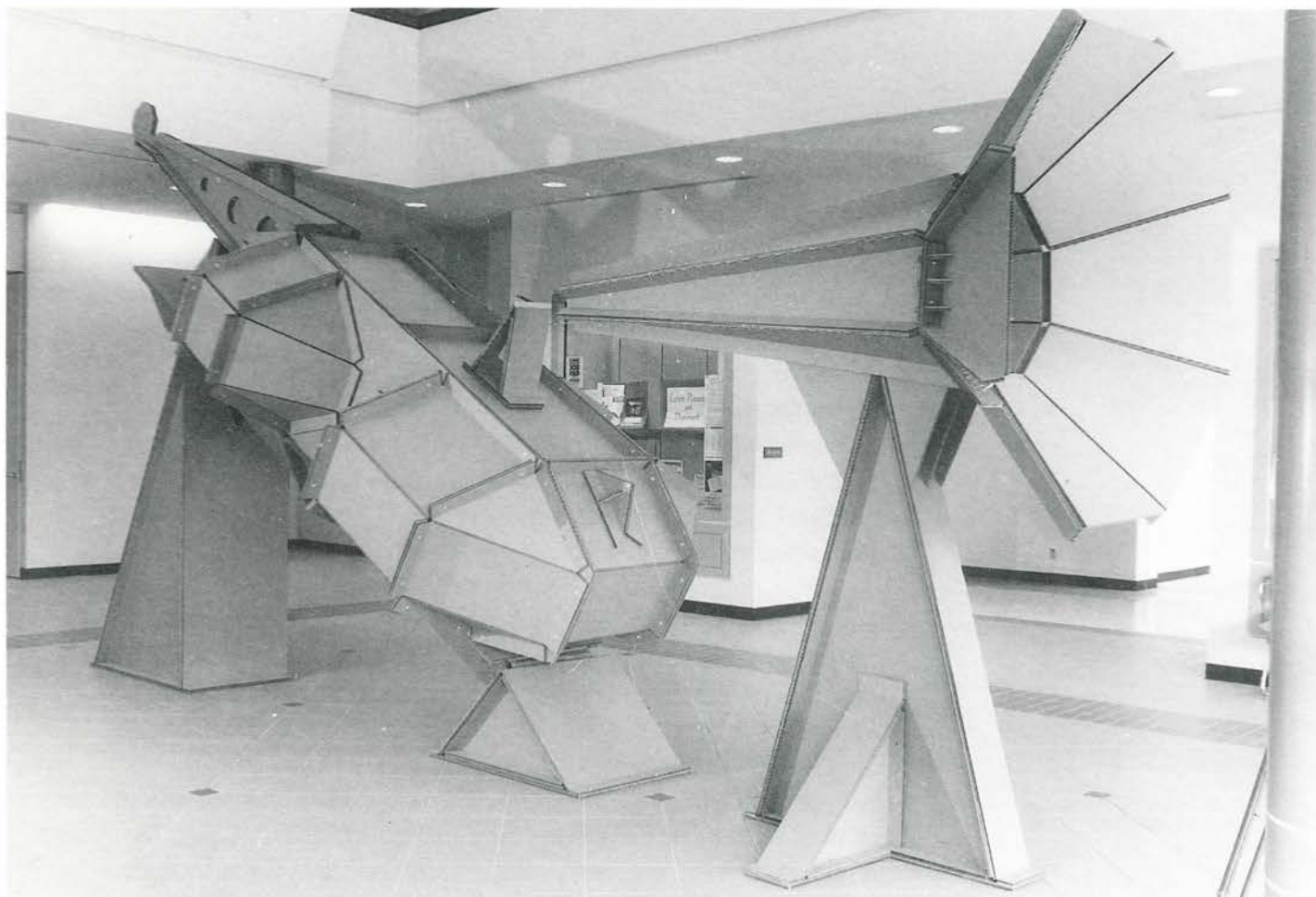
By colliding ancient histories and metaphors with the age of electronic communication Helyer opens possibilities of poetic insight through association and lateral correspondence. His installations fabricate and manipulate metaphoric and narrative structures in order to explore the relationship between formal, rational processes and an intuitive mode of understanding in the possible use of 'language(s)'.

Since 1985 he has increasingly embodied these structures in sculptural installations which have become more formally coherent while being less descriptive, less subject to simple narrative interpretations. *Preaching to the Convertor ; The Cartons that Culture Came In*. 1985, was an ambitiously large installation for **Australian Perspecta**, typical of the earlier narratives. It was constructed from cardboard shapes bolted together in an overt reference to processes of industrial fabrication techniques. Its form was an avenue or processional corridor flanked by 3.5 metre high torches which also looked somewhat like rockets. At one end of this avenue was a model of a Bessemer convertor which poured out a river of molten iron (red velvet) which carried with it cast iron hand guns (moulded from children's toys) towards a triple throne setting which faced the convertor and ceremonially closed the installation. The whole piece was claustrophobically enclosed by gallery walls so that it could only be experienced from within or viewed from access points on either side of the thrones.

While the nuances of this work are diverse with potentially ambiguous readings such as *Pour of Steel*, *Royal Carpet*, *River of Blood*, the main theme of political, industrial/economic and military power is quite literal. Such an obvious interpretive option tends to be disarmed by the more discursive readings which allow the individual viewer to discover layers of suggestion and personally relevant interpretation within the overtly theatrical ambience of the work.

The passage is to nowhere in particular as a passage can be a range of

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26. Disco Meister; Eine Kliene Nacht; and the Police Dance in the Streets Until Dawn (1:86 Architectural Model) 1988

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metaphoric 'principles'. It is in one sense, an historical notion of technical development as 'progress'. In another sense, the passage is that of material through mechanism, division, the discipline of man over matter and body. In a similar sense, the products or evidence of production, the small parts, the toy boats and the guns fabricated are simply split-off from the primary mechanism and become other machines in the repetitive sub-mechanisms of desire. This is often extended to pieces that 'come-apart', sub-mechanisms made of transportable parts or sections, which can then be reconstructed and the process of desire relived as the joy of 'putting it all back together' by the consumer.¹⁰

Europa Da-Da Dumb, 1986, has the more open metaphoric structure of the post '85 works. It was first shown at The Performance Space in Sydney and later in Germany as part of his representation in **Australian Perspecta** to tour Germany in 1988/89. It is characteristic of Helyer that the texts which accompany his work in catalogues from this date are tangential, creating an imaginative tension for the interested viewer. The text for *Europa Da-Da Dumb* is a poignant work in its own right. It does not describe or interpret the experience of the work itself but provides a parallel narrative. We are invited to conjure up a high-tech security-conscious zone which is the source of an all pervasive transmission. There is also a journey associated with an Aboriginal hunting trip, a narrative of life and death ritualised by a traditional 'Keeper'.

The truck is standing outside, all but loaded for the journey to the coastal lagoons. A final circuit of the room to pick up the remaining vital items for the trip, the gun and the portable radio receiver and he quits the building. After three hours in which the cab radio has competed with the rattle of the diesel truck he curses, stops the vehicle and checks the glove compartment without any apparent conviction, merely to confirm that the cartridges are still lying in the corner of the room.

The truck pulls up outside, he cuts the motor, he is passing through the first of the steel blast doors, his I.D. card is scrutinised, he passes beyond the second door. He is positioned before a downward sloping corridor which terminates in

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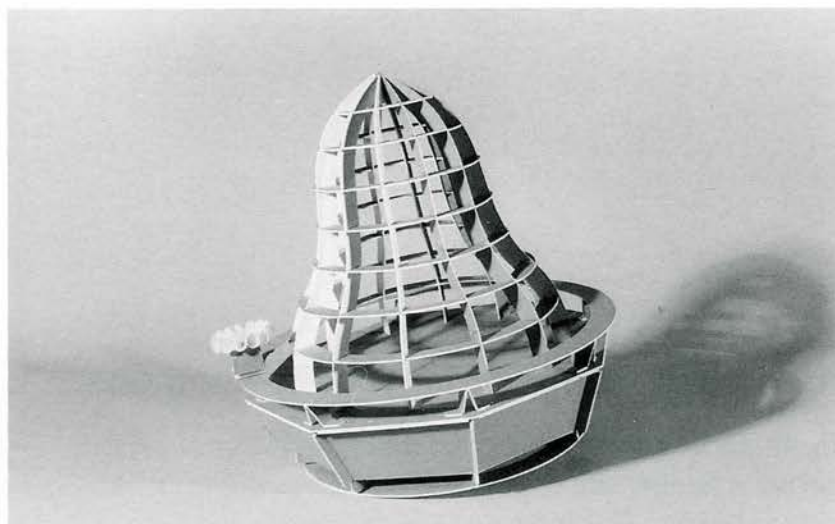
its own vanishing point, he is walking. He is standing at the head of a perforated steel spiral stairway, he descends. His I.D. is reconfirmed, this time by another who cannot or will not speak. He proceeds to the transmitter room. He is seated before the device, he glances to the left in order to indicate his readiness to the other operator, who returns his gaze with a studied neutral acknowledgment, calculated to dispel any emotional contact. The surrounding atmosphere is perfectly conditioned. They return their focus to their device, the dual keys are inserted simultaneously and locked to the right - a threshold is crossed - the transmission proceeds, its radiations emanating to fill every crevice of the known world.

He walks diagonally across the room to the opposite corner and stoops to retrieve the two cases of cartridges and, as a secondary measure, picks up some spare power cells for the portable receiver unit. He is free to leave - he is seated behind the wheel of the truck.

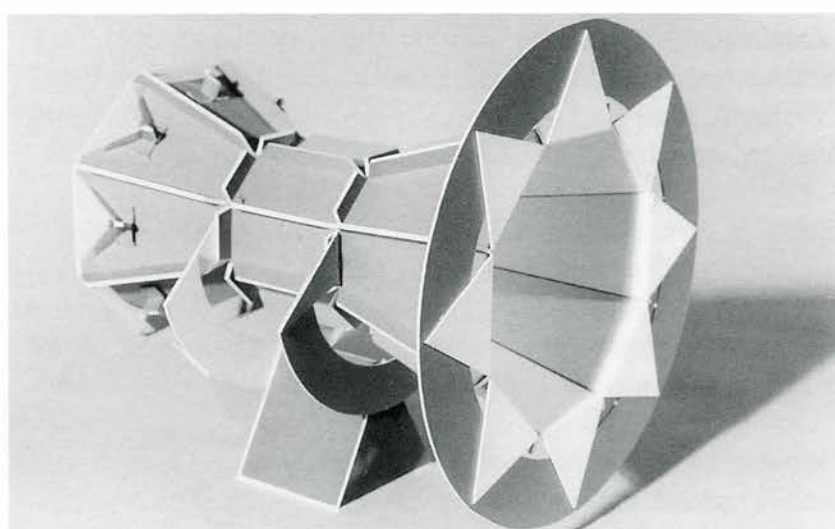
In between the land of the still-living and that of the dead there is a cave.... The truck passes along a dry valley floor, moving over a pavement of rock slabs which float in drifts of brilliant quartz sand, the fossil remains of some pre-historic beach. Gradually the vehicle descends into the dense scrub which lines the lower reaches of the gorge. At the creek he slows to a halt and out of respect turns off the cab radio, this creek flows down from the silent cave, a place which only the very old may visit. On the driver's side (to the north-east), the country eventually opens out to form the coastal plains with their lagoon systems, but to his left the massive jumble of dissected sandstone ridges continue unbroken, parallel to the distant shore.

She sits only a metre from the brightness of the creek. From here her vacant gaze is filled with the movements of crayfish, creatures which promise such good eating. This country will be her larder- an old lady's privilege. He lingers a while, his toes and the front tyres of the vehicle immersed in the creek. Idly he considers how good the fishing would be here, but that will doubtless be his privilege in many years to come - he is bound to continue his journey, out of respect for the old, from fear of the keeper's censure and propelled by his desire to bag geese on the salt-water lagoons to the north-east. He imagines that he can already hear faint rifle reports drifting in on the coastal breeze - his brothers and sisters must be eating roast goose by now. The truck fords the creek, the radio

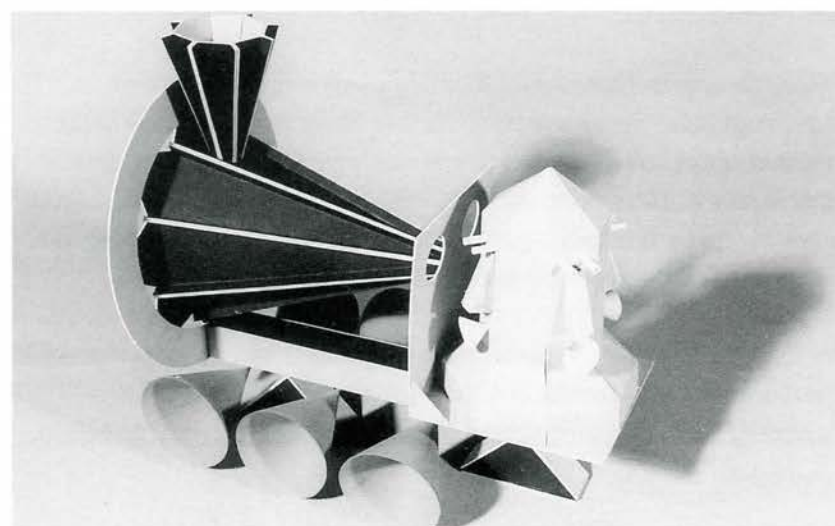
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27. 1:20 Prototype for Big Bell Beta 1989



28. 1:10 Prototype for Talking Drum 1989



29. 1:10 Prototype for Rock and Roll.1989

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returns; goose and gun-sight eclipse in his mind's eye.

The old lady remains motionless, a day - two days and then crawls into the darkness of the silent cave, carefully propping her spine against the smoothness of the rock surface. She lifts her gaze to regard the fading light that inhabits the cave entrance, closes her eyes and is gone.

Throughout that night and for the following day the transmission continues - the two keys remain locked into the central control panel of the device - a guarantee against equivocation. The room slumbers in a monochrome red light, the atmosphere is constantly recirculated and monitored. Many metres deeper the automatic power-plant spins a thread of high voltage energy up through the device and onward to dissipation at the terminals of the antennae installation.

Around the shores of the lagoon the transmission rains down on the hunters camp, mixing with the smell of roast goose. It irradiates the cabinets of their portable radios and enters the cabs of their vehicles but is unable to penetrate the tuning circuits or become manifest in small amplifiers; popular music, carried on different frequencies, has granted the hunters immunity.

The transmission showers down on the keeper, bathing his head and body with a foreign knowledge. But then the keeper is an old man, he doesn't have a radio, doesn't want one either. He too is a master of the silent gesture - his conversations are with the departed - as he helps them on their way from this place to the next. He is the gateman who ensures the living that this is a one-way traffic.

By now the dogs will have visited the old lady - she will have been scattered. The keeper must gather her up and install the bone pieces in a crevice high in the cave wall. From here the old lady will be able to continue her journey without cause to return. He sprinkles the floor with fresh water from the creek and very slowly sweeps the cave with a green branch. It is cool under the overhang, it is always cool; a good place to sit and watch crayfish.

The light has been fading for some time now - for quite how long it is impossible to estimate; it is only possible to remark that a feeble red glow remains. Apparently the transmission stopped abruptly a day ago. It is now possible to

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30. Still from performance video

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*imagine the faint sound of distant gunfire somewhere to the north.*¹¹

The text is an Australian drama where new technology and control are layered over traditional relationships of place and time while the sculptural work suggest a European history. It deliberately simulates archaic technology. A massive speaker (megaphone) projects a message from a galvanised metal amplifier on a steel frame towards a clumsy receiver which suggests the Art Deco style associated with the early days of mass communication. Suspended above the receiver are antennae and over in the corner there is an old bakelite radio.

By historically translocating technology Helyer opens and drives the connotative possibilities of his objects. We cannot help make an association with Marinetti's sound installation and thus to the connection between futurist art, mass communications and Mussolini's facism. It is always easier to recognise these relations when our focus is removed from the immediate present.

The use of sound and the implication of the universal presence of transmitted information recurs in Helyer's installation after 1986.

A Symphony for Other Cultures exhibited at The Performance Space in 1987, reduces the acoustic content to a single sustained reverberating note, played on a turbine-driven wooden organ pipe. The gallery consisted of two rooms separated by a corridor which ran parallel to the length of the rooms. When viewers approached the gallery they became aware of a physical vibration before they could hear the numbingly low note of the enormous wooden pipe which filled the first room. The low frequency quickly drove most people out of the space. In order to enter the second room they traversed a passageway to encounter a blast of air delivered by two large industrial fans. The second room was dominated by the form of clay bell standing 3.5-metres-high modelled in effect on the casting core for a bell; the inner space or the negative of the bell.

Here the clay was plastered over a metal armature and was allowed to fissure all over like the surface of a drying clay pan. This was not the bell of Foucault's conditioning, no heart rate would be disturbed by it's toll.

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31. A Symphony for Other Cultures

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The parallel text that accompanied this work was written by Allan Vizents in close collaboration with the artist, and stands as a piece in its own right. It is a poetic invocation of the weaving of technology and information as a commodity through the co-existing fabric of third world culture and a jungle of mingled mythologies. An extract from that catalogue conveys something of its intent.

I am sitting in the lounge room. The television is off; all stations are broadcasting a constant stream of rock video clips. Whose subject am I? I have torn open a package of Doritos Cornchips, with 'creamy-herb flavour'. The taste has nothing to do with Mexico, except by a distant relation adulterated and chemically restructured by language. It is for dipping into Mexico, into culture, that I have been constructed as subject.

The relation is a video clip fired at a mirror and reflected from a distant receiving station, a global drone; white noise where consumption is inevitable, movement kept to a lounge room minimum and bodies are targeted from the hills, the hills of Mexico, among the banana plantations south of Veracruz.¹²

The juxtaposition of antiquity and tribal culture with technology and the present is another persistent theme in Helyer's work. In *Symphony* a turbine drives the organ pipe and the wind tunnel is created by modern industrial appliances while the concept of the organ pipe and the ancient decomposing bell invoke non-specific associations with antiquity. The bell can be read as a crumbling ruin like something discovered in the jungles of Cambodia or Guatemala. History and the metaphor of the voyage are recurrent sub-themes which link Helyer's work weaving through the representation of technology. In Allan Vizents' text there is a reference to this which is particularly vivid and relevant.

The Passage of Standard Slippage.

The captain and first officer are seated at the control panel and before them stretches the vast machinery of the factory. Digital readouts cast green light from the left and orange from the right. Below, on the factory floor, watchdogs patrol the convoluted passages deftly avoiding the mechanised robotics. In the ceiling, large windows open to the night sky, and from the control panel, a clear view of the Southern Cross is often maintained.

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The air conditioning is superb.

The factory is located below the first deck of the ship, and produces multiple variations of desire during trans-oceanic journeys. The factory operates between cultures, as a neutral agent, a mythologising machine that refuses the notion of the irrational and/or schizophrenic. The machine can convert anything from raw emptiness to vast quantities of matter into meaningful patterns.

The ship is ancient. To some it has appeared as a canoe, and to others a ghostly wind jammer without crew. It has made its appearance throughout human history in each and every (successive) act of perception by man. It channels and funnels meaning, appears as a power engendering device of repression, as a ship of state, as a subjective voyage of the individual, as sexuality.¹³

In other paragraphs he refers obliquely to the installation itself.

One would expect such a ship and factory of desire to charm the viewer into submission with a sonic ring. Just such a call sign is repeated in perfect symmetry, recalling the reinforcement of the project of power/knowledge by its many tools. Visually this call sign can appear as the static voyage, (the implied movement), the flow of material through the machine, the representation of the earth itself as the constellation is seen, or the sight of the sun and its loss from vision. The absurd or grandiose irony of our production and conflict lies in fascination with the call sign. We rattle the fetish chains of our subjugation. The flow of the interminable message, the single organ pipe, is caught (received), recorded and re-broadcast on our bodies. In each cycle the background adds its touch of white noise. We give to our neighbour our body social to hold in trust, the atoms of mis-representation, whirling and knocking as so many pinballs transcribed onto a video monitor. The nostalgia of the radio waits on the coastal shelf, confirming the passage of an old power changing faces once again.¹⁴

Since 1987 there has been a series of works which take the form of musical instruments as machines. *Die Melodie der Welt; Bringing Home the Bacon*, 1987, constructed for The Bicentennial Australian Perspecta occupied most of the main entrance court of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Its four monstrous megaphones radiating from the 'Tin Man's' massive head allow the viewer/listener to engage audio loops of

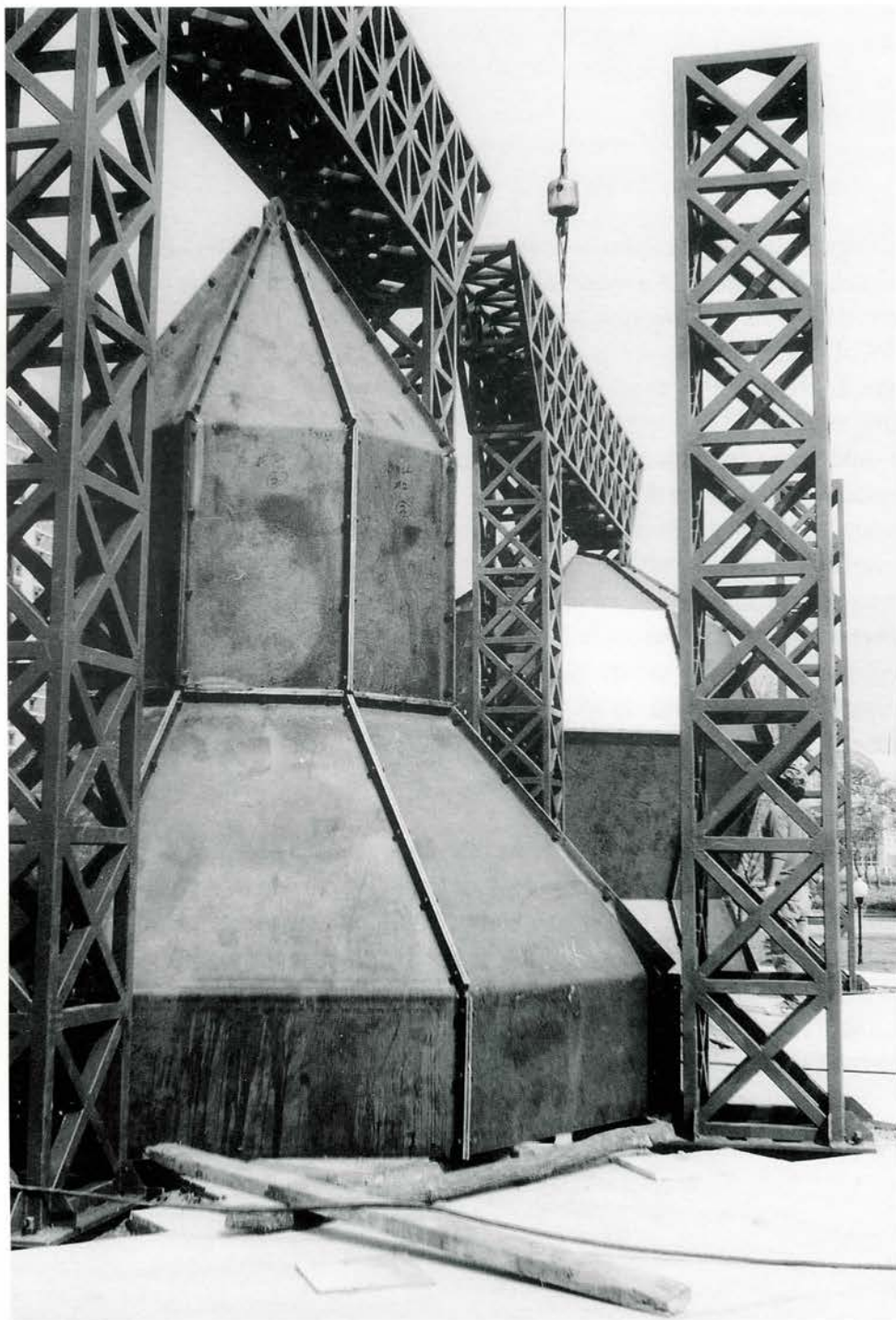
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Beethoven's 5th operating as a call sign. Surrounding this radial structure are four radio towers which transmit non-synchronised loops from Prokofiev's 'Alexander Nevsky'. The cumulative effect is as unnerving as the physical discomfort caused by *Symphony....* Gallery staff had to be regularly changed to avoid chronic stress symptoms breaking out into acts of sabotage. This art cannot be overlooked as an autonomous, albeit institutionally confined, event even if its meaning is only obliquely intuited by many of the gallery visitors. It forces a response or enquiry provoking a chain of associations that the viewer can play with. Beethoven's opening phrase is forever a morse code signal for victory and Radio London's wartime call sign will flood our memories with curious associations.

In the Seoul Olympic Park, Helyer has constructed the work *Din; Ding, Dang, Dong* - the four giant steel bells, modelled on an admixture of Korean temple bells and industrial vessels, are now a favourite picnic site. These bells are contained in a space created by steel superstructures like an harbour of vast portals. The ground plan is 22 metres square and the superstructures are 6.5 metres high. At the centre of the installation a massive granite dais supports four monstrous stainless steel hammers each weighing 60 kg, far too heavy to ever be lifted and used to make the bells toll. Like Kiefer's lead books in *The High Priestess* the potential of a call to history is silenced by the sheer weight of its instrument, at least until the coming of superman. On the other hand the planned failure of the deterministic construction of the work is overridden in practice as the wind produces sounds from the structure and the picnickers kick and slap the bells, bringing the whole work to life in the immediate present when play can overturn the prescriptions of history.

A Helyer work that has a double life is *Chamber Work; Monotonal Music for the Viol* commissioned by the Faculty of Engineering at San Jose State University in 1988. This is a machine made from triple-wall industrial cardboard, music wire, electric motor and solar power cells, in the form of a violin/rocket launcher. It does not emulate the fine art and feminine grace associated with a violin but becomes a functional machine for mechanically producing sound on 17-foot-long machine driven

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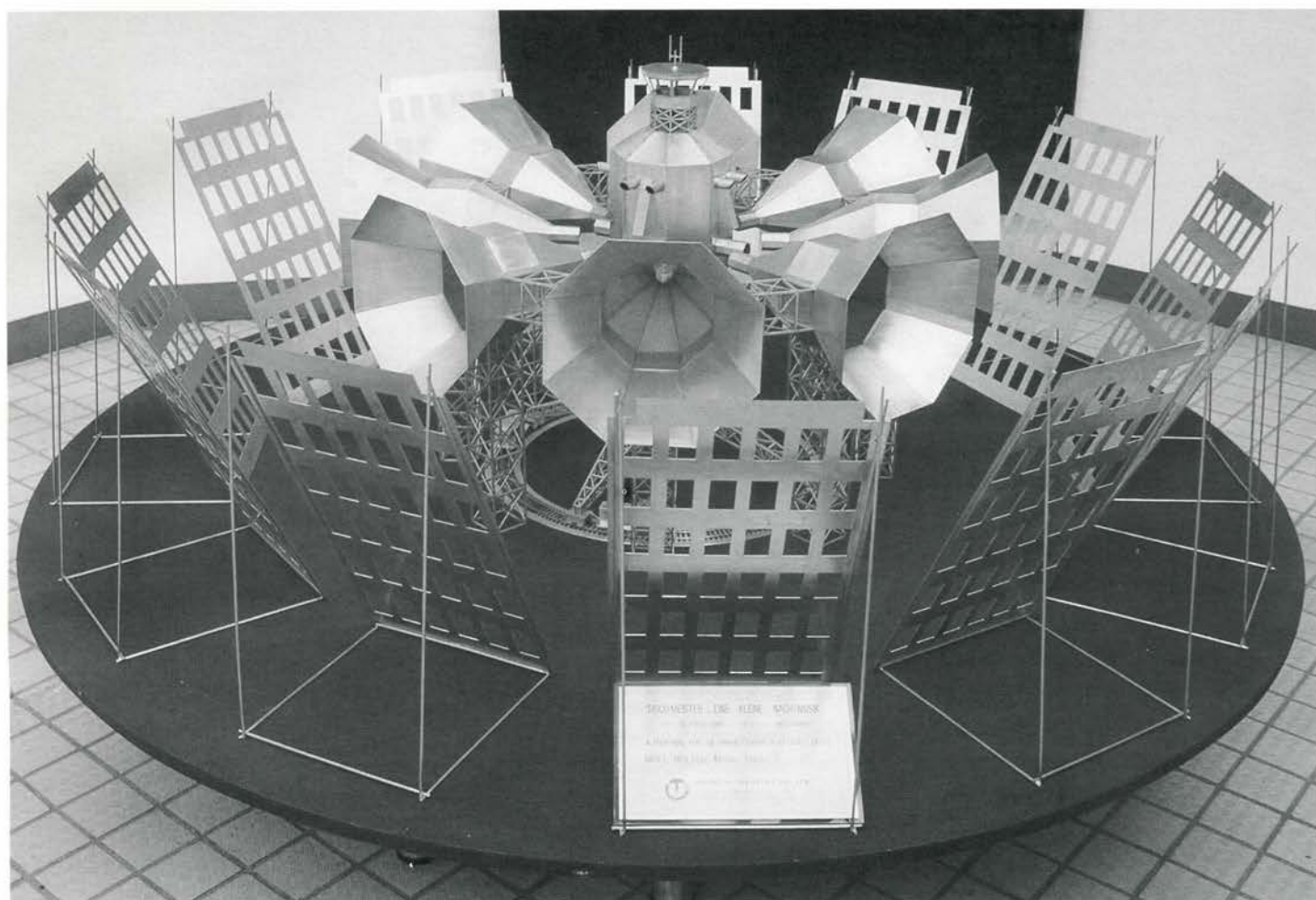
32. Din; Ding, Dang, Dong 1988 (construction detail)

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strings. Solar panels create the power and determine the strength of the signal. Once again it is a massive intrusion in space. It is as big as it could be in the building spanning the ground floor and mezzanine. 'What is it going to be for?' was the first question of the engineers who saw it. Helyer's sculptures do have the look of prototypes. In a purely pragmatic world they would exist as ideas for some other object that would have a determined function. As art however, the function remains largely in the domain of the viewer to complete. The idea of the sound and the function of the components that produce actual sound overlap to create a conflict of codes which causes a shock wave that reverberates continuously around all Helyer's installations. In the fluctuating field the viewers become sensitised to their own place in the complex web of acts and reactions, of causes and effects that we experience as the world. Every action or failure to act changes the world for all time, we are not only receivers of messages from out there, we actively change the message, passing on our own version or perversion.

In Helyer's giant machines there is the echo of human presence. In *Mute in TalkTown (the sweet warm breath of science)*, for example, the oversized saxophone may look more like a powerful and threatening rocket motor but it retains its associations with the more biological heat of a black jazz musician's warm breath. These contradictory readings reveal yet another paradox which underlies many of the pseudo-scientific forms in Helyer's work. The searing heat of an atlas rocket motor is in human

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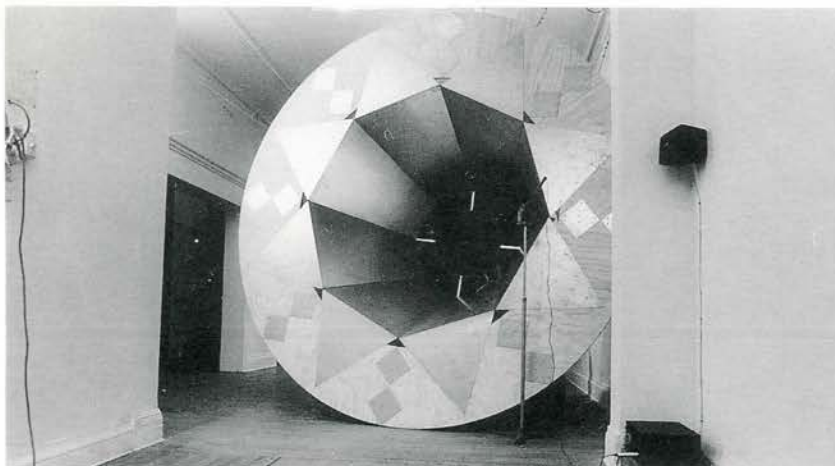


33. Chamber Work; Monotonal Music for the Viol. 1988

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terms a cool fire. It is an emotionally alienated technology and is sharply contrasted with the metabolic heat of sexuality and rhythm in New Orleans nights. All these oppositions are designed to set the viewer swaying between alternate meanings and between distinctly different codes of representation and experience. It becomes an hypnotic dance in which glimpses of the gaps in reality appear for a moment before dissolving again into the surface of the accepted.

All of these works play with changes of code where images have one reading in an iconic sense while as objects they carry quite different symbolic references. The works are primarily experienced at a kinaesthetic level as spatial events plotted within the temporal matrix of sound. Like the space and form, sound doubles as ambient experience and contributes to the signifying component in the overall semiotic of the work. A complex, total theatre is created where immediate bodily sensations are allowed to conflict with narrative structures.



34. Mute in Talk Town:(the sweet warm breath of science) 1990

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35. Mute in Talk Town; (the sweet warm breath of science) 1990

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1. Nigel Helyer. "Bell Transfer" - Ars Electronica Installation Linz 1989, The ABC and ORF Radio versions of "Bell Transfer" and from "Big Bell Beta" at PICA 1989/90.
2. (local tale quoted in ACM's The Big Bell Story.)
3. (extract from Big Bell Beta project correspondance, June 1989).
4. Nigel Helyer. "Bell Transfer" - Ars Electronica Installation Linz 1989, The ABC and ORF Radio versions of "Bell Transfer" and from "Big Bell Beta" at PICA 1989/90).
5. Allan Vizents 1987. "A Symphony for Other Cultures"(cat). ISBN 0958775907.
6. Nigel Helyer. "Bell Transfer" - Ars Electronica Installation Linz 1989, The ABC and ORF Radio versions of "Bell Transfer" and from "Big Bell Beta" at PICA 1989/90.
7. Allan Vizents 1987. "A Symphony for Other Cultures"(cat). ISBN 0958775907.
8. Nigel Helyer. "Bell Transfer" - Ars Electronica Installation Linz 1989, The ABC and ORF Radio versions of "Bell Transfer" and from "Big Bell Beta" at PICA 1989/90.
9. Ibid.
10. Allan Vizents 1987. "A Symphony for Other Cultures"(cat). ISBN 0958775907.
11. Nigel Helyer 1986. "Doppelganger". The Australian Exhibition , AGNSW 1988.
12. Allan Vizents 1987. "A Symphony for Other Cultures"(cat). ISBN 0958775907.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.

