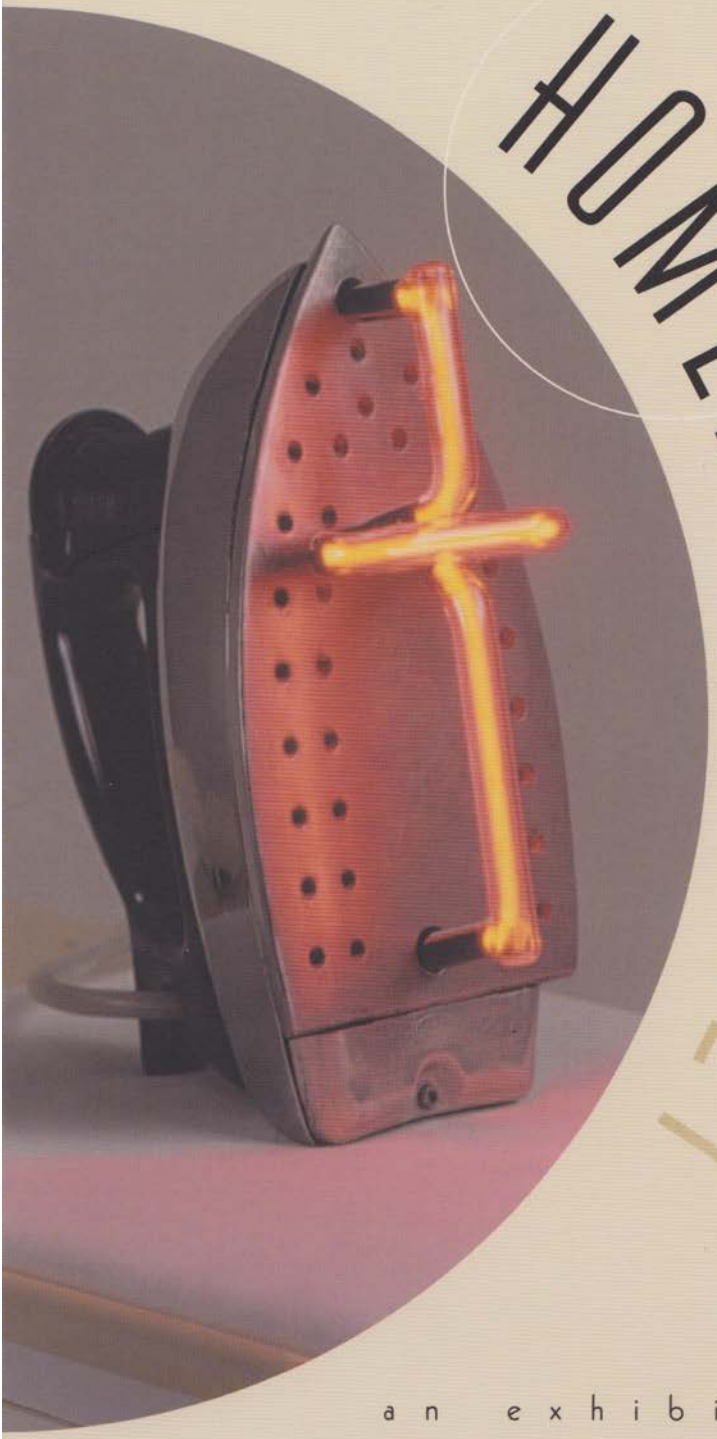

HOMELY HOMELY

june 2000

an exhibition by paul caporn

The Freudian notion of the *uncanny* reminds us that the edges of life throw shadows that can be read against the insistent rationalism of Modernity. In a sense, modern conditions are intrinsically 'arational' – think of the fetishism that surrounds consumer goods and commodities in daily life. Rational choice hardly determines our consumption habits (pace Adam Smith). More important is the range of received images, those of media and advertising among others, which connect goods to identity. No wonder Anthony Vidler writes in *The Architectural Uncanny* that there is a "resurgent interest in the uncanny as a metaphor for a fundamentally unliveable modern condition"[1].

The history of the Fremantle Arts Centre and Museum, the setting for this exhibition, reveals the extraordinary spatial manoeuvring that characterises this age. Despite its neo-gothic architectural associations, the building has seen cycles of use that locate it firmly in an industrial culture. Modernity's progressivist drive insists on spatial changes, on reconstructions of place, to match the needs of the time. Just as experiences are commodified - made, bought, sold and easily discarded - so places are changed with relentless devotion. What was, is easily swept away. Lunatic asylum becomes women's home, becomes American Services base, becomes technical college, becomes art centre and museum – all places largely determined by abstracted, transactional human relationships.

A consequence of this insistent place-changing is a loss of place-meaning and the dislocation of memory, personal and collective. Places are rendered at face value, bearing few of the imbrications of prior lived experience. Even so-called 'heritage' buildings have a diminishing capacity to express traces of the past. Modernity deploys something called History in an attempt to recover a sense of these located pasts. As Raphael Samuel has written . . . "where memory is time-warped, history is linear and progressive. History began when memory faded."[2] But while History may restore a temporal perspective to places it also tends to accent the transactional over the affective. It focuses on official will, strategy and desire, and the range of responses, reactions and resistances they inspire. Where is the detail of shared language and gesture that colour our lives?

Set against the *uncanniness* of these 'lost' or 'forgotten' public places is the popular association of the domestic home as the site of familial, affective relationships. In our cultural imaginations, 'home' is idealised as a place of simple decency, comfortingly secure from the brutalising press of the modern world. But, in truth, many of us know how facile this idea of the home as refuge of personal experience can be. After all, the home is also a locus of the commodity culture - take an inventory of what's inside your own home and you will see what I mean. We may think that the home is the site for affective relationships, between mother and father, child and parent, but it is also festooned with objects acquired through the mass of transactional exchanges that largely determine our lives.

This is Paul Caporn's point of engagement; the intersection between the net of modernist impulses that ask us to consume and forget on the one hand, and personal places that promise maintenance and recovery of experience and memory on the other. In a culture framed by habits of consumption, he reminds us that the object is shadowed by its contradiction, a kind of consumer *uncanny*. While the object or good is promised as essentially transformative, through the techniques of sale such as advertising, it always delivers something else – an *ersatz* version of personal contentment and happiness. And then there is Paul's use of neon, almost stereotypically modern, semaphoring excitement and glitz. These blue, green, white tubes stare out from his work, drawing our gaze, assuaging our desire for quick sensation and delight. Alongside technical virtuosity they invoke a sense of emotional superficiality.

The objects that Paul uses are familiar, known and recognisable; icons of a culture built on exchange and sale. But he pushes them in new directions, making them disturbingly *other*. The shearer's-cum-hospital bed is 'Bound' by neon restraints, neon bars turn the television into a 'Picture Cell'. A blue neon cube inside the padded fridge is an 'Icebox' resonating with senses of imprisonment and incipient decay. Suddenly, these objects become jokily threatening, leaping out of the repetitive banality that characterises products for mass consumption. There is nothing *homely* or comforting about them now. Instead of utility, they project an uncertain fear. For Freud *unheimlich*, translated as the uncanny, . . . "was the fundamental propensity of the familiar to turn on its owners, suddenly to become defamiliarized, derealized, as if in a dream"[3]. These works turn on us in a similar fashion, questioning our enmeshment in a cultural landscape determined by practices of production and consumption. They mirror the estrangement from locale and alienation from the fruits of labour that Marx identified at the epicentre of industrial capitalism.

The head of Mental Health Services in WA from 1963 to 1978, Dr. A.S. Ellis, has written that . . . "the well springs of conformity have yet to be explored, and insanity will be defined anew in every age."[4] The play with History in this exhibition speaks to that sense of temporal change and the contingency of discourse and knowledges. Stripped from their former contexts with *Duchampian* ease, these objects – bed, television, iron, washtub, fireguard, refrigerator – seem to float disconnected in the room, outside time and space. Now, they are artefacts bent to new purposes within a setting that insists on their consumption as 'art' objects. The associated panels declaim – as museum labels do – *partial* elements of each object's history, technical, personal or generic. Similarly, the place in which they sit has been stripped of former associations and re-conceptualised as 'art gallery'.

The re-presentation of archetypal domestic appliances also conflates the idea of the domestic home with the euphemistic use of 'home' as cipher for a coercive institution, ie. women's *home*. The association is ironic and unnerving, reminding us that language is a slippery eel which frequently misrepresents and masks institutional practice and authoritative will. Words paper over the intent that underwrote construction of this place for the incarceration and control of the mad *other*. Lunatic asylum, women's home – none of these words does justice to the building's pasts. It's between the play on words, between the home as secure, domestic space and home as a controlling, institutional site, that we might come to some understanding of the strange mix of strategies that determined the construction and use of this place over more than a century.

If the Enlightenment saw the flowering of the rational mind, then insanity came to be seen as its dark shadow, its *uncanny*. The asylum, Michel Foucault argued, manifested the post-enlightenment desire to regularise bodies and minds in space . . . "behind the great abstraction of exchange, there continues the meticulous, concrete training of useful forces . . . it is not that the beautiful totality of the individual is amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated within it."[5] This culture has turned our habits of consumption into normative behaviour. The triumph of capital with the fall of the Berlin Wall has been so complete, so total, that to argue against the market is seen increasingly as mad chatter, a kind of culturo-economic *insanity*.

Homely makes clear linkages between these tropes of insanity and consumer capitalism, refracting them through the prism of History. Both themes depend on the notion of making bodies docile, of regularising workers and consumers in space. Mass consumption, like rational thought, lies at the heart of our cultural frame. But Paul's work snaps at the heels of rational market politics, accepting its place *within* the system while laughingly provoking our memories of other pasts, other intents. Look into the pool of water in the washtub, see the shimmering neon 'Cleanse' and glimpse your own reflection. Paul is not only asking questions about consumption and convention, about goods as markers of our identities as consumers, but also pointing the finger at the production of *art*. The oft-repeated statement that art is just another technique of production and consumption is manifest here. No one stands outside the cultural set, not even the artist who reflects on the shadows behind the easy equanimity of our lives.

Mathew Trinca is a Curator of History at the WA Museum and has worked in Australia and overseas as a journalist.

[1] Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1992, p. 10

[2] Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, London, Verso, 1994. p. ix

[3] Vidler, p. 7

[4] A.S. Ellis, *Eloquent Testimony: the story of the Mental Health Services in Western Australia 1830-1975*, Nedlands, University of WA Press, 1984. p. 184

[5] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the birth of the prison*, London, Allen Lane, 1977. p. 217

PICTURE CELL
$1799.^{00}$ plus G.S.T

CLEANSE
$999.^{00}$ Empty
Water optional extra
$1.^{00}$ plus G.S.T

AWAITING ORDERS
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HOMELY

ICE BOX
$1600.00 plus G.S.T

BED BOUND
$1600.00 plus G.S.T

IRON CROSS
$749.00 plus G.S.T
Ironing Board Optional

If full payment falls after June 30th G.S.T will apply.

"The subject of the uncanny . . . is undoubtedly related to what is frightening – to what arouses dread and horror; equally certainly, too, the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense, so that it tends to coincide with what excites fear in general."

SIGMUND FREUD

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Selected Awards / Grants / Commissions

1999 ArtsWA New Works Grant For Exhibition at Fremantle Art Centre

1998 Artbridge 3rd Prize overall plus People's Choice Award.
Metropolis Super 8 Film Festival runner up in Animation category

1996 Healthways Grant City Farm Convergence Exhibition

1985 Artrage subsidy for Picture Show exhibited at PICA

Selected Professional Practice

1988-2000 Western Australian Museum, Exhibition & Design Technical Officer.

Solo Exhibitions

1998 Out Of Order at Arts House Gallery Northbridge

1996 By Light at Arts House Gallery Northbridge

Selected Group Exhibitions

1995 Mine Own Executioner Mundaring Art Centre
Anemone Regional Touring Multi Media Exhibition organised by IMAGO
Quotes (appropriation as sub text) Perth College
Glow Perth Institute of Contemporary Art

1993 City of Perth Craft Awards CRAFTWEST Gallery Perth

1987 Convergence City Farm Perth Curator and Exhibitor

1985 Performince Exhibition and performances at the lab Art Studios Subiaco Perth

Recent Publications

2000 The West Australian Habitat Friday March 10 Bring light to life by Rita Clarke

1999 Broad Sheet Vol 28 winter From a Western Summit Robert Cook
Art Monthly April Artnotes, WA Annie English

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