

Interview with Astrid Mulder, 22 July 2021

Sandie Bridie: We are talking about Astrid's experience of doing some sited performance work in the George Paton Gallery in preparation for her exhibition *Untitled (Gallery)*. The exhibition, due to the current COVID lockdown, will not be sited in the Entrance Gallery of the George Paton Gallery but will now be an online project on the GPG website.

This exhibition was really timely, in that this is possibly the last semester that we will be exhibiting works in the George Paton Gallery at Union House in the university. We will be moving to the New Student Precinct down towards Grattan Street next semester. The history of the GPG is so attached to the actual venue of the gallery that I think that Astrid's project is a beautiful exploration of the skin and the walls of the gallery.

Astrid's pre-exhibition residency/research period, where she explored the gallery and documented this exploration for her exhibition, was truncated due to Melbourne's COVID lockdown number four. And now the actual exhibition has been cancelled COVID lockdown number five. So, Astrid has experienced a dual punctuation of her project, that belies the beautiful results of her exploration of the gallery site.

Astrid, could you please talk about what your first ideas were for the exploring of the gallery?

Astrid Mulder: Usually I try to keep an open mind when beginning a project. When I start something new, I always allow a decent amount of time for just pure exploration. My process is quite playful and often consists of me documenting myself moving amongst a space or with an object in a variety of different ways. I like to think of these interactions as exercises, which I intuitively develop as I engage with a particular thing or place. I will often repeat these, over and over, tweaking them slightly until I unlock some kind of rhythm, or establish some kind of connection in relation to my body...

(Beginning again).

SB: In a way your work is interfacing something, for instance, last year during the extended COVID lockdown, your work was about the interface with the laptop computer, which was all we were stuck with to communicate with those around us. You were offered the Entrance Gallery at the GPG for a solo exhibition, and I would suggest that you were approaching that in a similar way – that the site was informing what the work would be.

Astrid Mulder: Yes, I suppose that was one of the only parameters I set myself. I set out to make a work about the physical site of the George Paton Gallery and planned to build upon this investigation conceptually during my residency.

SB: It's so literal, the way you approach that sitedness.

AM: Yes, and I find it hard to talk about as it's such a physical experience for me. It often begins with a series of instinctual movements and interactions.

SB: So, it's intuitive, your response, you are dancing with the space, like it is your partner. For instance, I remember when we visited the gallery there were features of the space that you lit on as props that you wanted to engage with.

AM: Yes! It's usually something formal that I'm attracted to. For instance, I might be drawn to a particular angle of a wall or the placement of an interior fixture, such as a light switch. I really loved the back area of the space and in particular the bend in the balustrade. I'm drawn to what I can instantly envision myself performing upon or with as a kind of apparatus.

SB: If someone saw the show then they would start to look at the gallery furniture in a different way. I always love it when people do exhibitions in the gallery that are about an acquaintance with the skin of the space. It is almost like an in joke for someone who runs the gallery, it gives me a particular kind of pleasure to see this riffing off the walls and the doors. You were quite excited, I remember, about the handles on the glass doors to the Entrance Gallery when we were doing that first site visit. But once you were in the gallery then it was the balustrade at the back stairs, and also you were playing/performing with the desk.

AM: It is interesting how you refer to the walls as the 'skin' of the space. It's a nice way of describing a wall and generally I like to think of the things that I work with as bodies. I'm interested in the possibilities of a body and how the vitality within might be revealed. I think we are generally quite restrictive with what we allow certain objects or spaces to be. In a seemingly empty gallery, there is in fact so much material to work with. With the large door handles of the gallery, I remember thinking, yes, I might be able to fit my body through that. So, there is always this interesting instinct I have in relation to my own body. I am always thinking about how I might be able to perform with something.

SB: It is like a dance partner. Those photos you took of the desk, I am thinking of the humour in it and of these great shots that I have – photos of Buster Keaton, the silent movie director and comedian, there is something really comic that reminds me of his work. There is that engagement that animates the other thing that creates a comic discourse between the actor and the object.

AM: The humour is not always intentional, but it's definitely there. It comes naturally when you move around in such an unfamiliar way. You are supposed to sit at a desk, not try to fit your body in the space underneath it, and when I do things like this, my actions become absurd. Sometimes the positioning of the camera can also contribute to this absurdity, an example in this project would be in the videos where the frame is flipped vertically, which makes it seem as if I'm walking on the ceiling. When documenting myself, I'm constantly running back and forth between the camera to try and find what I think works best.



SB: It is a nice physical interplay as well. Another aspect to the dance is the actual act of documenting of it. Thinking of the hilarious image that we have used on the cover of the gallery program, there is a difference between the humour of the actual photo of you, but when you were actually taking that photo, I wonder how that felt with your head inside the desk? What quality were you looking for in the actual photo?

AM: *There is a lot of humour in that image.*

SB: Yes, it is a classic slapstick moment.

AM: *When I was documenting this, I was thinking about the scale of my body in relation to this object and how I might balance myself against it. As I became closer to the underneath of the desk, I started to think about the hidden and rebellious nature of this space – often you will find gum under there, it's not a place many people like to touch, let alone have your face in!*

SB: Not by choice, no. And in the photo, it looks potentially precarious in that your weight on the bottom looks like it might flip the desk up, but I don't think that would have been the case.

AM: *Yes, it was a very precarious pose and hard to hold still.*

I always like to engage the balance, strength and flexibility of my body and the objects that I am working with. Some objects are more flexible, whilst others have a lot of strength. The objects that I explored within this work are very angular and fixed, so the flexibility of my body was explored more than the flexibility of the object. Every object or space has a particular skill set. The balustrade had a lot of strength, so I experimented with pulling my entire weight against it.



SB: What kind of pace is the exploration? Is it a frenetic, energetic performative thing? Or is it more measured and quiet, or a combination of different levels of energy?

AM: *It can be a mixture but in general it's pretty measured. I usually try to hold a position for about thirty seconds because I find the subtle movements that arise from this to be quite interesting.*

SB: Do you rehearse it before you document it, or do you measure it out or go through your motions?

AM: Usually I will begin with a specific kind of interaction or pose and slowly move through this into a variation or alternative engagement. It's very intuitive and I try to move with a continuous rhythm and fluidity. The routines I perform for the camera remind me of the routines I used to perform as a gymnast.



SB: So then, in regard to this past experience of your of being a gymnast, is that a connection that you have recently been able to attribute to your work, or is it something you have been conscious of for some time now – that the movements that you are making in relation to the objects/props you engage with are somehow innate to you, coming out of this trained activity that you have had since your childhood?

AM: Artist Gymnastics was my entire world growing up, I trained for almost a decade, four to eight hours a day. I think this really shaped who I am and how I engage with the world. I've only recently made this connection within my art practice; however, it's always been there and I'm excited to explore how the sport might otherwise inform my art.

SB: Do you have fun when you are doing this or is it dead earnest? Do you think it is slightly absurd and silly at the time you are making the work?

AM: I really enjoy performing the exercises or skills that I develop. It's very playful but it can be serious when I'm holding a pose or undertaking an exercise for a certain amount of time. It can turn into a workout. Sometimes it's frustrating when I can't figure out where the process is going; I begin to question myself, but I will usually look over my documentation and little things will appear, and I can build upon these nuances. I might edit the footage in a certain way or go back and reshoot more of something I like. It can be as simple as rotating the frame to unlock something really great. In my process there is a lot of back and forth and when I find myself at a roadblock, I either need to push through or take the work in a slightly different direction.

SB: So then, how frustrating for you was it to have that curtailed due to the lockdown that was announced during your research period in the gallery? Did you feel you had more work to do that was essential to your understanding of the project, that just couldn't happen?

AM: The disruption was frustrating, I was supposed to have an entire week in the space, but my residency was cut short after two days. Those first two days I used for exploration, and I had planned to refine, choreograph and reshoot. Unfortunately, I didn't get to do this, and I had to push through with my initial documentation. In a way it has been good for me, to be forced to take a different approach. I had to push through, not disregarding the work I had already done, and it made me value this in a different way.

SB: I think you do have a really solid body of work to work with here, but the finesse will be different and that is not necessarily a bad thing, it just results in a different grain. The different projects that you do can have grains, or levels of finish to them.

So then, last week we were informed that we must endure another lockdown and that all events would need to be cancelled. How was it for you to find out that your exhibition in the gallery would not go ahead?

AM: It was a real shame, as the work is about the space and its physical presentation within it could have really activated it once again. I had also hoped to engage the viewer's body in the positioning of the work, so it was disappointing not to be able to do that. However, I'm fortunate that photography and video translate so well online.

SB: On the positive side, I think that sitedness in a physical space, in a gallery, is something you can bring to another project where you can elaborate on the ideas that you have built in this project. For us at the gallery, it is a great project to have in our last year in the current space that is the George Paton Gallery in Union House, something that is about the site. The literalness of it, I adore.

AM: I am glad that I had the opportunity to do this within the George Paton Gallery. It's not just a white box, it has all these different areas within it and rooms attached to it. It was also really nice to be surrounded by passers-by and students eating their lunch, watching on as I performed these weird interactions.



SB: Were they curious about what you were doing?

AM: Totally curious! People were looking through the glass windows and someone even knocked to asked what I was doing. At this point, I had the desk rotated and was balancing myself upside down within it, so it was a bit difficult to answer. I didn't really stop to interact much with onlookers, as I

was often in mid-recording. They were happy to let me continue though. At lunch hour, there were almost fifty students surrounding the space, some curious, some not fussed.

SB: So, you did have your audience after all!

Despite your research time being contracted into a two-day 'residency' in the gallery, it may have generated a lot of material for you. I guess one benefit of presenting the project online is that you can include material that you might not have found a location for in the Entrance Gallery.

AM: Yes, it was a great experience to perform my process in front of others and despite the disruptions of both lockdowns, I was able to produce a lot of material.