

# Rules of engagement

Reception areas are strange places: they allow a foretaste of an organisation's activities, without telling its full story. They are filled with trustworthy and reliable fittings that reflect a corporate look that is usually neutral, functional and vaguely stylish (without being alarmingly so). They are public places where people stand and wait for attention, trying not to look bored, nervous or confused.

Nicole Voevodin-Cash's series of installations collectively entitled 'Lobby play' throws down a challenge to this idea, spilling out of the IMA and into the various reception areas of the Judith Wright Centre. Working with each of the organisations within the Centre, she has replaced their existing fittings with interactive components that look suspiciously like furniture, but don't necessarily operate as such. Unbounded by white walls of a gallery, 'Lobby play' flouts the normal conventions by which we engage with art objects. Their rules of engagement are different.

## 1. Interact

Instead of 'look but don't touch' – the usual rules of gallery behaviour – works in 'Lobby play' require physical interaction, engagement, discussion and enjoyment. They are made with serious fun in mind – talking in a quiet whisper is difficult; trying not to smile even harder and repressing laughter an impossible task. The materials, form and craftsmanship employed by Voevodin-Cash challenge the assumption that we are looking at 'visual' art, as her work practices owe as much to techniques and objectives of furniture production, installation art and the fun-fair. As such they are created as physical environments to be enjoyed. The white vinyl and foam landscape *Joyce terrain*, sited within the IMA proper, is made to be engaged with as playfully as the maker intended it to be seen.

## 2. Wobble

Bladders, like cellulite, are normally hidden beneath layers of more decorous fabrics, hidden from view. These private, wobbly worlds have their own organic rhythms that are far removed from the consistent geometry of a regulated life. Remember waterbeds? They sloshed and sluiced, creating cool ripples where smooth, dependable springiness had been the norm. *Elements*, in the reception area of Koembra Jdarra, are made from the same material. These floppy, wobbly objects are placed as if to invite visitors to be seated, but seem ready to spill their contents – or the person seated – if the activity is not carefully negotiated. *Elements* remind us of the leaky, pliable, less controllable aspects of

the corporeal world to which we as humans belong, that is often at odds with the orderly and controlled spaces we inhabit.

### 3. Balance

Voevodin-Cash blurs the boundaries between function and play. Her attention to detail and exemplary upholstery and cabinet making skills in the *Flintstone* stool, convince us of the object's practical application and sturdiness, leading us to believe its trustworthiness. How misguided. Unaware of the dangers that lurk in the shadow of her craft an unsuspecting viewer may attempt to sit comfortably on the one-legged *Flintstone* stool only have their sense of balance seriously put to the test. Found appropriately in the reception of Rock 'n roll Circus where action and balance are requisite skills, the stool can be pushed into behaving as a practical object, but it is also a thing of ungainly beauty and immense fun. This is not to say that practicality, beauty and fun are impossible to share in the one object, but frequently one is prioritised at the expense of the others. Voevodin-Cash has the ability to balance a multiplicity of intentions in the one object, and the result is a surprise combination of pure, sensuous enjoyment.

### 4. Share

At Youth Arts, a team effort is required for *What if* to function without the prospective user collapsing awkwardly in fits of giggles. While it looks perfectly harmless, albeit covered in arrows pointing in different directions, trying to sit on it is another issue. The secret is to join forces with at least one other person, form a TEAM (Together Everyone Achieves More) and agree on a method of approach. Safe seating can only thus be achieved. Don't attempt to sit on *What if* alone! You'll need to share your space, ideas, trust and timing with someone else.

### 5. Make a spectacle of yourself (and pay for it)

The six stools *Into you* play on the choices we make in public, in this case paying for self-enjoyment. In theatre reception areas the audience normally pays for a ticket and waits before stepping inside the auditorium for the performance to begin. As with other elements of 'Lobby play', Voevodin-Cash has upended this idea. Sited in the Theatre Foyer, each of the stools has a coin slot built into a small side table: the seat will vibrate if you insert a coin in the slot. No coin, no vibrating. While there is an element of performance, it is more akin to the surprise and fun of slot machines in sideshow alley, or

a peep-show in a tawdry backstreet. *Into you* suggests that the role of performer is ambiguous: is it the audience member in the lobby, or the actor in the auditorium?

## 6. Indulge

In the Screening Room, the four works that comprise *Dimple* are soft and dark, like enormous squares of luscious chocolate. Comprised of shiny lycra slipped over a soft centre, some feature a hole in their fabric, a springy, erotically charged donut-orifice, into which whole limbs can penetrate and disappear. *Dimple's* size, texture and shape creates a spectacular theatrical intimacy, as if the things we enjoy in the privacy of our own homes have been paraded on view to everyone. Those warm, intimate, naughty moments are shared not with a friend or lover, but with an audience of other, unknown viewers, en route elsewhere, doing something else, distracted by these seemingly out of place objects. Our private experience is made public, and we are not alone to contemplate our own intimate thoughts.

## 7. Be surprised

In *Reception disc*, a combination of DVD and wire drawings for Arterial's reception area, Voevodin-Cash comments on gender stereotypes, expectations and workplace needs. Identifying a need in our increasingly alienating public spaces for interaction and real experience, Arterial's reception area – previously unfurnished – has been granted a receptionist and a series of Genoa armchairs. While both these elements would be ideal for the area to function properly, and indeed appear life size and sound, they are a mirage: the receptionist is computer generated and the chairs are line drawings of metal wire, attached to the wall. While both can be approached, they can never assist; while one cannot be attended to in this reception area, like the others in the Judith Wright Centre, one can always be surprised.

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