

Artists do the Big Picture: Arts Practice as Cultural and Religious Renewal

Rod Pattenden

Introduction

An increasing number of Australian artists have, in recent years, developed a heightened interest in the philosophical and religious ordering of cultural forms in society. Impatient with making art objects for domestic use or public display, these artists have moved towards ways of working that heighten an interaction with the viewer, such as site-specific installations, that seek to express visual experience which invites spiritual and social renewal. Many of these strategies draw on religious traditions, but move beyond a mere re-affirmation of the visual habits or structural doctrines of a particular religious tradition. These strategies contain an impulse towards a public role for the artist that moves beyond past categories of the *avant-garde* to that of prophet, shaman and priest. These activities invite the re-mapping of cultural affections towards a more holistic view, a whole systems ethic that holds modes of seeing, acting and being together.

In 2000–2001, with the support of a major grant from the Australia Council for the Arts, the installation series *Incarnations* was staged in the Paddington Uniting Church as an attempt to explore the connections between contemporary arts practice and the wider issues of cultural formation, an horizon which includes religious ideas of faith, the future, and the political realities of contemporary Australia. The series remains of the more innovative installation projects in this country and certainly unique in its choice of a church with historic and cultural associations. The space continues to be used by an active Christian community that is extensively involved in the local community. This includes welfare programs, performing and

visual arts events, as well as the well-known Saturday Paddington Markets.¹

This paper will concentrate on two of the artist included in this series: Tim Johnson, an early collaborator with Aboriginal artists from Papunya, and Janet Laurence, known for her important public commissions including the War Memorial Canberra and the Museum of Sydney. Other artists included in this series were My Le Thi, Noelene Lucas, John Adair, Marion Borgelt and Martin Sims.

Janet Laurence

Janet Laurence is an artist with significant international exposure who has been involved in a considerable number of important public commissions in Australia, Japan and the United Kingdom. In all these works she deals with the nature of memory and relies on a material and alchemical way of proceeding. Her commissions include the *Tomb of the Unknown Soldier* at the Australian War Memorial Canberra (1993), the Museum of Sydney (1994), the Central Synagogue in Bondi (1998), and the Australian War Memorial in London (2003). Laurence's work is characterised by a non-figurative approach to surfaces that have led her to concentrate on the materiality of the artwork. This was clearly evidenced in the recent survey exhibition recently staged at the Drill Hall Gallery, the Australian National University Canberra.²

Her involvement in the *Incarnations* project arose out of her sensitivity to issues of memory and spiritual significance in her work, as well as the previous experience of working with the Paddington Uniting Church on a design commission in 1992. The work she eventually completed, 'Veiling Space,' was a

¹ See the 24 page catalogue, *Incarnations*, Paddington Uniting Church, 2001.

² *Janet Laurence: A Survey Exhibition*, Drill Hall Gallery The Australian National University, Canberra 19 August–25 September 2005.

deceptively simple arrangement of thin fabric that divided the interior of the church into smaller spaces. Several objects were placed at the entrance of the space: a box containing sulphur (a chemical transforming in the atmosphere) and an ensemble of sulphur stained glass sheets mounted on the pulpit area of the church. The central feature of the work was, however, the diaphanous and fluid interior space of the church filled with light and a sense of its own mysterious depth.

In many ways, the work installed in the church was a pivotal expression of her interest in veils and surface, glass, translucence, reflection, the process of looking into and through, mediated by perception and memory. The church installation gave her an opportunity to work with uncluttered space rather than inserting her installations within a frame: here she could in fact play with the whole. The opportunity to explore these interests in this installation has further focused her more recent work and led to her enrolling in a doctorate at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology studying ephemeral architecture and the notion of veiling:

For me the veil is the space between perception and memory.
Still space, slow space.
A dissolving membrane, a hesitation.
A way of looking within the world rather than at it.³

This interest has proven to be one of the fundamental methodological preoccupations of her work in recent years alongside a larger concern to relate her practice to ecological issues and to rejuvenate the role of the artist in society in relation to environmental awareness.

Rather than working in and around a given structure this installation piece allowed the veiling to simply hang as fluid and translucent planes within the given structures of the building. The

³ Janet Laurence, *Verdant*, Catalogue Sherman Galleries, Paddington, 9 October–1 November 2003.

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impermanent and fluid shifting of light and material provided a counterpoint to the given stable architectural edges of the space. She set out her intentions in the catalogue notes by drawing attention to the ongoing dialogue in her work between the material and the immaterial:

The work enables the re-experiencing of the building, where the materiality of the stone walls is juxtaposed against the weightlessness of the veils. Within in this space a relationship between matter and immateriality is formed. The warm stone walled structure encloses and protects, transformations of thought and perception are made imaginable. The spiritual question returns to us as a transparent possibility... The Church creates this space for becoming.⁴

In her review of the installation Adrian Parr proposed that veiling ‘... does not reinforce the internal/external dichotomy. Instead, veiling reinvents space and our perception of the world on the line between the two.’⁵ This observation identified the interest Laurence has in heightening the quality of seeing and perception in the viewer.

Veiling is a strategy that comes from a desire to make a slow space visually, towards a sense of thickness. It gives the hand and the eye a relationship, you begin to feel your way into the space rather than marching right in – you can’t quite see where you are going.

With the slowing down of that experience you become aware of yourself, as well as thought and perceptions in the space. It was a way of moving space from a perceptual experience to what I call a memory space. Finding the place to engage with memory.

⁴ Janet Laurence, artist statement, *Incarnations*, Paddington Uniting Church, 2002, p 21

⁵ Adrian Parr, ‘Veiling Space; Exhibition Review,’ *Architectural Review Australia*, No 79, Autumn 2002, 19.

Veiling partly occludes and affects your visibility. But what it creates for me is a desire, a desire to go further, beyond...a desire to move into your experience of body in a space of tacility where you experience the materiality of the space.⁶

These sorts of strategies have drawn Laurence to assess her work in the terms of architecture, rather than just as two-dimensional art form. Writers that deal with the philosophy of space and environment have prompted her. She has also drawn on ideas from phenomenology and notions of embodiment and enmeshed experience.

Beyond the physicality of architectural objects and practicalities of pragmatic content, enmeshed experience is not merely a place of events, things, and activities, but something more intangible, which emerges from the continuous unfolding of overlapping spaces, materials and detail.⁷

These words echo the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty who gave perception a new language that sought to re-ignite connections that had been separated by Cartesian duality. Merleau-Ponty stated, for example, that 'Vision is a conditioned thought; it is born 'as occasioned' by what happens in the body; it is incited to think by the body.'⁸

The body in the space of the Paddington Church was clearly disoriented from its careful and ordered reference to architectural forms. This church in its architectural tradition is based on neo-Romanesque forms that emphasise the purity of geometric spaces to contain and order the divine - human encounter. Laurence's work introduces a more fluid state of perception that

⁶ Interview with Janet Laurence, 27 October 2005.

⁷ Steven Hall, Juhani Pallasmas and Alberto Perez-Gomez, 'Questions of Perception: Phenomenology of Architecture,' Special Issue of *Architecture and Urbanism*, July 1994, [1998 second printing,] Tokyo, 45.

⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, James Edie, editor, Evanston, 1964, 175.

heightens the movement of the body through space that both amplifies and subverts the manner in which any two-way traffic might occur.

A related focus in her work has been with the networks of relationship in the environment, with ecological balance and sensual appreciation. This was heightened within the terms of this installation as the liturgical calendar during this period of late December moved towards the advent of light at Christmas. The revealing and unveiling of curtains is an important symbol of the death of Christ, as the curtain is torn in two at the point of Christ's death.⁹ It also present in an understanding of the birth of Christ as an appearance of light.

The philosopher, Helene Cixous, reflects this in words that provide a poetic reflection on her experience of a medical operation that restored her sight. Her words open up a reflection on the possible theological effects of seeing as a physical embodied act:

Ah! She hadn't realised that day before that eyes are the miraculous hands, had never enjoyed the delicate tact of the cornea, the eyelashes, the most powerful hands, these hands that touch imponderably near and far-off heres. She had not realized that eyes are lips on the lips of God.¹⁰

Laurence's work creates a liturgical space that is thick with the slowness of perception about the interaction of creatures in the space and the orientation of the self to the firm perceptual boundaries. The work forces the worshipper to look into the veil to face them with the partiality of knowledge rather than the firmness of belief. For, as Saint Paul says: 'for now we see in a

⁹ *The Holy Bible*, containing the *Old and New Testaments* in the King James Version, 1977, Old Testament, The Gospel according to Saint Matthew 27:51, 22.

¹⁰ Helene Cixous and Jacques Derrida, *Veils*, translated by Geoffrey Bennington, Stanford, 2001, 9.

mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I only know in part: then I will know fully even as I have been fully known.' (1 Corinthians 13:12)

There is an illusive and shifting perception in Laurence's work that works against any sense of stable ordering of meaning. In fact, it undermines any sense of concrete or fundamentalist reading of the space. Veiling becomes a strategy that makes visible the unstable nature of meanings that float in the space. This strategy draws attention to the shifting, floating, skins of interpretation rather than the firmness of structures, definitions and frames in the space. It both subverts and works to let free the joy of being in the space. This fluid irritation of finding only instability is reflected in Jacques Derrida's meditation on veils and the provisionality of language in the following way. '... exhausted from knowing it, for too long, that history of the veil, and all the folds of explications, complications, explications of its revelation or unveilings.'¹¹

The church building, while having a substantial architectural frame, is peaked with a barrel vault ceiling that is held in place by thin iron columns. This upward movement is painted white and emphasises something of a temporary structure within the strong solid construction of stone that carries the weight of the building. The tent like form lent its own sense of amplitude to the work by Laurence and reflected the light back down from the ceiling into the shifting plains of the material curtains and veils. While there is dissonance and surprise in the installation there is also a sense of appropriateness in its siting and use of materials that allowed it to breathe within the space as an appropriate addition.

After working on this piece, Laurence completed a small sculptural work in resin that played with the internal spaces created by the veils in the church. Entitled 'After Veiling,' the work highlighted the tangible sense of memory that she was

¹¹ *Ibid*, 38.

seeking through the attenuation of veils. The work highlighted the sense of 'being inside a membrane - the sticky thick aspects of memory – the elasticity with no strict boundary.'¹²

This was followed by larger scale works where she visited jungle sites in Mexico where the environment was threatened with deforestation (the series *Selva Veil* 2005). Here she veiled tree spaces and created an 'in memoriam' kind of effect that were later presented in large scale photographs printed on hanging sheets of film. These panels in turn reflected the light and the moving passage of the viewer in real time, across the image in the gallery setting. These were 'ghost spaces of memory' that connected her methodology with her concern to ignite connection with the world of living things and the nature of human connection to that world.

Other works, such as a veiling space for sick plants and her current work on an installation wall for the CH2 Building being developed by the Melbourne City Council, continue this set of interests. In this way she continues to explore in her work a wider role for the artist as one who seeks to help people see and feel more deeply the world around them that includes a sense of social responsibility. She notes that:

If I am going to work in public then I have a responsibility as an artist.

Where does art find a place in our current market economy?

My question is whether art can have a role to reach the public about our threatened environmental situation.¹³

The content of Laurence's work continues to focus her interest in issues that are centrally defined by an interest in ecology and the sad, yet awakening notation of endangered species. Her attempts at creating spaces for sick plants and extinct species are poignant reminders of a need to live life in connection with

¹² Interview with Janet Laurence, 27 October 2005.

¹³ *Ibid.*

the world that we inhabit, to see with eyes open the world around us with compassion, connection and feeling. She summarises her intent in the following way:

The particular content I have been interested in working with is that of the fugitive and transitory state of the life-world that enmeshes us within it and through our slowing enables a recognition of inseparability from it. In this sense it is an ecological quest.¹⁴

Tim Johnson

Tim Johnson's approach to image making is one that includes a key consideration of religious awareness as well as a complex integration of cross-cultural identities. His sensitivity to religious approaches will often find expression through collaboration with artists from diverse cultural backgrounds, which have, in the past included indigenous artists from Australia, Asia and the USA. In this project installation for Paddington he included Daniel Bogunovic (Serbia) and Karma Phuntsok (Tibet), who both contributed painted images to overall works developed by Johnson.

A larger and more significant contribution was made by My Le Thi, a Vietnamese born artist, who developed several key components to the installation in the Church space. Tim Johnson and My Le Thi have had a long series of collaborative exhibitions and installations and were able to draw in further artists to work on complex multi-image works both on canvas and through installations.¹⁵

The overall installation provided something of a bibliography of sources that have fed Johnson's work for the last thirty years. He

¹⁴ Janet Laurence, artist's notes 2005.

¹⁵ See, for example, the many collaborative exhibitions at Stephen Mori Gallery, Sydney such as *4 Directions*, October 1995, *Threads of Destiny*, May 2003.

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developed a series of small installations that the viewer encountered as they walked around the space. A large dot painting filled the front wall of the church and blended in to the natural yellow and pink sandstone walls that had been exposed after a recent renovation. The central part of the floor space of the church was made up of an ensemble work of shoes and plaster cast feet developed by My Le Thi. The church had been cleared of excess furniture providing a large open exhibition space that Johnson laid out in a way that worked within the building's overall frontal focus.

Tim Johnson has had a long career through a number of stages spurred on by his conceptual interest in art making.¹⁶ Johnson began his career in Sydney in the early 1970s and was strongly associated with artists Mike Parr and Peter Kennedy through the exhibition space *Inhibodress* in Potts Point. These artists were interested in the emerging concerns of conceptual art and were influential in introducing these strategies to wider Australian audiences.¹⁷

In many ways the installation in the Paddington Church proved to be an index of these diverse interests, as Johnson set up a number of small elements placed around the space and which were encountered on an individual basis. Johnson's intention was to identify the many cultural and religious references contained in his overall interest. These included works with diverse borrowings from Tibetan Buddhist sources as well as Chinese Confucianism. Other works included a three-panel wall divider that had been painted in small sections with a chapter of the 'Book of Revelations' from the Christian Bible on each small panel in the form of an unfolding scroll. A number of objects, such as a small figurine of Princess Leia from the *Star Wars* film trilogy, an alien green head bedside light, as well as a painted

¹⁶ The artist keeps a website with a comprehensive overview of his output at <http://members.ozemail.com.au/~tmjohnsn/home.htm>.

¹⁷ See Sue Cramer, *Inhibodress: 1970 – 1972*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 1989.

work of a UFO, indexed his serious interest in popular forms of spiritual speculation.

The title Johnson gave this installation, *Presence*, expresses his interest in exploring the religious resonances in the making of artworks. He sought to explain his intention in the following way:

Signs and symbols, often surviving from ancient times and often laden with meanings, sometimes secret and/or sacred, may point to a way of making artwork that references some of the more esoteric issues and philosophical questions that we face.¹⁸

Dealing with the expectations of the spiritual in terms of heightened theatricality or the 'special-ness' of the object is consistent with his previous development of a conceptual approach to art where an object is always found within an environment of attendant meanings. He is intentionally working against an aesthetic that announces the spiritual through signs of flourishing or decorative importance. He is rather more concerned about the social connection or what might be activated within a person's horizon of vision:

It's something inside a person looking at an artwork, rather than just the artwork itself. I am not trying to create an object that is special in its own spirituality. I am dealing with it on the level of information.¹⁹

In some ways, his works contain a bland if not casual approach to image making, where Johnson resists the seduction towards finesse and any tendency to stylistically enhance his drawing and painting skills that will draw attention to any sense of cleverness in image-making process. His somewhat casual approach to image making belies a more concentrated interest in the processes of reproduction of the image itself. He is responding to

¹⁸ Tim Johnson, artist statement, *Incarnations*, Paddington Uniting Church, 2002.

¹⁹ Interview with Tim Johnson, 31 October 2005.

habits of seeing that have been trained by media and digital forms of reproduction and is looking for responses in the viewer that go beyond these conventions.

It is a matter of replicas. As you replicate things you see whether it is real or not. And as you test it out you work out whether you are the person who can replicate it or not. I am really more interested in the actual ideas and philosophy behind it than the images or the icons that are being represented.²⁰

This indicates a detachment from the craft of art-making, and the seduction of materials or the power of personal fetishes, and a concentration on the role of the artist as the one who simply reproduces the design. This is clearly a conceptual strategy as he quotes popular images current as traffic in a media society. It is like indigenous art where individuals hold responsibility for sacred designs and dreamings that are reproduced within the schema of a work that may be executed by another's hands. The emphasis is on not originality, skill or beauty but rather on an accurate reproduction or replication of a design.

The presence of such an art installation in a space such as a church heightened a number of contrasting elements. This space, rather than being unifocal, is one where public and private, personal and political, difference and belonging all meet and collide in potentially creative as well as destructive ways. The work provided the opportunity for formal discussions as well as more playful intervention through worship services. These strategies developed in consultation with the artist allowed the work to enter the worshipping discourse of the worshipping community as well as visitors to the space, who were affected by the symbolics and nature of a church as a possible way to interpret and read the work.

²⁰ Ibid.

The work offered an opportunity to engage with a number of issues including the state of the refugee in Australian society and also more general ideas about journey and the nature of religious and ideological difference. The exploration of such material in a church building served to amplify aspects of difference as certain religious elements of this installation in particular were unexpected or were dissonant voices in an otherwise western Christian symbol system. What was one to believe while standing in a space where horizons were clashing, where the very symbolic order of the building was engaging with Buddhist ideas, Aboriginal culture, as well as references to UFOs and popular science fiction?

In the face of religious intolerance, conflict and the emerging religious motivation for terrorism, this installation opened up questions in visual terms about the collage of allegiances and ideas that are at work within Australian society. Without solving any of these tensions Johnson does push the viewer to develop a vocabulary that is complex enough to take in these elements and to push forward towards some sort of practical set of relationships between this otherwise disparate world of images.

His work offers a series of fragments about what we can believe: a speculative open-ended investigation that moves by sympathy to create connection. In his own personal practice he sees no difficulty in an attempt to incorporate his Christian upbringing with his more recent Buddhist beliefs and practices: 'both systems work well for me. Buddhism gives me a way of dealing with things, with the body and the mind and with desire.'²¹

The effect of this installation on Johnson's work was to make clearer some of his religious motivations that have not otherwise received adequate attention. Writing on art generally still contains a hesitation when it comes to spirituality and personal practice. Not long after the completion of this project, Tim

²¹ Ibid.

Johnson and My Le Thi worked on an installation that was developed to complement the major survey of Buddhism in Asia, *Buddha: Radiant Awakening* at the Art Gallery of NSW. The concerns of this project arose directly out of the church installation and focused on the Buddhist concepts of *yab/yum*, the father/mother union that expresses the uniting of wisdom and compassion.²²

One of the overall implications of the project in the Church is the wider question of cultural future in an age marked by religious conflict and acts of tribalism and terrorist apocalyptic. Is there a role for art to mediate difference or to provide resources for forming the future of a culture's imagination? This is a question about the role of the artist that had ebbed and flowed in western art history, to which Johnson has a particularly focused response.

In a recent summary interview, exploring his work following the Incarnations project, he noted a growing apocalyptic interest in the nature of history. Johnson speculates about our cultural future that balances an ultimate sense of the climactic horizons of life and death, future hope and final destruction that are contained in religious systems he has been exploring. These ruminations also include the possibility of destruction fuelled by apocalyptic images found in both Christian and Buddhist texts:

Yes Armageddon. The end of times ... but hopefully not! I am not afraid of it at all. My works are positive about the future but my works contain the process of working against that background. I don't need to paint the end of the world. As long as the world is here there is hope – so keep making art for the future, but personally that is what I think is going to happen.

The other thing that keeps me going is about living forever. Both in Christianity and Buddhism – in Buddhism you are not just your

²² Tim Johnson and My Le Thi, *yab yum*, installation, Level 2 Contemporary Project Space, Art Gallery of NSW, 10 November 2001-13 January 2002.

body - you will be here forever and so, day-to-day things don't matter, except in so far as they are part of your path. The future is there – Buddhism overrides the judgement and so, we will live forever. The judgement is only about the destruction of evil.²³

His works are therefore to be understood as part of a process of change and hope. His personal orientation around fear of death and the nature of the future allows him to cross boundaries rather fearlessly and posit connections in a collage of space that is all seeing and all-knowing where the future unfolds not without violence but towards some sense of hope. This is a place of fundamental religious if not visually funded mystic speculation. It is not just about art but also about the fundamental structures of life.

Tim Johnson orchestrates a complex plethora of images drawn from disparate and diverse origins. He nevertheless conjures them in a space of possibility and ongoing chaotic creativity that engenders the future formed by religious vision and a belief in the act of creativity and the role of the artist as bringing in this future. He has been profoundly influenced by indigenous culture in allowing the possibility of spiritual wisdom or insight to be present in his work. 'My work is like a premonition, like something's there in my work before it comes into the culture.'²⁴

As an artist he allows for the possibility that his work may have a larger cultural effect and power. He allows for the presence of personal secrets and disclosures, as well as the possibility of the socially prophetic – based on openness to chance and the cultural patterns of the present time.

Both Janet Laurence and Tim Johnson offer insightful examples of the manner in which the visual may invite reflection, inspiration and orientation around the cultural imagination of contemporary

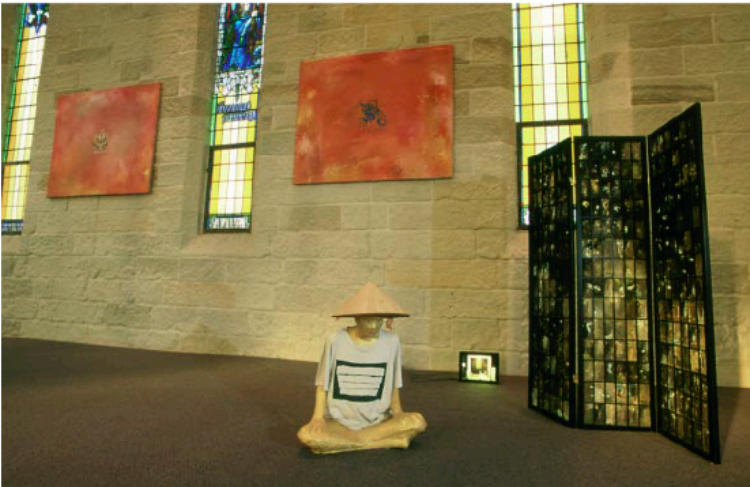
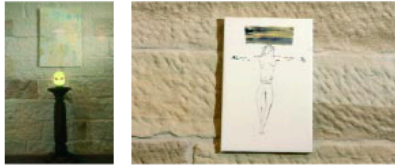
²³ Interview with Tim Johnson, 31 October 2005.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Australia. In the space provided by the *Incarnations* project the wide horizons of art, culture and religion were more carefully intersected than is usually the case in the otherwise distanced environment of the art world. The opportunity to explore these horizons in a church building situated within a major cultural and tourist destination provided an opportunity for new audiences to engage with contemporary art. It also provided an important avenue for ideas and concepts that are forming our common future, whether that be our relationship to the environment, or how we negotiate across diverse cultures. The *Incarnations* project, and the two artists discussed, demonstrate the manner in which contemporary artists are engaging with religious ideas to both develop their work, and in turn, to create lively and informed audiences for these visual explorations.

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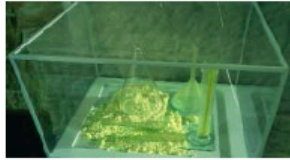
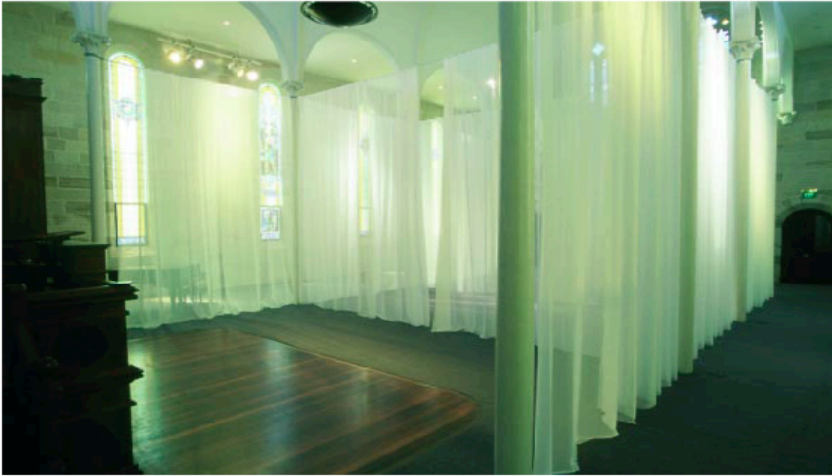
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