ANNE GRAHAM: The alchemy of becoming

But this one element in a work that manifests another, this one element that joins with another, is the thingly feature in the artwork.¹
Martin Heidegger

Vitrines, bottles, metal, animal fur, red dirt, combs, horsehair, balls of string, hands, feet, memories, communities: these are just some of the objects and materials of Anne Graham’s art. From public artworks in hillsides communities in Japan to minimalist sculpture in Martin Place; from food events in Newcastle to the personal and intimate collections of objects in her home, Graham seems always in the process of stimulating intercoursal connections and alchemical reactions. In another life she may have been a taxonomist or alchemist, such is her interest in collecting all things weird and wonderful. It is in the meeting of these materials and the conjoining of objects that her work transmutes and becomes a ‘thing’.²

It is the thing-ness of Graham’s work that is uppermost in my mind when I think of her studio with its boxes and displays of combs, fossils, horsehair, rubber and metal, wood and wax, shells and horns, needles and pins, all living and coexisting as a Foucauldian community of monsters and fossils. In Foucault’s words, ‘the monster provides an account, as though in caricature, of the genesis of differences, and the fossil recalls, in the uncertainty of its resemblances, the first buddings of identity’.³ It is in the poking, prodding and arranging that order is brought to the impending chaos and presents relationships between subject and object, space and enclosure, void and innerness. Foucault says that ‘one cannot know the order of things “in their isolated nature”, but by discovering that which is the simplest, then that which is the next simplest, one can progress inevitably to the most complex things of all.’³

In a conversation with the artist, we discussed the notion that if you carry a book around for long enough, the inevitable fingering, opening and reopening of the sensory object causes the words to enter your mind as if by osmosis; that just by being in the constant vicinity of the book you come to know its contents. For the objects and materials in Graham’s studio, this too is their fate. If they stay there long enough, they eventually enter her frame of reference; their essence penetrates her thoughts and skin and they are poked, prodded and manipulated into becoming a work of art.

There is an evolutionary process in the creation of Graham’s art whereby materials, objects and things come together to form a work, with the sum of its parts occasionally evolving; one assemblage conjoins with another assemblage,⁴ the space they make together forming an intimacy and innerness. Graham interrogates this space and its object relationships through the analysis and process of
becoming, with the resultant assemblages forming an intimate conversation. Objects come together as a conjugal love song—touching, interconnecting, penetrating—performing an act of joining which leaves a pleasurable and lingering stain on your memory and on your skin.

In her essay, 'A thousand tiny sexes', Elizabeth Grosz refers to the process of becoming as a fluid reorganisation that creates territories, passages or 'cracks between segments so that they may drift and yet something may pass between them'. These passages, cracks, enclosures and spaces in Graham's works are often wrapped, bound, tied or interconnected with a material that pierces (pins and needles); caresses or strokes (combs and rakes); or binds and restricts (elastic and rubber). This piercing, caressing, binding and restricting of singular units into a 'thing' often creates a multiplicity of shapes or a repetition of texture and movement, provoking our vision and senses into simultaneous relaxation and stimulation.

Graham often creates objects and things as a knowing response to life's situations and repetitive processes: a woman's prison; a retirement home; the space under a bridge—the home of the homeless; sewing; making pastry; eating; grooming. It is an individual's memories, possessions and objects that provide a passage to this knowing and it is this knowing that Graham wraps around and inserts into her works.

Similarly, it is in recognising this knowing that a memory unfolds as we look at her work, for these objects and things transgress all boundaries. In working with the animate and the inanimate, persons and things, memories both tangible and intangible, Graham probes and probes not only her objects and things; in confronting the old, the homeless and the strange, she also probes and probes and penetrates the memories and emotions that we associate with being part of a community. It is not always pleasant, not always a feeling of ease, but one thing is assured: the thing that you look at, the feeling you get when you experience the work will be hard to shake and, like the book that you may carry around with you, it will penetrate your mind, pervade your senses, and you will come to know it.

Donna Brett
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

3 ibid., p. 59.
4 Thanks to Tom Loverday and Tim Royner for this insight.
Anne Graham: Selected Works 1983–2003 installation views, Bond University Gallery
Project manager John Walsh, Gold Coast City Art Gallery, Queensland