

Sweat: performance, New York, 1994

Anne Graham

In early 1994 I commenced working on a project which traced the history of sewing in women's gaols in Australia. The equipment employed by the women and the items fabricated by them became fruitful metaphors which I used to create work which applied to a broader context of oppression and social injustice. I wanted to extend this work in New York, the city where the term 'sweatshop' originated and also where so many artists had been moved to respond to the experience of immigrants employed in sweatshops. This background became part of the existential and visual raw material which provided a theme for the large numbers of artists living on the Lower East Side in the early part of this century. Max Weber, Man Ray, Barnett Newman and Jacob Epstein were among the artists who all shared this common background. William Gropper used his childhood sweatshop experiences as the source for numerous paintings and drawings of a satirical nature. In his written work the more painful aspects of this life become apparent:

Almost every artist has at one time or another painted a picture of his mother. The most famous of them is the one by James Whistler, who portrays his mother in a rich velvet dress, sitting peacefully and comfortably holding an embroidered handkerchief in her folded hands. If I ever painted my mother, she will be either at the sewing machine or at the washtub . . . The sweatshop gave us our livelihood but robbed us of our mother. Late at night I came home completely exhausted. My mother was still bent over her sewing machine . . .¹

The work of these socially committed artists from the early 1900s had a personal relevance for me, as my mother was a trained tailor; I recollect lying at her feet as a small child being soothed by the rhythmic sound of a treadle sewing machine. The sewing machine was the means of providing an income in our home but also a temperamental master that required regular adjustment, attention and oiling. I loved the smell of the oil, the texture of

the chalk, the yards of crisp new fabric and the sharp, shiny pins, for me, objects loaded and redolent with associations. I brought my own history and memories to this project; sitting on the street at ground level looking up at the people walking past reminded me of the constantly upward-straining gaze of myself lying at my mother's feet.

The Singer sewing machine resonated with the history of the area: many of the passers-by had first-hand experience of the rag trade or had family members or relatives with an involvement in the fashion industry. The sewing machine attracted these people, they wanted to tell me their stories. My sewing machine was a composite of four different machines, although it looked like a genuine old, hand-operated Singer. I learned how to use it from a young girl whose grandfather was a Jewish tailor. She showed me how to adjust the tension and she talked about the sewing machines she owned which were inherited from her grandfather. I learned that sewing in New York, at least the more prestigious aspects of the industry, is a male occupation—the tailors, sweaters and cutters are male, while the women provide the sweated labour.

The Mulawa and Norma Parker gaols in New South Wales also provide the equivalent of sweated labour, where women earn the sum of twelve dollars a week churning out surgical gowns for the NSW hospital system. It is paradoxical that women in the most powerless situation, deprived of their liberty, should be employed making garments for the most powerful controllers of bodies—surgeons. The wearers of these habits are permitted extraordinary licence under the protection of their profession. Medical prescriptions (for sedatives) are utilised as the main means of containment for women in custody. Women in gaol are often presumed to be 'bad or mad'. It is only in fiction that they become heroes like their male counterparts. The surgical robes resemble strait-jackets, they have the anonymity of loss of personality. They carry another message, that of uniformity; there can be no pleasure taken in making these identical garments. I decided to make one of these garments each day for the duration of my performance in New York, wanting to impose a structure on my work which had some similarity to a sentence or period of sweated indenture. The gown was an important link between my practice in Australia and the unpredictable environment of the streets in the textile district in Lower Manhattan.

I wanted to work on the street in a public context in order to interact with new audiences in a 'non-art' situation:

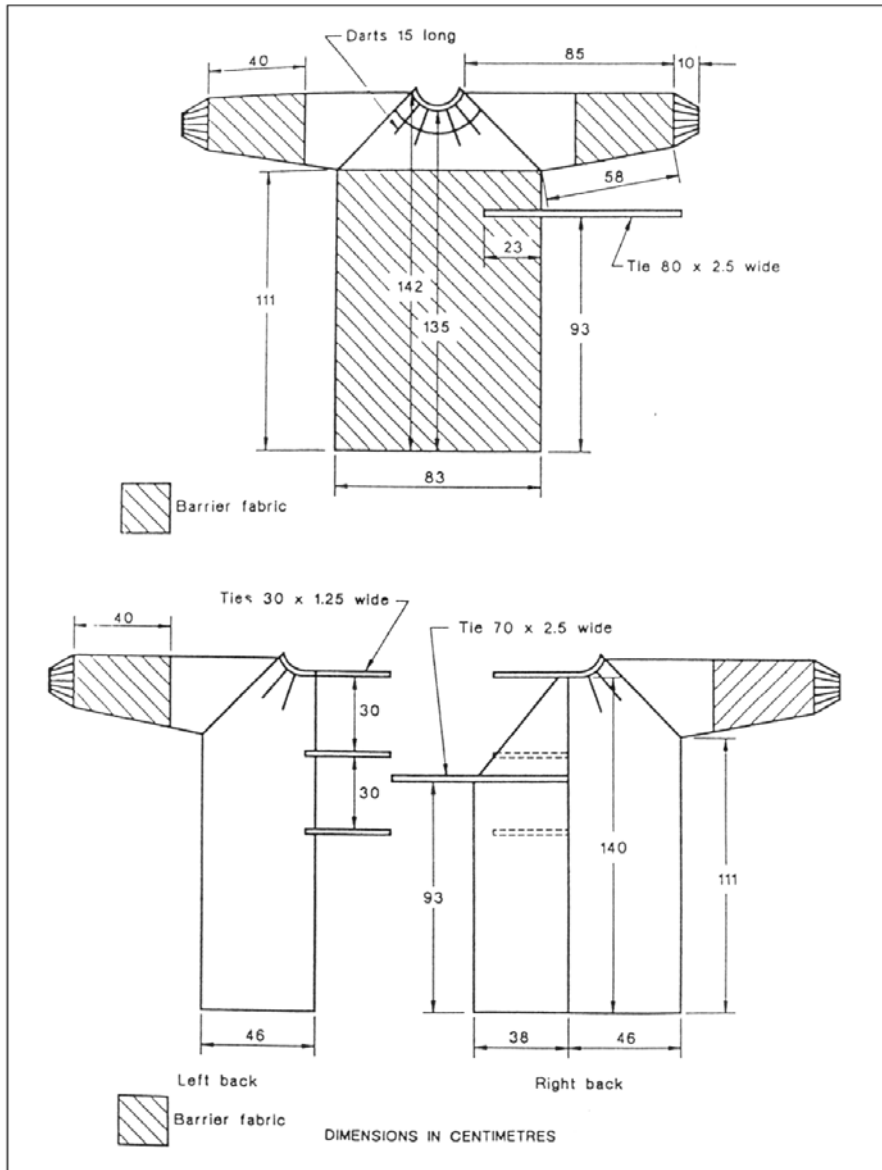
For the meaning of the work to be conveyed, its presence in public

is essential. It is not art for public spaces but art addressing public issues. This art is dependent upon a real and substantive interaction with members of the public, usually representing a particular constituency, but not one that comes to art because of an identification or connection with the art world. Such work must reach those for whom the arts subject is a critical life issue. This work deals with audience first: the artist brings individuals into the process from the start, thus redefining the relationship between artist and audience, audience and the work of art. This work departs from the position of authority over and removed from the audience that has become the hallmark of twentieth-century Western art. It reconnects culture and society, and recognises that art is made for audiences, not for institutions.²

My partners on the street were mainly composed of the vast community of people who operate illegal street stalls all over Manhattan, for there is a constant battle between the stall-holders and the police. The police regularly attempt to clear the streets and the stall-holders have developed rapid disappearing techniques, magically reappearing when all is clear. Buying and selling on the street represents a genuine effort to earn an income and to become self-supporting for people who have no other means of support. In a Third World economy it is an accepted practice to trade in public. In New York it is a necessary practice: many of the traders are from other cultures (for example, Africa, South America) and some, of course, are illegal immigrants. My presence and performance were readily integrated into this volatile community, particularly as I did not represent competition, offering the possibility of entertainment and the potential of attracting business. There was a discernible pattern in the movement of the traders from site to site, and a hierarchy of position in each location. I had to negotiate my spots with care: if the site I chose was already occupied, I would visit and revisit the place until some familiarity was established and it became clear that I did not represent a threat.

I moved from location to location with the assistance of a shopping cart. While these objects are used only by elderly citizens in Australia, in New York everyone has one, as it is much more expedient and a cheaper means of moving possessions or shopping from place to place than trying to travel by car, particularly for short distances. These carts are also used by people who live on the streets. Thomas writes:

Supermarket and shopping trolleys have become signature items in the iconography of American homelessness. They provide portable storage for possessions, and are often used by those who scour the



trash cans in search of refundable cans or bottles. In this way they grimly parody the consumer ritual of parading the shopping circuit in pursuit of commodities.³

Thomas goes on to discuss the work of Krzysztof Wodiczko who designed a trolley which could be used to collect cans and bottles but which also folds out like an ambulance stretcher to

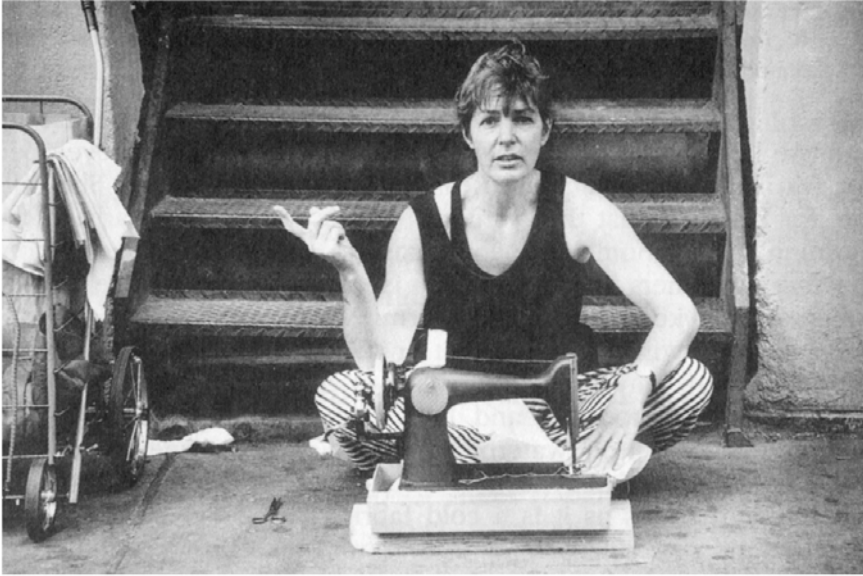
provide emergency shelter. The cart was not intended for mass production but was intended to make the point that such an object had become a social necessity: 'This allows the homeless to be seen not as objects without human status, but rather as users and operators of equipment whose form articulates the conditions of their existence'.⁴

I initially set out on my journey wearing a performance uniform; white overalls and a white shirt. This costume was designed to give off an aura of semi-officialdom and to distance me from the street. I felt self-conscious, nervous and vulnerable as I had not yet acquired the ease of familiarity with context. I walked around Manhattan for a couple of weeks, climbed to the top of the tallest buildings and sailed around the Island, becoming oriented and more confident. I felt ready then to replace the uniform in favour of very casual, loose street gear, and becoming more approachable, I prepared myself to listen. Suzi Gablik describes this interactive method of working in a community:

Art that is rooted in a 'listening' self, that cultivates the intertwining of self and Other, suggests a flow through experience which is not delimited by the self but extends into the community through modes of reciprocal empathy. Because this art is listener centered rather than vision oriented, it cannot be fully realised through the mode of self-expression: it can only come into its own through dialogue, as open conversation, in which one listens to and includes other voices. For many artists now, this means letting previously excluded groups speak directly of their own experience. The audience becomes an active component of the work and is part of the process.⁵

SITE 1: HOUSTON AND BROADWAY, SOHO

This is a historic site by New York performance art standards. Down the street on an eight thousand square foot derelict plot at the corner of La Guardia Place and Houston, in Greenwich Village, Alan Sonfist created *Time Landscape*. The garbage-strewn site was converted into a time warp, a place to experience how Manhattan might have looked three hundred years ago. Local residents and schools helped plant and landscape the site and it is now a permanent part of neighbourhood life. Across the road was the famous performance space and bar 'The Knitting Factory'. Up the street was the Bowery, home of Kerouac's *Dharma Bums* and also the site of Martha Rosler's early photographic work depicting evidence of alcohol dependency on the Bowery. This location, with its history of associations, seemed a suitably 'safe' site to



begin my negotiations of this unfamiliar city. Nothing much happened on this site on my first day. I realised that chance would play a major role in the development of this piece and that I must relax into the role of 'housewife flanneur' and be prepared to cruise the streets until I found the right place at the right time.

SITE 2: CARLISLE STREET AND WASHINGTON STREET, BATTERY PARK CITY

Walking down Carlisle Street pushing my cart looking for something, I stop, someone is doing my piece! A woman is sitting quietly sewing. She is busy, very organised, with her material laid out in neat piles. I am so surprised to see her that I keep walking for a moment. I have to stop and ask if I can join her. It is warm and comfortable on this bit of the sidewalk, there is plenty of room for both of us. Sophie is from Columbia. I ask her why she came to New York and she tells me that this is the only place to live, everything is here and everything is possible. I am reminded of a description of a settler in New York by E. B. White:

There is the New York of the person who was born somewhere else and came to New York in quest of something—the city of final destination, the city that is a goal. The city is embraced with the

excitement of new love, it is absorbed with the fresh eyes of an adventurer, each settler generates enough heat and light to dwarf the Consolidated Edison Company.⁶

Sophie would not dream of living anywhere else; she has an intimate knowledge of the city and its facilities, she has developed survival skills and she passed this information on to me. She tells me, for instance, that the Municipal Public Baths open early in the morning so that homeless people can go and shower there before the first swimmers arrive. Summer is an easy time to live on the street and to keep clean and warm. Winter is much harder. To keep warm in winter you must sit or stand on a piece of cardboard if you have to stay for a long time in one place; you must buy shoes two sizes too big and line them with foam rubber, first putting the rubber in waterproof plastic bags to keep your feet dry. I was told that you never buy acetate clothes from the second-hand shops as it is a cold fabric. It is better to buy fleecy material and sew one pair of trousers or jacket inside another for maximum warmth. Sophie got most of her fabric from Canal and Mercer Streets on Tuesday night, garbage night. Combing through the garbage is a richly rewarding occupation in downtown New York. Rubbish presents a huge disposal problem but also provides a living for many people. Sophie sews beautiful, padded bows to wear either in your hair or to clip onto your clothes. The bows have slip covers, one inside the other for an ever-changing bow.



An excellent seamstress, she also makes bags but said the bags took too long to make and she could only get a couple of dollars for them.

We spend the afternoon sewing together; I tell her that my machine is made up of bits and pieces from old machines. She tries it out, likes it and thinks she might get one. I realise that I should have a billy-can and a primus to make tea to complete the feeling of a social ritual and transform our spot into a domestic, welcoming space. We make friends, and I leave confident that we would meet again on our rounds, but we do not.

SITE 3: AVENUE A AND EAST 4TH STREET, EAST VILLAGE

Late one night I join a group of street traders at the crossroads of Avenue A and East 4th Street. The other three corners are occupied by newly fashionable restaurants with names like *Pisces* and *Frutti di Mare*. Alphabet City and the East Village are hovering on the edge of gentrification, the situation is unstable and the yuppies are easy targets for being mugged. This area has the highest incidence of adolescent death in the city with hordes of feral youths roaming the streets dressed in ragged layers of dirty, black clothes. Body piercing is in evidence and drugs are available on every corner. I walk this area with my cart fairly constantly, chatting to people, meeting the regulars. On the next block is an alternative art space called 'Collective Unconscious', and across the road from this, a small theatre company. A lot of young artists have studios in the vicinity and maybe eventually this area will become another Soho.

My spot on the street is at the end of the row. My neighbour is very charged and speedy but friendly, he is from Puerto Rico. He lays out a piece of velvet and arranges silver forks which have been beaten into bracelets and rings. He tells me that he is always having to pack up and flee because of the police. Because of this, he is constantly losing things in the rush. Further up the row a ghetto blaster is pounding out jungle techno, two men are dancing and entertaining the passers-by. I am constantly asked if the sewing machine is for sale: an Italian man wants to buy the machine—he tells me his aunt taught him to sew and embroider as a child. She had made altar clothes and robes for the local parish priest in Italy, and helped him to embroider a head of Christ wearing the crown of thorns. He still kept this relic of his Italian Catholic childhood in his apartment. The act of sewing in his religious



context was akin to prayer and penance and he had no trouble assimilating my performance into his understanding of the world. The image of Christ's head punctured by thorns, being clumsily sewn by a small boy, connected for me with the self-inflicted wounds of the pierced street ferals, and also with the junkie debris left in every gutter. Damage in the name of transcendence occurs in situations of stress: using a needle to make track marks in cloth was a powerful metaphor for me in this place.

SITE 4: EAST 1ST STREET AND AVENUE A, THE LOWER EAST SIDE

Walking along East 1st Street I look in through a basement window and see a man sewing a huge sheet of coloured satin. It is spread out in front of him like a shiny river and it echoes the sumptuous sheets, barely covering Marilyn Monroe, on the poster on the wall above his table. It is quite late at night and I want to know why he is still working at this hour. He tells me this is his second job, by day he is a truck driver. His name is Shmil Gandelman and he wants to know what I am doing. He is not impressed with my reason for doing this. Why did I make all this work for no financial return? I had a skill, I could sew, therefore I could market this skill. He inspects my sewing and declares it passable. He then

wants to know if I can cook and offers me a job with a possible promotion to wife if I work out OK! All this exchange occurs with great humour and warmth, and in the course of our exchange he extends an invitation into his Russian-Jewish community.

Jacob A. Riis describes the early days of a Russian-Jewish immigrant in the Lower East Side:

No need of asking here where we are. The jargon of the street, the signs of the sidewalk, the manner and the dress of the people, their unmistakable physiognomy, betray their race at every step. Men with queer skull-caps, venerable beard, and outlandish long-skirted kaftan of the Russian Jew, elbow the ugliest and the handsomest women in the land. The contrast is startling. The old women are hags; the young houris. Wives and mothers at sixteen, at thirty they are old. So thoroughly has the chosen people crowded out the gentiles in the Tenth Ward that, when the great Jewish holidays come around every year, the public schools in the district have practically to close up . . .⁷

The homes of the Hebrew quarter are its workshops also. You are made fully aware of it before you have travelled the length of a single block in any of these East Side streets, by the whirr of a thousand sewing-machines, worked at high pressure from dawn to dusk till mind and body give out together.⁸

Most of the fabric and garment shops are still owned by Jewish companies. I bought my fabric from Long Island Fabrics Inc.



Broadway; an Aladdin's cave of listing piles of fabric. Next door I bought tape and buttons from the most kosher of shops where women were advised to dress modestly if they wished to be served. I learned to enjoy the abrupt, snappy manner of the shop assistants and appreciate the raw edge of abrasive New York humour. There is also the most wonderful heritage of Jewish restaurants. The most famous of these is Katz's Delicatessen where the orgasm scene in *When Harry Met Sally* was shot.

SITE 5: THE A TRAIN TO HARLEM

I am conscious of the fact that underneath the streets another system is operating—the subway. There are occasional fires in the subway caused by homeless people who fall asleep in cavities in the tunnels leaving a candle or a cigarette burning. I want to traverse these subterranean pathways with my cart. The New York subway is not a pleasant place: dark splotches of compressed gum operate like small black holes in the expanses of concrete paving, the opposite of their stellar counterparts, there is a strong smell of urine and, worse still, is the unreliability of the trains which break down and cause whole trainloads of passengers to be herded about like cattle. There is also a sense of loss of responsibility for your actions as you have placed yourself in this container, hurtling through space with other human beings, you are not in control. It is a hot, crowded space and care must be taken to keep the required distance because tempers are short. There is a vulnerability in these closed quarters as crime is commonplace on some lines.

Buskers work this audience and subway traders operate, moving at a fast pace dictated by the distance between stops. A puppet theatre show can magically materialise, money is collected, the theatre then evaporates. I wanted to work in this distorted space, where audience participation is condensed and predetermined by its destination. I choose the A train because it goes the length of Manhattan which would allow me to become the stable factor with a changing audience. I work hard, sewing, performing a constructive act, making garments, as the train moves through the different socio-economic areas from Battery Park City to Harlem. The subway carriage becomes a womb-like space, the performer and audience, whatever their reactions, are inextricably joined in the unfolding of the piece. Mike Parr describes this:

Since performance art is 'action', 'behaviour', the traditionally sacrosanct boundaries between object and artist, artist and audience are

broken down. Freeing each from their differentiated roles; their passivity and isolation. Such art can lead to a new form of communication between artist and audience—a constructive role that is more than the denunciatory gesture. Revealing his or her deepest urges the artist catalyses the deep behavioural response of the audience, but because this is a direct interaction—unmediated by the traditional ‘object of contemplation’ or the thin empathy of a ‘Theatre of Illusion’, the structure is dialectical and formative. It is this quality as a ritual of deep communication that constitutes the meaning of performance art.⁹

The sound of the sewing machine creates a counter rhythm harmonising with the sound of the train, and synchronises with the rocking of the carriage on the rails. At Washington Square a young Chinese fashion student joins me, clutching a roll of calico like mine, and tells me about tiny hand-held sewing machines used by designers for instant alterations. They would be perfect for me to use in the unorthodox situations that I work in. She is very efficient and knowledgeable, she wants to help me improve my performance! Up near Central Park a very friendly lady from Puerto Rico sits with me, her name is Julie. She loves sewing and she makes all her daughters’ clothes. She is full of energy and illuminates the dull space of the carriage with laughter and enthusiasm. When she leaves the train just before Harlem, her absence is palpable, like a light being extinguished.

This was one of the most questionable performance locations



for me; I was the only white person on the subway and I was doing something noticeable. Any image of this piece would be in danger of doing two things which I definitely did not want to do. I wanted to avoid valorising the performer for performing in a difficult or dangerous situation, and to avoid exploiting the audience who became a foil for the privileged position of the artist.

Maybe the best comment on, and response to, these difficult considerations comes from Guillermo Gomez-Pena:

The debate [on multiculturalism] has already reached the mainstream, yet crucial political issues are still being avoided. Blockbuster exhibits present multicultural art as the 'cutting edge'; yet, with a few exceptions, there is no mention of historical crimes and social inequities that lie beneath the neocolonial relationship between Anglo-European culture and its surrounding Others, like the United Colours of Benetton ads, a utopian discourse of sameness helps to erase all unpleasant stories. The message becomes a re-fried colonial idea: if we merely hold hands and dance the mambo together, we can effectively abolish ideology, sexual and cultural politics, and class differences. Let's face it, the missing text is very sad: in 1995 racism, sexism, xenophobia, and ethnocentrism are alive and well in the USA, and the communities that more proportionately reflect the multicultural composition of society are the homeless, the prisoners, people with AIDS, and the soldiers who returned from the Persian Gulf.¹⁰

The questions raised by Guillermo Gomez-Pena must be faced by any artist working with social issues in public places. How can we avoid the voyeuristic, elitist nature of documentary photography and video. How can we truly empower marginalised groups? How can we respond to the social, cultural, linguistic and demographic realities of our multicultural society and avoid the anachronism of colonial attitudes. Gomez-Pena says:

What we are trying to say is that we want to be part of a 'multi'-participatory society that truly embraces us all, including the multiracial and multisexual communities, the 'hybrids', the recent immigrants from the south and east, the children and elderly people—our most beloved and vulnerable ones—the people with AIDS, and the homeless, those whose only mistake is not to be able to afford housing. This is not radical politics but elemental humanism. From rap music to performance art, and from neighbourhood politics to the international forums, our contemporary culture is already reflecting this quest.¹¹

**SITE 6: MULBERRY STREET AND COLUMBUS PARK,
CHINATOWN, FIVE POINTS, LOWER MANHATTAN**

Columbus Park came into existence as a result of an attempt to cleanse the district of opium dens. Riis describes the dens in colourful detail:

From the teeming tenements to the right and left of it come the white slaves of its dens of vice and their infernal drug, that have infused into the 'Bloody Sixth' Ward a subtler poison than ever the stale-beer dives knew, or the 'sudden death' of the Old Brewery. There are houses, dozens of them, in Mott and Pell Streets, that are literally jammed, from the 'joint' in the cellar to the attic, with these hapless victims of a passion which, once acquired, demands the sacrifice of every instinct of decency to its insatiate desire.¹²

This area was also the home of the 'Triangle Shirt Waist Company'. One of many companies that crowded as many women as physically possible into the smallest of workrooms; the doors and windows of the workrooms were locked during working hours to make sure that none of the women could abscond with bits of fabric, or throw fabric out of the window to an accomplice. The Triangle Company was the site of an horrendous fire—all the women were locked in and unable to escape, they died in tragic circumstances and their deaths became the motivating factor in the



campaign for better working conditions for women which instigated the Trade Union Movement for women in the textile industry.

Columbus Park is the meeting place for many elderly Chinese people, fortunes are read, and Mah Jong is played. Most of the frequenters of the park do not speak English, they do not need to in Chinatown; I am the foreigner here. I have a problem with my machine today, I cannot adjust the tension to the correct setting. I fiddle with it for a long time: the desire to give advice, to help is irresistible! I am quietly surrounded by an interested group of venerable Chinese people, one lady becomes the spokesperson. She could speak a little English and she had used a machine like mine in China. She tells me this quite emotively as we fix the tension. Once the machine is working I am politely left alone again. Clearly what I am doing is my business and I am given room to work.

SITE 7: FRANKLIN STREET OFF BROADWAY, TRIBECA MANHATTAN

Surrounded by rolls of fabric in Franklin Street, the home of The Franklin Furnace, legendary New York performance space, I contemplate the progression of this performance, *Sweat*. Throughout the piece I have maintained a commitment to sewing and repairing as a metaphor for healing the wounds of the city and its inhabitants but I have also relied heavily on interaction with real people in real situations:

When art as a practice is intentionally blurred with the multitude of other identities and activities we like to call life, it becomes subject to all the problems, conditions, and limitations of those activities, as well as their unique freedoms . . . The means by which we measure success and failure in such fleeting art must obviously shift from the aesthetics of its symbolic reference to the world outside of it, to the ethics and practicalities of those social domains it crosses into. And that ethics, representing a diversity of special interests as well as the deep ones of culture, cannot easily be disentangled from the nature of the artwork. Success and failure become provisional judgments, instantly subject like the weather to change.¹³

I am reminded of the work of Donna Henes. She placed collection boxes around Manhattan and asked people to donate favourite pieces of their clothing, 'healing' clothes that made the wearer feel good. Donna Henes took these clothes to the Manhattan Psychiatric Center on New York City's Wards Island and, on Memorial Day, with the patients and staff, tore the clothes into



long strips, like the women in the First World War who tore fabric into bandages for wounded soldiers. Henes institutionalised herself and lived and worked with the residents for three weeks. They tied 4159 knots onto trees, shrubs and fences throughout the facility grounds: 'In the tradition of women from almost everywhere who visit healing waters to make supplications by knotting torn clothing into the trees'.

The director of the institution wrote: 'This is what we have been looking for, life, thought, interaction. The banishment of apathy and spiritual neglect which have so long been the fate of the most severely mentally ill.'¹⁴

SITE 8: MERCER STREET BETWEEN BROOME AND GRANDE, SOHO, LOWER MANHATTAN

I am sitting on a stoop above a pile of pleated paper—the paper is garbage put out by a workshop where it is used in making pleated skirts. In the background delicately etched against the sky are the twin towers of the World Trade Centre, the doppelgänger cathedrals of the world of commerce. The paper looks as if it is falling from my machine like endless bills from a cash register. The huge pile is somehow emblematic of excess, we are in New York and even the piles of rubbish are bigger! The image has a

mythical quality because the scale is wrong, the pile is too big. In *The Odyssey*, Penelope sets to work on a great loom:

On her loom at home she set up a great web and began weaving a large and delicate piece of work . . . It is a winding sheet for Lord Laertes. When he succumbs to the dread hand of Death that stretches all men out at last, I must not risk the scandal there would be among my countrywomen here if one who had amassed such wealth were put to rest without a shroud . . . by day she wove at the great web, but every night had torches set beside it and undid the great work.¹⁵

The City of New York is like this great web, there are periods of growth followed by massive collapse. There is a sense that this city, which has amassed such wealth, will be laid to rest naked, unless, like Penelope, it is found out and brought to account.

