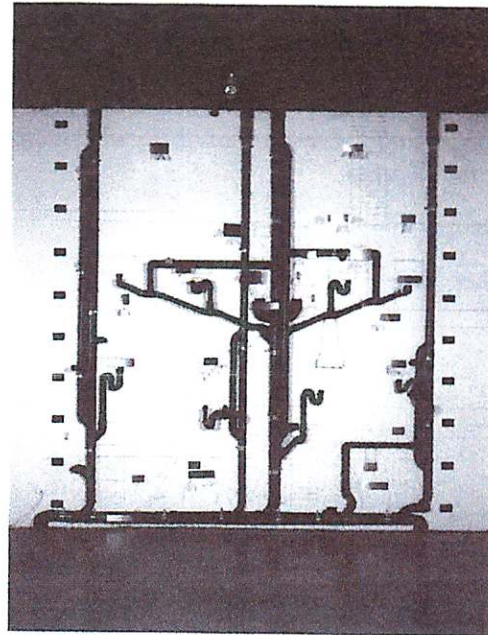
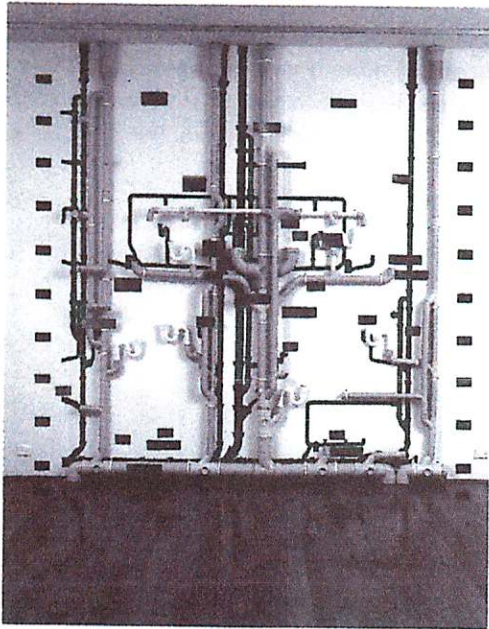


Margaret Morgan; "Out of Order": Clogging the Works • The Australian Centre for Contemporary Art • South Yarra, Australia



Margaret Morgan, *OUT OF ORDER*, 1997, installation view showing plumbing

While Margaret Morgan's subject matter and media have altered over the course of the last decade and a half, three paired concerns continue to circulate through her work. [1] Both formal and conceptual in nature, they are labour and history, image and text, idea and object. These concerns provide Morgan with the critical tools to examine gender and class at the levels of the social, the personal, and the linguistic. It is something of a truism to say that in modern patriarchal, free-enterprise culture, class, and gender are largely elided by its ostensibly neutral and value-free ordering of art history. Over the past few decades, this Modernist position has been problematized, critiqued, and much revised by a new art history. It is this more recent critical foundation that provides the impetus for Morgan's work, and suggests the ways in which an art historical hegemony is promoted, internalised, and maintained. Yet, her work complicates this project by allowing for the desire and the agency of the subject, the viewer, the artist. Their pleasures, identifications, and inputs to the system—those rattles and seepages in the works—ultimately alter the system: History is no one-way flow.

Morgan's work from the early '80s exposes the conscripted spaces of the domestic sphere so often the site of unacknowledged and unappreciated labour. The bathrooms and kitchens of domestic suburban interiors, often the most occupied spaces in the home—yet also the most ignored—are rendered in cramped and twisted perspectives. Toilets, sinks, and tubs seem to bump into each other, their porcelain bent and stretched around a concave bathroom, while kitchen environs are littered with scraps of bread, stacked dishes, and the detritus of everyday life. Strange corners and the backs of doors jar the perspective. Morgan's thick acrylic adds an encrusted dimension to the tactility of the tile and grout. These spaces with their awkward perspectives seem to be culled from surveillance cameras, *although they* lack the distanced nature of this apparatus. Instead, the compacted and bowed spaces are damp but homey, replete with the clutter and chaos of lived-in-ness. There is a palpable human presence—an open bottle of wine, a ring around a

tub—yet these interiors lack occupants; they are vacant rooms, as if the inhabitants have gone for the day, leaving only their traces like the stains from leaky faucets. Within an art historical discourse the painterly banality rendered in these bathroom and kitchen scenes slips outside the accepted vocabulary. Morgan's work runs counter—current to much of the cool, conceptual, and detached aesthetics of the late '70s and early '80s. They are not interrogations of the domestic from a safe theoretical distance; rather they are strategic affirmations of these intimate spaces, stressing the personal and the power of unresolved narrative. Morgan's early work was informed by feminists and activists who were explicitly dealing with class and gender. [2] Narrative functioned as a useful implement to displace traditional and contemporary social institutions and art practices. Passing these domestic and "gendered" spaces through a narrative filter, Morgan's strategy effectively functioned as a critique of a critique.

Morgan's very different work of the '90s continues to resist and disclose the ways in which social and art historical systems have been constructed, formatted, and sustained. A critical exploration of the impact of gender and class, this work uses the language and structure of Modernism in order to render visible its inner workings. Within art history, Modernism privileged perpetual innovation and art work that attempted to divine the essential experience of modernity. Each new generation of artists and theorists insured the evolution and improvement of the art system. This continual "retrofitting" reinforces the edifice of art history, a structure within which all artists and styles could be judged and measured. In practice, it is a streamlined, heavily fortified, and "man-made" structure.

Morgan takes this Modernist structural system to task from the position of one both excluded from it, via gender and class, and invested in it, by way of the art academy. This dialectic, although never resolved, creates a space for critical analysis. Concerned less with the façade of Modernism than with its internal mechanisms, Morgan literally and figuratively explores Modernism's blueprints and plumbing systems, its physical make-up and confined thematic fluids. The blueprint that Morgan uses, monumentally rendered on an entire wall of the gallery, is appropriated from Alfred H. Barr's diagram from the catalogue for the exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art* (1936). Barr, the first Director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, was instrumental in articulating the hegemonic model of modern art history. Morgan combines his diagram with an early twentieth century map of a plumbing system meant to evoke the aesthetics of the Modernist architect Adolf Loos, who valorised rational and functional art systems. In this layering, the plumber emerges as the hero who maintains these systems. When merged together, Barr and Loos undergird the founding tenets of modern art and theory. However, by making visible their metaphors of art history and aesthetic idealism, Morgan reveals their systemic absurdity.

Those familiar with Morgan's work will recognize the plumbing system in "Out of Order"; the constant recirculation of form, content, and ideas is an important component of this body of work. The plumbing, a conceptual conflation of Barr's and Loos' diagrams, stress the continuity of the Modernist system: the flux and flow is regulated and contained. The blue shadow behind the plumbing bears testimony to the careful orchestration of its geometry. Labels with art historical movements emphasize the directional current: Machine Esthetic runs up toward Futurism and onward to its teleological ends, Modern Architecture and Abstract Art. The force of influence courses through these pipes. But the canonical system cannot contain every movement, nor every artist. Small paintings bearing icons disrupt the clean organization of PVC pipes. Their presence calls attention to positions excluded from, although still tenuously connected to, the system. They contain unwritten histories, perform undesirable labours, and remain discarded objects. They elicit the beginnings of alternative narrations, obtuse relationships.

These small paintings, appearing like minute snap-shots, parallel the large panel works around the room. The portraits rendered in white chalk on blue panels, like photographic negatives, depict minor figures from art history, people one may not recognise but whose impact on the discipline is great: Victorine Meurent, Richard Hamilton, the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, etc. The portraits in blue chalk on white panels, appearing like faded blue prints, are snap-shot images of what Morgan calls, "nobody's history." They are figures who seemingly have no pertinent relationship to either an art historical or social system. Each of the portraits, minor or anonymous, is accompanied by a story about work and Modernism. Yet any expectation of the stories providing a fixed and final explanation is thwarted: these overlong "captions" are neither simply descriptive nor explanatory, meaning residing somewhere between the

drawn image and the oblique fictions. The relationship between text and image starts and stops, thereby clogging any whole and unified narrative, and instead invoking the possibility and limits of meaning. They are never about the "truth in painting," or the truth in history, or the truth of the word. Icons, snap-shots, and histories each circulate around the modern and art historical system, emphasizing its constructed aspects. Together they perform their own deconstruction, unfixing the system, allowing for adjustments, leaks, and always insisting on the possibility of process.

1. This essay originally appeared as a an introductory essay for Margaret Morgan's exhibition "Out of Order" at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, August 22—October 5, 1997.

2. In conversation with the artist, she cites figures and institutions in the Sydney scene of the late '70s and early '80s such as Helen Grace, Virginia Coventry, Vivienne Binns, Ian Burn, Ian Howard, Dennis Mizzi, Helen Eager, Vicki Varvaressos, the Film-maker's Co-Op, Watter's Gallery, and the Art-worker's Union.

Mario Ontiveros
Los Angeles, California
1997
