

Notes on Box of Birds

In 2003 I made *INSULA* and *1-38*, bodies of work that drew on archival photographs of unidentified women patients in a Sydney psychiatric hospital. The hardest part of making that work was deciding how to negotiate the issue of patient privacy: any of the women, though they'd been photographed in 1948, could conceivably be recognised by someone seeing their image in 2003. The implication was that this recognition, if it occurred, would be a violation of the woman in the photograph, and of the person viewing it. As well, some women had clearly not consented to having their photograph taken, intensifying the ethical dilemma. Against that, the archival photographs were compelling, each individual person seeming to demand the attention of others who had escaped their plight.

A decade later I still feel a strong responsibility to this work and how it is shown and seen. However my thinking about the past and how to approach it has changed over time, hence the desire to return to this material. I'm less interested now in exhuming the traces of the past and in what can be gleaned from them. I'm more interested in trying manifest what I see as the past's active power in the present. In *Box of Birds* I experiment with performance as a means to do this, working with female performers and objects (lengths of dyed and painted felt that recall the felted and crumpled clothes of the women in the 1940s photographs). These objects make strange, outlandish shapes of the performers' bodies. The process is improvised; what comes out is impossible to predict or control.

The one action I specifically ask of the performers is to hold a single piece of felt up to the camera. This action is repeated 38 times, once for every piece of felt and for every woman in the patient archive. The aim is not to document the object but to allow it to announce its existence in and to the world. The resulting images remind me of tribal masks, particularly of the photographs that Walker Evans made in 1935 of African masks in New York's Metropolitan Museum.

While those 38 photographs are untitled, other images bear the names of (unknown or non-existent) birds. All the work in *Box of Birds* tries to elicit the energy I thought I saw trapped in those 1940s photographs, their unquiet spirit.

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