



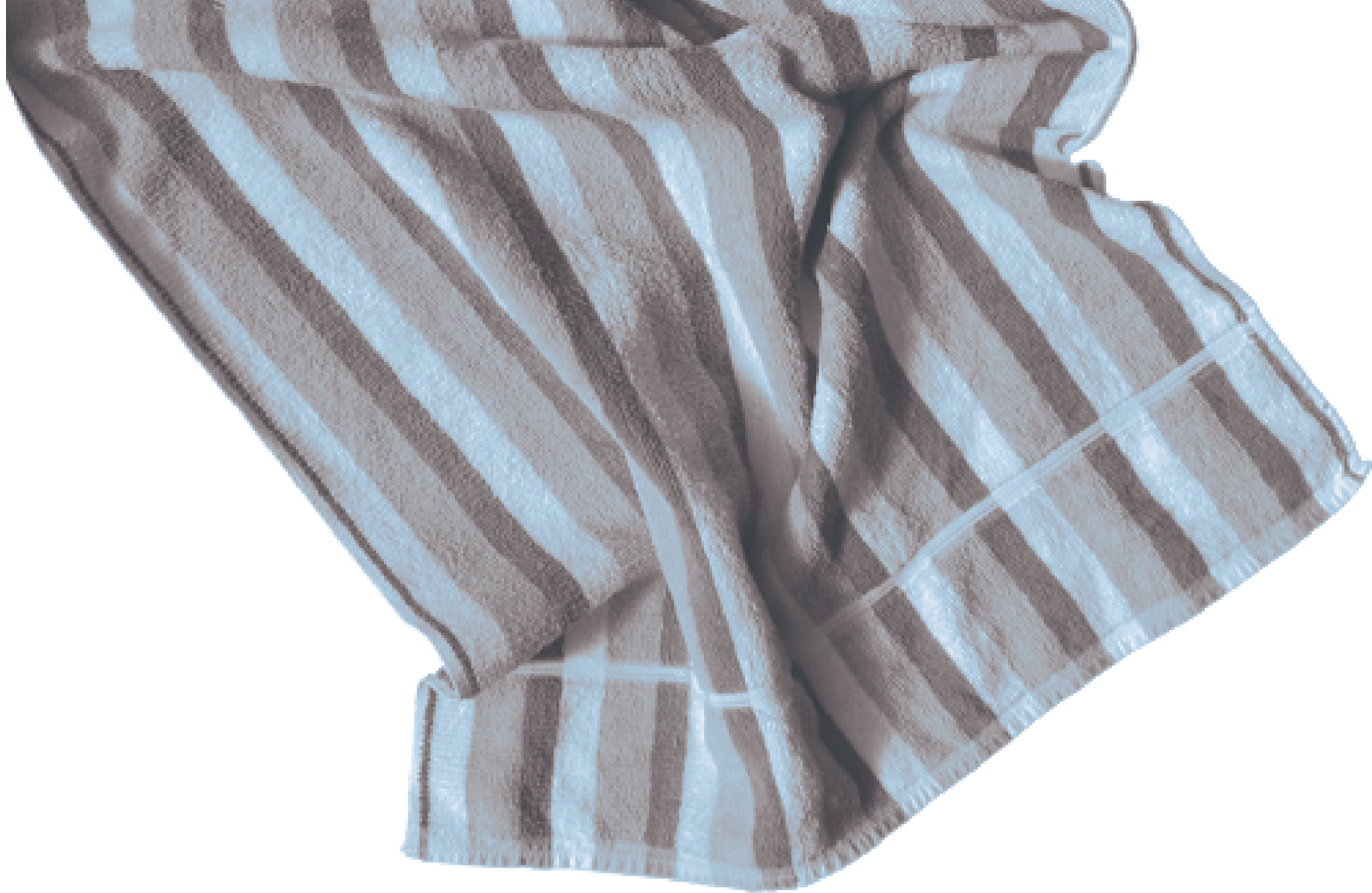
Thanks to: Richard Beagley, Mary-Louise Browne, Daryl Carruthers, Elliot Collins, Catherine Garet, Shelley Classey, Robert Leonard, David Perry & Allan Winter.

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2005

September Sixteenth to October Thirteenth

Wet Social Sculpture

Stella Brennan

Micro-Utopias

“Everyone is an artist”, said Joseph Beuys. In the 1970s the German artist coined the term Social Sculpture to distinguish creative acts engaging the community and affecting the everyday. In reality, however, most artworks are created by trained specialists with their own technical language and professional hauteur. Art objects sit apart in pristine gallery spaces. Operating outside the gallery, social sculptures are collective, process oriented projects. Beuys planted trees.

Rather than claiming quotidian acts for art, a strand of contemporary practice makes the gallery into a locale for a range of activities: listening to music, lounging in hammocks, making instant noodles; experiments tweaking, expanding and highlighting the specific sociabilities of the gallery. These works are part homage, part resistance to the expansive Utopias promoted by social sculpture.

...their author has no pre-ordained idea about what would happen: art is made in the gallery, the same way that Tristan Tzara said that “thought is made in the mouth”.

Nicholas Bourriaud

Neither shaman nor activist, now, more than ever, the artist is hostess.

The Life Aquatic

While other kids were gleaning anatomical information from the pages of National Geographic, I was searching for the occasional alluring articles on European spa towns or Japanese resorts, where ladies in paper caps would be covered with coffee grounds or iced with warm mud in between taking the waters.

In the space of the last few years, all my parents’ neighbours have constructed swimming pools of varying styles and magnificence. Their street has entered the swim zone. My folks, being elderly and of a puritan persuasion (my dad grew up during the Great Depression), regard these constructions as faintly reprehensible, but I think the strangled screams of the neighborhood kids are kind of nice. Like shrieks of bourgeois parrots.

On my first trip to Sydney I was enchanted by the baths by the shore at Bronte and Bondi, concrete pools filled by the waves washing over the rock and concrete rim, inhabited by paunchy leathery men. The perfect halfway house between the beautiful (but inhabited) ocean and the sterile chlorine safety of the pool. I was thrilled when Newmarket’s Olympic Pool, sunburnt locale for tedious inter-school swimming sports, became a roofed cathedral with sauna and spa, and cinemas above. I love doing laps imagining the movies overhead, and, if I go to a film there, sniff hard for any rumour of chlorine in the air conditioning and strain to hear splashing in the quiet moments.

The pool is a powerful object of desire and status. Underwater every tile gleams. The swimmer’s pleasure is solipsistic, muffled by water.

Last year at Marienbad...

A subset of the domesticated pool, spas connote luxury, relaxation and suburban sleaze. Chlorinated and heated, with built-in sound, aeration and lighting, the spa is a quotidian, technologically mediated, amniotic environment, therapeutic and regressive.

More intimate than the swimming pool, with no callisthenic alibi, the spa epitomises certain characteristics of domesticated water. The spa is a pleasure enabled by electricity and chemistry and facilitated by modern materials, by coatings, fiberglass, by insulating foams and ozone generators. It is the leisure class in a capsule, cocktail in hand.

Named for a Belgian bathing-town and often evolving out of the Roman passion for hot water, spas first became popular with itinerant European aristocrats in the 18th century. The moneyed and titled would converge on Continental watering holes for the winter cure.

A hollow commodity — defined formally by its absences, its cradling nooks and its capacity — the portable spa offers an off-the-shelf solution for creating a truly immersive environment. It is a loaded cultural object offered up to gallery visitors.

Sensory deprivation tanks are a world away from the sociability of the spa. Psychological researcher John Cunningham Lilly popularised them under the brand name ‘Samadhi’. Fascinated with internal psychological states, he exploited the blank canvas provided by the warm weightless dark of the tank to examine the

operations of his own consciousness (which he came to term the ‘Human Biocomputer’), often under the influence of LSD or Ketamine. Lilly’s research was utilised by organisations including NASA and the Esalen Institute. Lilly privately admitted participation in MK-ULTRA, the CIA’s top-secret Cold War mind-control programme.

A physician and psychoanalyst, John Lilly was also a pioneering researcher into human communication with dolphins. Lilly’s psychedelic enthusiasms foreshadowed New Age preoccupations and his story spawned two Hollywood treatments. In *Day of the Dolphin* (1973) the US Navy attempts to turn dolphins into smart-bombs with flippers. In Ken Russell’s *Altered States* (1980), a researcher played by William Hurt, uses a sensory deprivation tank and hallucinogens supplied by a mysterious Indian tribe to devolve into primordial matter.

Wet Social Sculpture re-cuts a sequence from *Altered States*, the point of maximum cosmic wig-out, a minute of starbursts, protoplasm, seething cells and opalescent clouds; an abstract interlude in an otherwise more or less conventional Hollywood storyline.

The soundtrack is taken from the record *Songs of the Humpback Whale*, included, in a moment of popular ecological sentiment, in the January 1979 issue of National Geographic. Sandwiched between its pages, the floppy 45 was a kind of archaic multimedia. I remember being so excited — a magazine that talks!

After lowering a pair of hydrophones into the sea, I switched on their amplifiers and listened in stereo through the headphones.

We were no longer alone! Instead, we were surrounded by a vast and joyous chorus of sounds that poured out of the sea and overflowed its rim. The spaces and vaults of the ocean, like a festive palace ball, reverberated and thundered with the cries of whales — sounds that boomed, echoed, swelled and vanished as they wove together like strands in some vast and tangled web of glorious sound.

Roger Payne

With its blend of whale song, trip sequences and disco lights, *Wet Social Sculpture* traces these overlapping, sometimes tangled strands, blending the backyard with the transcendent, the psychonaut with the playboy.

Chlorine Dreams

As I flew over San Bernardino and looked down and saw the swimming pools and the houses and everything in the sun, I was more thrilled than I’ve ever been on arriving at any city...

David Hockney

An invert architecture, the pool is handmaiden of suburbia. The turquoise-studded sprawl reaches its apotheosis in Los Angeles, the city with the highest density of private swimming pools in the world. The products of Hollywood, LA’s mythologist and apologist, would be bereft in their absence. From gleefully hydrophilic Esther Williams spectacles to every rising starlet’s obligatory photo shoot by the pool at the Chateau Marmont, chlorine runs through the movie industry’s veins.

The artworld too has a fascination with the democratic Californian luxury that the pool embodies. David Hockney lovingly records their cyan surfaces, garnishing them with pretty boys. In Ed Ruscha’s 1968 artist’s book *Nine Swimming Pools and a Broken Glass*, photographs of various pools are followed by an image of the bare-footed bather’s natural enemy.

Like any Utopia, the pool is high-maintenance. With its recirculating contents and its suburban connotations, it becomes symbol of a certain kind of well-padded alienation. Think of Dustin Hoffman alone in his wetsuit at the bottom of his parent’s pool in *The Graduate*, or Bill Murray’s millionaire businessman in *Rushmore* — mock-drowning, adrift underwater as his unsympathetic family stands around the brink. In a late-century spin on aquatic ennui,

Mariko Mori’s photograph *Empty Dream* (1995) shows cybernetic mermaids lounging amongst the paddling families on a spectacular Japanese artificial beach. The fibreglass and sequin-clad mermaids are a final garnish to the pool’s motorised waves and airbrushed skies.

In this hermetic turquoise world some counterpoint of anxiety, a hairball in the filter or a fly in the sunscreen seems almost inevitable. Here the dream comes unravelling first — drained or alginated, or with cloudy water full of invisible bacterial threats. The same 1979 issue of National Geographic that includes *Songs of the Humpback Whale* also features a two-page spread of a Los Angeles swimming pool torn in half by a landslide. The supporting earth has gone, a scraped cliff-face remains. The stunned owner stands looking down at the smear of rubble and tile.

Cool comfort, locus of a million dreams, the pool can also recall Lethe, the mythical river from which the dead drink to forget their former lives. The protagonist in John Cheever’s classic 1960s short story *The Swimmer* sees his affluent neighborhood as a liquid realm:

He had been swimming and now he was breathing deeply, stertorously as if he could gulp into his lungs the components of that moment, the heat of the sun, the intenseness of his pleasure. It all seemed to flow into his chest. His own house stood in Bullet Park, eight miles to the south, where his four beautiful daughters would have had their lunch and might be

