UNHOMELY

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Abstract

As winter's dusk encroaches on The Rocks, under the shadowy reach of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, anonymous and unnoticed by the lively crowds, the shutters open, and the blank upper windows flash alive in vacant Reynold's Cottage. Through the unraveling night the cottage innards twist and flutter, spit and ooze with glimpses of disarray, despair and turmoil, the windows spirit-lenses on the turbulent world of mid-twentieth century Sydney.

Keywords: Uncanny; electronic art installation; affect; database aesthetics

Unhomely is a site-specific installation, an 'expanded cinema' of 6 video channels projected inside Reynold's Cottage. Created by myself and collaborators Ross Gibson and Aaron Seymour, our aim with *Unhomely* was to create an uncanny and spooky audience experience, by filling and electrifying - possessing and processing – the cottage with unfolding scenographies created from our mid-twentieth century crime archive. The site evokes an unhomely inner city Sydney, the windows a dark lens on Sydney's hard and dirty past, a shifty spirit-world from the harbour-side of the mid-twentieth century. The audience views the cottage from outside, from both the front and back of the site. This paper outlines the creative context and design processes behind the installation *Unhomely*.

Unhomely is a new art work in the Life After Wartime suite, a local body of significant electronic art (started in 1999) that poetically engages with Sydney's past, mediated through a renowned archive of police scene of crime photographs from 1945 – 1960 [1]. In *Unhomely* the images come from several local and Sydney crimes - from murders to petty theft, assault, abortion and illegal gambling.

Uncanny, unheimlich, unhomely

The word unhomely has an evocative, recursive etymology. I am arguing here that unhomely is the modern English translation of unheimlich, a nineteenth century German concept that entered western epistemology through the field of psychoanalysis and gave to English another expression for the concept of the uncanny. Unheimlich translates to unhomely. The etymology - from the uncanny, via German psycholoanalysis, to unhomely - is a tale metonymic of the complex aesthetic and historic relations evoked in *Unhomely*.

As I am using it, and as it has been applied creatively in relation to the installation, unhomely is a fundamentally modern trope. Let's begin with uncanny, from a wonderful Celtic verb, to ken, so essential and yet so ephemeral it sits between sight and cognisance in the visual thesaurus. It arose in the Romantic movement and in the extreme expressions of 'the sublime', where the domesticated can manifest absolute terror in the form of the 'uncomfortably familiar'.

Arguably first embodied in the early nineteenth century stories of E.T.A. Hoffman and Edgar Allen Poe, the domestic uncanny is an affect to be enjoyed in private quarters, whereby one finds a thrill in "the contrast between a secure and homely interior and the fearful invasion of an alien presence; on a psychological level, its play was one of doubling, where the other is, strangely enough, experienced as a replica of the self, all the more fearsome because apparently the same" [2].

As an alienating affect, the uncanny took even greater hold on the vulnerable inhabitants of newly industrialised cities. These people experienced a sense of urban estrangement, reinforced by their powerlessness in the face of the improverishing landlord/rent system, detached from community bonds and meaningful labour, and inhabiting a fast-paced world in which they were relegated to the status of scurrying insects. The uncanny on this scale is identified with the emerging spatial fears of the late nineteenth century, including both agoraphobia and claustrophobia: still concerned with interior space, now the unhomely exists in the interiorised mind [3]. World War One sees the site of the uncanny "no longer confined to the house or city, but more properly extended to the no man's land between the trenches, or the fields of ruin left after bombardment" [4].

In 1906 German psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch wrote his essay "Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen," translating uncanny as the richly loaded German unheimlich [5]. However it was Freud's 1919 essay "The Uncanny" exploring the phenomenon, and his analysis of E.T.A Hoffman's "The Sandman," that was

Front of Reynold's Cottage © Aaron Seymour and LifeAfterWartime 2013

more influential. Here Freud focuses particularly on the contrast and doubling of unheimlich to its base word heimlich as "concealed, hidden, secret," so that the unheimlich is that which is taboo, abhorrent and hidden from the public eye – the propensity of the familiar to turn on its owners [6]. Taken up by later philosophers such as Bachelard, Heidegger and Lukács, the unheimlich stands for the unsettledness, the fundamental world anxiety, which Heidegger sought to redress with his profound nostalgia and discourse on 'dwelling'.

As Anthony Vidler puts it: "Thus historised, the uncanny might be understood as a significant psychoanalytical and aesthetic response to the real shock of the modern, a trauma that, compounded by its unthinkable repetition on an even more terrible scale during World War II, has not been exorcised from the contemporary imaginary. Estrangement and unhomeliness have emerged as the intellectual watchwords of our century…" [7]

In our suite Life After Wartime, given that our database of images come from 1945-1960, our focus is on the changing cultural, social, physic and economic conditions of Sydney in that era. As my collaborator Ross Gibson puts it:

The crimes represented in our archive are metonymic of and typify the aftermath of World War 2 that so informed our parents' lives, the society into which we were born, and our childhood consciousness. Thus the project title Life After Wartime. [8]

Site specificity

"The whole atmosphere of that dirty old slum house was instinct with mystery and evil. It seemed to gloat, and hold to itself all the murders that had been committed within its walls. The smell of blood was there, and the miasma of cowardice and stealth and cruelty" [9].

I love The Rocks - an obdurate finger of rocky Hawkesbury sandstone extruding into the harbor west of Sydney's Circular Quay – site of colonial quarries and windmills, docks, debauchery, poverty, plague and twentieth century changes too fast and complex to outline here [10]. When ISEA offered a location for *Unhomely* in The Rocks, in association with the Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority (SHFA), I excitedly anticipated the site visit.

Stepping into the cottage from the shimmering summer street, inside is dark, warm and spicy – the smell of Sydney heathland on a summer's day. Pleasingly symmetrical, originally one room deep (and still so, upstairs) the house afforded 7 windows, four front and three back. No lines are true, you can see that, but it is incorporating its growing wonkiness and is resonantly charming and darkly redolent. I accept straight away – a controlled environment, level access, high traffic location – the producer in me syncopated smoothly with my joyful artist's heart – a house in the Rocks!

Reynold's Cottages (our site was one of 2 cottages) were average working class houses, convict built in 1829 in the ubiquitous Colonial Georgian style of early Sydney. Before Reynold's Cottages were built, the site was continuously occupied from the arrival of the First Fleet – including by forger turned government architect Francis Greenway, who owned the block bounded by George, Argyle, Harrington Streets and Suez Canal where the cottages now sit. Archetypal of much Sydney real estate, Reynold's Cottage has its intricate history of ownership, loss, death, birth, rise and fall. Having been the owner/builder, Reynolds himself become tenant through corruption in the Land Office. During the twentieth century it was public housing. It is remarkable that the cottages should have survived the rapacious real estate turf wars native to post-contact Sydney [11]. Without doubt the site would have also been treasured, in the same and other, deeper ways, by local Aboriginals for its protected north-east aspect, natural water well, sandstone shelters and excellent view [12].

The house as psyche

"…in the psyche there is nothing that is just a dead relic. Everything is alive."
Carl Jung, Mind and Earth (1964). [13]

Now we had the actual house, the final jigsaw piece in the creative concept. With its double story front, and a third space out the back comprised of a later kitchen and lean-to, or sleep-out, each with a window, the cottage offered not only the windows but its particular spatial and architectural affordances, and extra dimensions of engagement due to people's ability to view it from the front and, via the gloriously named Suez Canal, the back.

Without laboring the point, our aesthetic treatment and projection design was partially informed by Jungian analysis that embraces the house (dwelling) as a symbol of the dreamer's psyche – the rooms and levels representative of and analogous to aspects of self, or imagined as vessels into which we project our psychic fears and desires. Jung explains the initial metaphor of house for consciousness:

"I thought of the conscious as of a room above, with the unconscious as a cellar underneath and then the earth wellspring, that is, the body, sending up the instincts. ... That is the figure I had always used for myself, and then came this dream ..." [14].

Jung's dreamed house of 1909 had 3 or 4 floors, and exploring the lower cellars took him back in time to the roots of western culture, yet these floors still had a domestic look and feel; the exploratory experience analogous to "…a continuity of psychic stratification from the historical near past to the distant evolutionary past. Accordingly, the cave is the lowest extension of the house, a mere sub-cellar. In Memories Dreams Reflections, a kind of continuity with the house is captured in the images of thick dust on its floor and scattered broken pottery, which give the place a domestic feel. Elsewhere in Jung's and others' accounts, the lower cellar is like a cave or tomb" [15].

After this famous dream, Jung articulated the idea of the collective unconscious and its relationship to his dream house. Not a social construct but a physiological one, the collective unconscious is a shared and evolutionary structure of the brain just as the human body is a collection of evolutionary matter [16]. In *Unhomely*, we are connected to, tap-

Lower front detail, © Aaron Seymour and LifeAfterWartime 2013

ping into, the collective unconscious of the site as we vitalise and electrify the cottage with the specific uncanny of post WW2 Life After Wartime.

The visual nature of dreams is generally highly phantasmagoric - different locations and objects continuously blend into each other. In *Unhomely*, whereby the cottage is a vessel with apertures, a magic lantern, we assigned to each room video content composed of animations of our crime scenes and victims/ perpetrators. No channel was technically synched with another, but we were attentive to the overall rhythm and pacing, focusing especially on the image transitions.

Design and creation

"Our Sydney pictures are as ordinary and wondrous as they are aweful. With their concussive stillness these images offer glimpses of lives you can almost remember. You can sense in these crime scenes a power that hums out of the past and makes an everyday city that is soulful and reverberant. A city with more blood and spirit than our perception usually lets us see". [17]

All Life After Wartime projects are characterised by a strong emphasis on the photographic, a dominant use of black and white, and the aesthetic experience of the images/sound emerging, and/or being called up out of the darkness. To this end, the image transitions themselves carry a lot of weight. For *Unhomely*, transitions comprise images emerging from ghosting fog; images spitting and stuttering; images twisting

Lower front detail, © Aaron Seymour and LifeAfterWartime 2013

Rear sleep-out detail © Aaron Seymour and LifeAfterWartime 2013

to unfold as they emerge from a chrysalis form and fill the visual plane. There is often a writhing, oozing and bleeding between images; and the electricity and the flickery flash of early photographic lighting.

In the cottage front, faces stare out of the lower left window: victims and perpetrators emerge out of ghosting fog and swirl into recognizable form, look right into the camera in an era when this was not typical of cinematic treatments – without the reverse shot, an incomplete anamorphosis. [18] These preternaturally oversized portraits hold the gaze of passersby. In the lower right side of the building, bedrooms and hallways, luminous, subtly moving, are at first glance seemingly innocuous and 'to scale', yet percussive with disturbance and disarray on closer viewing.

For these two downstairs windows, we opted for rear projection using a rear-pro fabric with a lot of warmth that enhanced the black and white and the detail of the images. The deep window casements added a dimension that was unexpected but powerful.

Lower front detail, © Aaron Seymour and LifeAfterWartime 2013

The top front windows are at times blank and vacant, and we might wonder: "what happens upstairs?" Then suddenly they are animated by strange flashes emphasising the spatial improbability – car headlights scan the interior, rain pours down, a red sky is riven by lightening, a torchlight seeks out dark corners. The impression is of a borderless space inside. Here we projected at an angle against the back walls and ceiling, which really opened up the spaces and created illusions of depth and complexity.

At the back of the building, the kitchen is almost untouched since the early twentieth century. The viscerally mottled and decaying wall becomes a component in the design as we project onto it a kitchen interior from the 1940s – the darkened window with its shabby cur-

tains, the teapot and cups left at the moment of rupture. The image slowly morphs, seemingly with the weight of its witnessing. Traditionally the site of the happy hearth, the family and nurturing, this kitchen bears signs of a struggle: flour spilled from a set of upset scales, a woman's shoes left as she was lifted from them, a single child's bootee and well loved, thread-bare teddy bear, an upturned box cart bear witness to fingers dragged through the flour as they try and take purchase on the flag stones, a knee pressed into the floor. Dead leaves mingle with the spilled flour – echoing the outside-in treatment of the front windows and reminiscent of the opening sequence of 1950s classic melodrama, "Written on the Wind", in which autumn leaves are blown into the lush entry foyer of a mansion to symbolise the moral decay about to unfold in the film.

On the other back window – which looks into a room most likely added as a lean-to, or sleep-out, the corrugated iron suggests a space that was part interior, part exterior - the house spawns objects that unfold like a chrysalis – a hat, worn shoes; tools of illegal street trades (a gun, a spanner, abortion instruments, medical syringes; a threatening note); a snapshot of transsexuals dressed for a night out, another that decorates the rooms of a prostitute; police procedural documents detailing how a crime scene should be treated; a forged cheque drawn against the Bank of New South Wales. For this window we projected directly onto the glass, having first treated it to create a surface reminiscent of one dust-

Rear kitchen detail, © Aaron Seymour and LifeAfterWartime 2013

ed for figure prints. A series of interesting reflections resulted – up against the angled window shade, the ceiling of the room interior.

"And he had just disappeared. Nothing was ever heard of him again… There was just a little box cart left lying on the roadway, and that was all."

Unhomely is an installation that captures the socio-cultural and economic disarray and alienation of post World War Two Sydney. By mobilising our archive of mid-twentieth century scene-of-crime images to possess and process abandoned Reynold's Cottage, we have created an opportunity for visitors to experience vernacular architecture, animated by electronic art and appreciated by visitors as an uncanny, site specific experience.

References and Notes

1. The seven projects in the *Life After Wartime* suite utilise a database of 3000 images, shot between 1945 and 1960, plus over one thousand of Gibson's texts, in a series of media artworks that offer interrogative and creative responses to the archival material and engage with database aesthetics and artist and audience agency. The projects have been created across multiple platforms and have been exhibited and reviewed and cited at state, national and international level.

2. Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny - Essays in the modern unhomely.* Boston, USA:MIT Press, 1992 Introduction

3. It's a nice (Jungian) synchronicity that in 1895 The Lumiere Brothers screened their first film of workers leaving a factory, and in the same year Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer published 'Studies on Hysteria' in which psychoanalytic technique was first introduced: both cinema and psychoanalysis are characterised by an axiomatic imperative to observe and imagine.

4. Vidler [2], p7.

5. Ernst Jentsch, *On the Psychology of the Uncanny* 1906 – translation by Roy Sellars, accessed 06/2013 on http://theuncannything.wordpress.com/

6. Sigmund Freud *The Uncanny* 1919– accessed 06/2013 http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/~amtower/uncanny.html

7. Vidler [2], p 9

8. Ross Gibson. *Crime Scene,* exhibition catalogue. (Sydney, Aust: Justice and Police Museum 1999).

9. Ruth Park *The Harp in the South.* Sydney Aust: Angus and Robertson 1948) page 123.

10. For a richly sourced (and sauced) history of early Sydney I suggest John Birmingham *Leviathan: The Unauthorised of Sydney* Australia: Random House 2008

11. M. Holmes,. *Reynold's Cottages.* 2012 Retrieved 2013, from Dictionary of Sydney: http://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/reynolds_cottages

12. For an invaluable primer on the history of Aboriginal Australia as understood through the colonization of land see Heather Goodall, *From Invasion to Embassy: land in Aboriginal politics in New*

South wales 1770 – 1972, (Sydney: Allen and Unwin in association with Black Books 1996)

13. Carl Jung, "Mind and Earth", in H. Read, M. Fordham, & G. Adler, eds, *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung* Vol. 10 (London: Routledge 1964) pp. 29-49 par. 55(Original work published 1931)

14. Carl Jung, *Analytical Psychology: Notes of the Seminar Given in 1925 Princeton*, (Princeton USW: Princeton University Press 1989) p 22-23. (Original work published 1926)

15. Raya H.Jones, "A discovery of Meaning: The Case of C.G.Jung's Dream House", Working paper 79, Cardiff University, School of Social Sciences p 12

16. Case of C.G.Jung's Dream House", Working paper 79, Cardiff University, School of Social Sciences p 12

17. Ross Gibson. *Crime Scene,* exh. cat. (Sydney, Aust: Justice and Police Museum 1999).

18. Cinematic editing conventions enable a visual sequence to "make sense"; for example, a shot of someone looking at the camera, is reinforced by a shot of the subject of their gaze (the reverse shot). If enough shots cover the physical and emotional terrain, they attain an anamorphosis – a complex coverage of the event. For more on this see Kate Richards *Life After Wartime, a suite of Multi-media Artworks*, Canadian Journal of Communication Vol 31, Number 2 2006

19. Ruth Park [9], p 175.