

UNCOMMON ROOM



PROFOUND ESSAY

A ROOM OF THEIR OWN

By the final tortuous chapter of my high school years, we had collectively endured enough to be granted a long-envied privilege: The Common Room. I think it was painted a vomitous shade of green, although I can't really be sure. It was, after all, the exclusive domain of the cool group.

I was a nerd, of course, and I knew well enough to stay outside. If there was anything I had learned at school, it was my rightful place in the social order. While I sat on the dead grass and ate my gladwrapped vegemite sandwiches, behind a nearby wall the chosen ones were microwaving noodles, drinking hot chocolates and (at least in my imagination) languorously stroking each other on velour couches.

The irony that a supposedly common space functioned as a kind of country club was no doubt lost on them. But even if its users were not particularly self-aware, it was a room whose work—or more accurately, its play—was truly *site-specific*. Nothing was nailed to the floor, and the space was continually *activated* by the stream of budding actresses, ruckmen and remedial maths students who adopted it as their regular hangout.

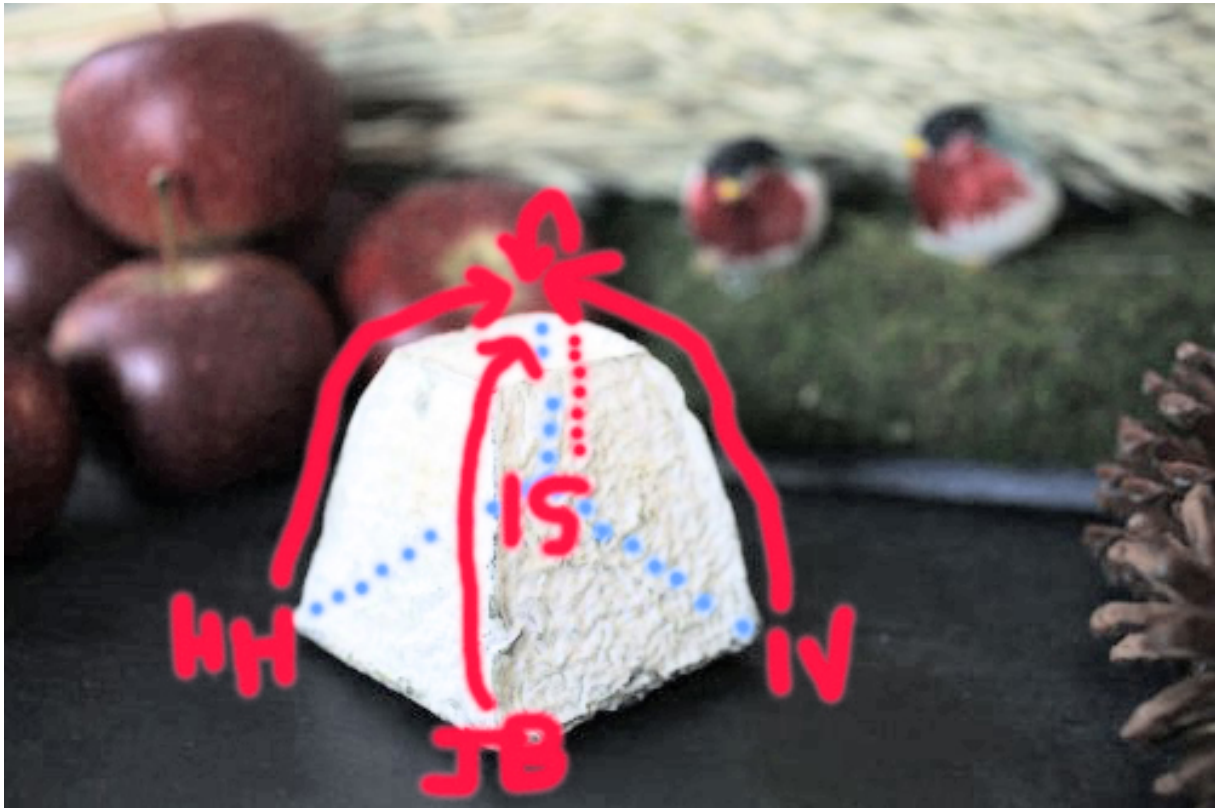
This might be a trite observation, but it's one worth mentioning in light of this exhibition's original title: *Common Room*. How strange that the artists would plan to forego the dynamism of such a space to create something more static,

and certainly less comfortable. Perhaps Misses Bullivant, Holmes, Sully and Vaughan were plotting a revenge of the conceptual-artist-nerds: *sorry guys, there's nowhere to sit, but here are some ideas to play with.*

I seem to remember (although it's possible I have borrowed this utopian vision from an episode of *The West Wing*) that in the few weeks that passed between the World Trade Center collapsing into dust and the empty-whoopie-cushion end to my school life, the common room opened up radically. The surfers, the stoners, the artists and the loners; they all drifted in to talk about how things were making them *feel*, and what might happen *next*.

To give these artists their due, their unexpected (and unpublicised) departure from their carefully laid plans carries this same kind of emancipatory potential. I can explain, if you allow me to get a little spatial. The original intentions of *Common Room* can be illustrated by the placement of each artist at the corner of a square, with the lines around the sides representing the four works they were to make. Each work would thus be created by two artists, in collaboration with each other.

Whether the result of this work would have stayed true to the inherently closed-in nature of the square is impossible to know. The admission by the one of the artists, in the middle stages of the process, that artistic collaboration makes "you realise what you don't share [with each other]" is telling. What we may have encountered, had we felt comfortable enough to enter, is a *dysfunctional* country club.



Sketch for Uncommon Room strategy as Valençay (2012)
Photoshop brush tool on JPEG

Fortunately we have avoided that possibility, thanks to the group's decision to abandon the plans for *Common Room* and adopt a new strategy modelled on a French goat's cheese. Aside from its pleasantly mellow and slightly lemony flavour, Valençay, from the Loire Valley, is remarkable for its appearance only in the form of a truncated pyramid.

If the squishy charcoal-dusted corners of the pyramid's base still stand in for each of the artists, their movement up the inclined edges implies collaboration with a trajectory—rather than from a static position—and towards the artist with whom they would otherwise never have worked. Perhaps more importantly, the artists' landing on a small cheesy plateau places them in closer proximity to each other: *all the better to see you with.*

In a move heavy with signalled intention, the newly-conceived exhibition has been titled *Uncommon Room*. I can forgive them this. Maybe they had already printed the invitations. Besides, if Johnny Baldessari, granddaddy of us all, could burn a buttload of paintings and be so witless as to call it *The Cremation Project*, these four young artists should have no trouble defending a decision to scrap all their work and slap an *Un* out the front of it.

THIS WORK IS COMPLETELY BALLS

With the final installation of *Uncommon Room*, the artists have made the job of a writer quite

easy. I can think of no better metaphor for their inflated egos and outsized ambitions than the two giant beach balls which dominate Gallery 1 at Rear View. I mean no disrespect by this, for these are both qualities necessary for a successful artistic career.

The balls, made in collaboration by Heidi Holmes and Isadora Vaughan, were partly inspired by Vaughan's recent visit to a hardware store where the bored clerks had painstakingly made a rubber-band ball "as big as it could possibly be." Vaughan's ongoing interest in the expressive limits of particular materials led her to consider what kind of object could push against the boundaries of the white cube.

Having been inflated until they are squeezed—quite literally—between the floor and the ceiling, the balls cleverly invert the prevailing mode of

making *work that responds to the space*. By pushing back and denying their potential size, *the space is responding to the work*. The effect is disconcerting, especially since the balls themselves (which presumably would prefer to be on a bikini photoshoot or at the cricket) seem perfectly comfortable with the situation.

Beginning with special-order sheets of PVC fabric, Holmes and Vaughan have gone to great lengths to convincingly render by hand what would otherwise be an object of mass manufacture. But a second glance confirms a creeping feeling that something is *NQR*. The segments of the ball, which would ordinarily emanate the chirpy colours of childhood, are painted only in generically corporate red and blue. Like the ties in Kevin Rudd's wardrobe, or the Officeworks logo.

Six sketches for HMITHCTTA/HMHTHCTTA (2012)
Photoshop brush tool on JPEG collage



A clue comes from the title of the work, *How much Isadora thinks Heidi contributed to this artwork / How much Heidi thinks Heidi contributed to this artwork*. The exhibition room sheet helpfully provides a key to interpreting this code: Heidi's perceived contribution is in red. Looking at the balls, one features a small sliver of red on a waxing blue moon, and the other is split strictly 50/50 down the middle.

But which ball is which? Crucially, we are left in the dark on this point. If the sliver is Heidi's, she's either delusionally self-critical, or an incredibly passive artist. In either case, this would make Isadora an insistent diplomat. Alternatively, if the sliver represents Isadora's perception of things, I don't even want to know what kind of rotting corpse lay at the centre of this collaboration.

According to the artists, less than a week prior to the completion of work on the beach balls (which were to be painted in bright pastel shades), Holmes presented Vaughan with a set of transcripts based on audio recordings she had secretly made of the pair's meetings. The data, she hoped, would be an opportunity to translate an objective analysis of her own 'performance' into the final work. In the language of *The Terminator*, it was J-Day.

In what spirit Vaughan accepted Holmes' proposal I'm not entirely sure, but it makes for a fascinating work. Bravely, it questions the very premise of collaboration, reflecting ambiguously on the relationship between *ideas* and *making*. Although coded, installed at Rear View *HMITHCTTA/HMHTHCTTA* appears assertive and playful. In an unexpected and delightful paradox, despite revealing the flaws inherent in collaborative practice, Holmes and Vaughan's work appears to have arisen out of a clear and unified vision.

STOP THE PRESSES, EDGAR DEGAS HAS ENTERED THE ROOM! (OR ÉDOUARD MANET, OR JOSEPH KOSUTH, OR...)

If while wending your way through Holmes and Vaughan's giant balls you feel, briefly, as though you are immersed in a more self-reflexive and less child-friendly (not to mention less polka-dotty) Yayoi Kusama installation, you may be shocked to find yourself at the end of Gallery 1 face-to-face with Time Magazine's *Person of the Year 2006*. Yes, that's right. You.

Jessie Bullivant and Isabelle Sully's installation of a giant mirror covering the gallery's rear wall is subtly deceptive. For one thing, it offers the possibility of not just an art-going doppelgänger but another two beach balls out the back. More surprising—especially to those who have seen their reflections before—is the full-length ballet barre which sits, expertly mounted, in front of the glass.

While the mirror serves to elongate the already-narrow gallery space (thereby making a deliberate spatial alteration away from the mythical white cube), the barre concentrates the viewer's line of sight on a potential, or implied,



Six sketches for Barre Work (2012)
Photoshop brush tool on JPEG collage

action. Edgar Degas, who practically has an old-dead-white-guy trademark on ballet in art, would get a kick out of this. He should definitely have been invited to the opening night, not least because he would have had plenty of pretty young things to gawp at.

Bullivant's work has often been concerned with revealing—or contriving, if necessary—the inadvertently poetic tassels of everyday life, and this installation is no exception. Tucked in the bottom right-hand corner of the mirrored wall is a neat rectangular sticker with rounded corners: *Installed by A.A.A. Northcote Glass & Mirrors. Phone 9419 1989.* This small sign seems to arrive from a different world, which is strange since the company—despite its name—is located around the corner on Keale Street.

(Unsurprisingly, though, it does have the first listing in its section in the Yellow Pages.)

Perhaps they should have, but the explicit reminders of the installation artist's tendency towards eccentrically fickle consumption do not stop there. A closer inspection of the ballet barre reveals it to be made not of the industry-standard Victorian Ash, but of broom handles. Not just any broom handles, either. As their prominent labels show, they are from Oates' *Duratuff* range of lacquered composite bamboo and timber.

It might have been a bridge too far to suggest that this calls to mind Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Brooms*, except that there are in fact exactly three brooms used in the installation. If I can attribute this to one of the artists, it is to

HAPPY HOUR AT THE ARTISTS CLUB HOTEL

Sully, who is consistent in her determination to hold “a conversation in art.” With my ear up to the wall I can hear her side of that particular dialogue: *no, Joseph, you idiot, there are only three of them, and they're all the same.*

The installation is (of course) called *Barre Work*, after the exercise routine dancers perform throughout their careers. The title neatly sums up the crux of the piece, but also makes explicit what should be obvious at the first sight of the broom handles: *this artwork is about art and work*. While the allusion to ballet implies a lifelong Brancusi-like honing of skills, the title's double entendre reveals the reality of life for many young artists: pulling beers.

Sully herself does just that at the aptly named Workers Club, about one kilometre from here. Knowing this, and having seen the mirror-and-barre installation, it's almost synaptically impossible not to be picturing Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* right now. Or, coming full circle, Jeff Wall's *Picture for Women*, which looks dead set like it was made in a ballet studio.

This elliptical reading will, I'm sure, flatter and please both the artists, and I am happy to applaud their work. Although they at times risk talking over each other, the concerns central to the individual practices of Bullivant and Sully amount to something greater in this collaboration. My woman-at-bar vision has now been replaced by one of a single beach ball, painted completely purple, a harmonious meeting of red and blue.

If the artists are serving drinks at the Workers Club, who's serving drinks at the Artists Club? If there's any justice in this world, such a place would be staffed entirely by the legions of jocks, bullies and beauty queens who spent their school days keeping the rest of us out of their insular worlds. But I have a feeling this fantasy is guilty of the same crimes that wounded me and my little band of outsiders, way back in the innocently jaded times of late postmodernism.

Instead, our duty should be to make these uncommon rooms we create and inhabit for three weeks at a time as *common* as possible. Abandoning the square for a 220 gram truncated pyramid of cheese was a brave decision, and the result of these new collaborations is worthy of a wide audience. Although Mars, Inc. suggests we should rest as well, I don't believe there's much more to life than work and play. The best elements of *Uncommon Room* interrogate that recognisable but ineffable nexus between the two.

On reflection, the most playful work here begins to look serious, and the most serious work begins to look playful. In the same spirit, we should earnestly open the doors. The gallery is the Artists Club, and everyone's invited.

—DSM, 4 May 2012

ART (SORT OF) BY
JESSIE BULLIVANT
HEIDI HOLMES
ISABELLE SULLY
ISADORA VAUGHAN



THIS BY
DANIEL STEPHEN MILLER