

# ANNE FERRAN

For some years Anne Ferran's work has been intimately involved with the archive and its ability to both represent and tellingly – forget – the lives of certain types of women throughout history. Inspired by both the gulf of information lost through lack of specificity and personal detail in certain cataloguing systems and collections, and the limited knowledge gleaned from the often tantalisingly slight documentation that survives, Ferran's practice oscillates somewhere between history and remembrance, acknowledgement and recognition. In no way an attempt to memorialise her once real but now largely imagined subjects, her photographs and installations use this sense of absence (of records, stories and the women themselves) to create a space of meditation, speculation and ongoing connection across time.

The artist's most recent project, *In the ground, on the air*, 2006, returns to material that she first worked with in the exhibition *Lost to worlds*, 2000. Central to this body of work are two historical Tasmanian sites: the Ross Female Factory in central Tasmania and the Cascades Female Factory of South Hobart. Despite the historical significance of these 'factories' (which were in fact places of incarceration for convict women), there remains very little material evidence of their existence. The factory at Cascades for example – originally an area comprising five compounds – is now a solitary stone wall with some visible evidence of what was once the second yard. Similarly, the history of the Ross Female Factory and the lives of its inhabitants can only be vaguely hinted at by the fragmentary objects that have been uncovered from an archaeological dig of the area.<sup>1</sup>

Among the personal archive accumulated by Ferran of the sites, are her photographs of Ross' gently undulating and occasionally rocky ground. These images of 'nothing' consciously resist interpretation, refusing to offer up either the known details of the site or the imagined stories of the lives of the women who lived and worked there, just as the scant historical records that have inspired their creation themselves often break up straightforward classification. The Ross Female Factory and the Cascades Female Factory deny the sense of closure (or at least understanding and acknowledgment) of the past that a detailed historical record might allow, and it is from this space of poverty and lack – of both the treatment of the women and their children and the information about them – that *In the ground, on the air* speaks.

The factories at Ross and Cascades housed three classes of female convict – First, Second and Third or Crime Class, and they were called factories because the women were expected to work during the period of their internment. Women who became pregnant were automatically assigned six months in the Crime Class (which occurred after the weaning of their babies), and the babies who survived birth were reared in overcrowded and unhygienic communal prison nurseries. Not surprisingly, hundreds died.<sup>2</sup>

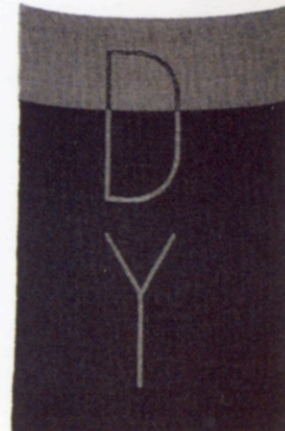
The nine woven cot blankets of *In the ground, on the air* represent some of the causes of death most commonly recorded for these infants – diarrhoea, convulsions, marasmus, dysentery, catarrh, whooping cough and pneumonia – and the first two letters of each condition (for many are symptoms rather than diseases) are cut into the coarse but finely spun wool comprising each work. The disturbing associations of this potentially violent action and the inner layer of fabric revealed by the process lend these tiny blankets an air of *gravitas* and vulnerability. Divided horizontally into two bands, each blanket represents, through the block of colour at the top, the number of recorded deaths attributed to each illness. Effectively graphing a history of 'neglect and indifference' when installed along the wall, this austere group of objects both reflects and laments 'the care that wasn't given and the comfort that wasn't offered',<sup>3</sup> poetically confronting us with the cruelty of our past while ensuring that the loss of these young lives continues to leave a sort of residue or imprint.

This sense of loss is further reinforced by the rollcall of babies' names that scroll across the two LCD screens included in the installation, which in turn personalise the mortality rates evoked by the blankets. As the name of each child slowly fades out, expiring like a last breath, we experience the duration of their brief lives as their time comes to an end.<sup>4</sup>

Kelly Gellatly



Anne Ferran  
*Untitled (Convulsions)* 2006  
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Anne Ferran  
*Untitled (Dysentery)* 2006  
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