



WHO'S AFRAID OF JAN NELSON?

Peek-a-Boo...I can see you. An exchange between mother and child in which the Lacanian 'I' is yet to be formed. The game, in case you have forgotten, is played by the mother or the child hiding their face from the other. The idea being... If I can't see you, you can't see me. The mother or the child cannot 'be' without the other.

BOO! is an the object of the omnipotent mother. The mother whose apron strings might be a problem later in life. For now it is the playful, omnipresent mother with a bright coloured orange apron with big pockets, front and back. All the better to hop into if the game gets too rough.

The peek-a-boo game is surely the condition of the art object and the audience, too. If the audience and the art do not see each other, do they therefore not exist? Well, yes. That is the contractual relationship which is set up between the audience and the art...and....as a by-product, the artist.

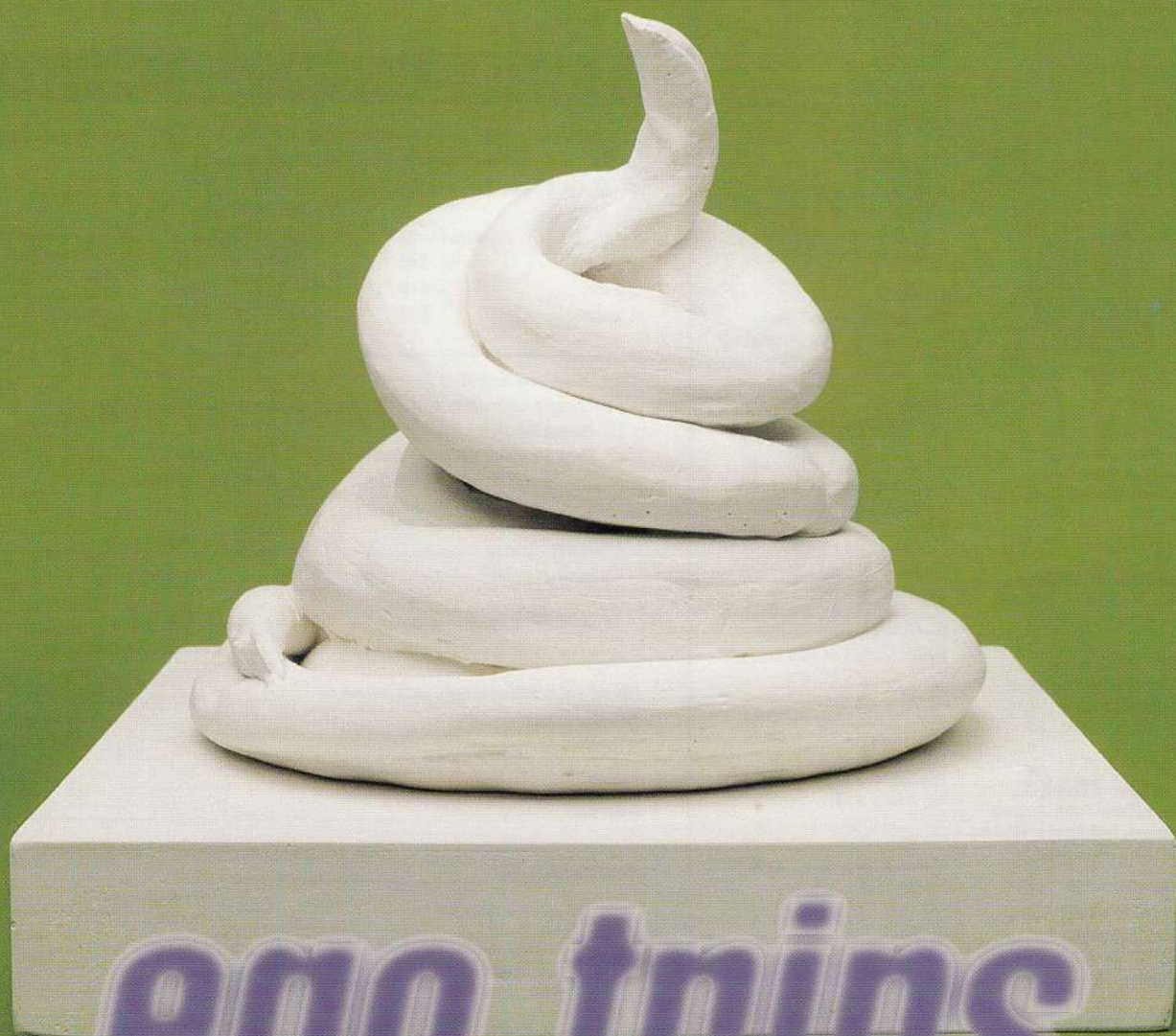
Claes Oldenburg knew this. He set up his shop of floppy and plaster things to amplify the relationship of exchange and value in the trade of art; looking and purchase. Playfully, like Jan Nelson, he promoted this central idea through somewhat unlofty commodity items. Importantly, they were often consumption, comfort things; like doughnuts and cakes. BOO! is somewhat doughy... flour dusty.

At the moment Jan Nelson is playing between the spaces of pop art and post partum. It is an interesting space, one which offers unexpected opportunities. It is certainly one which invites a refreshing inventiveness of materials and objects. Perhaps even a giggle, like the child who sees because they are seen. Peek-a-boo...I can see you... Jan Nelson.

Juliana Engberg

NUMBER 51 1995 AUS \$12 US \$12 UK £6.99 NZ \$19.50

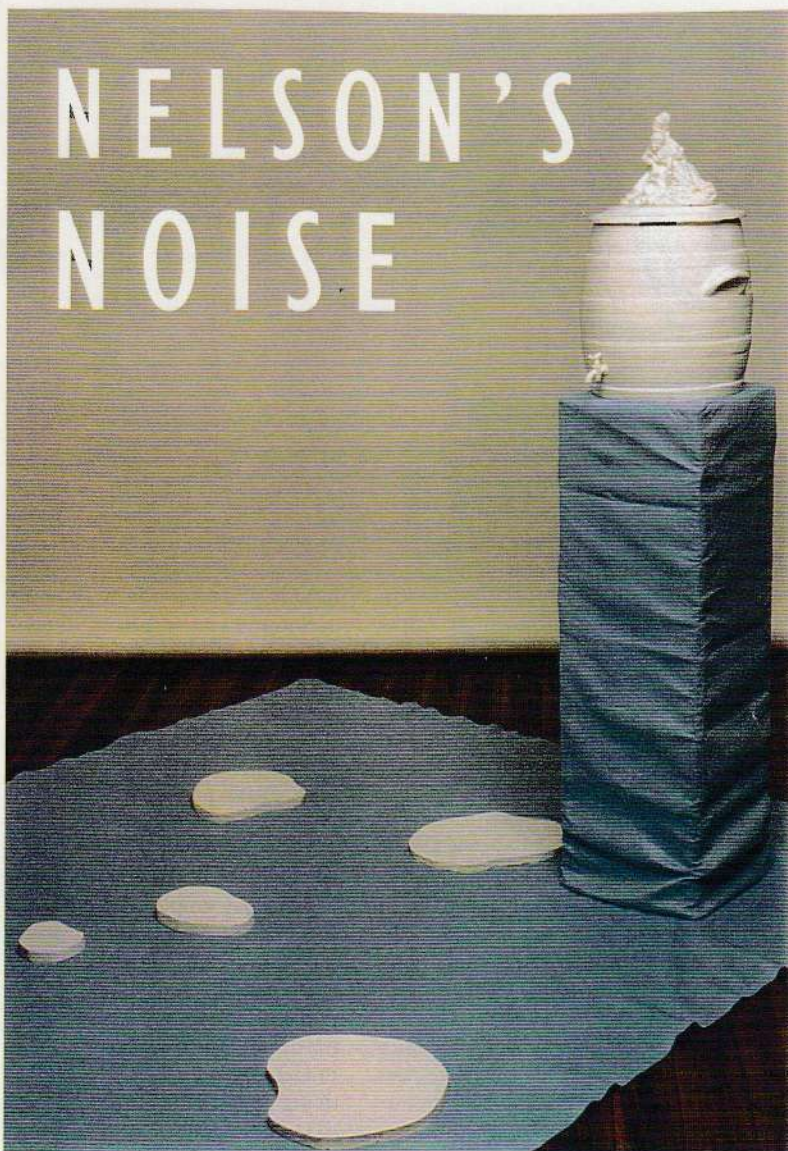
ART + TEXT



ego trips

JAN NELSON'S WHITE NOISE

JULIANA ENGBERG



SPILL, 1994, PLASTER, FELT, 153.5 X 194 X 200 CM. COURTESY ROBERT LINDSAY GALLERY, MELBOURNE.

Encoded into the substance of Jan Nelson's white objects are a multitude of theories and histories. Einstein's idea of the "other dimension," Darwin's discourse on evolution and reproduction, Freud's speculations on hysteria, and Irigaray's hypothesis on female fluids are mixed with biographies of Marie-Antoinette, Théroigne de Méricourt, Emma Wedgwood, Marie Curie and others, to curdle like milk

infested with alien bacteria.

The whey-colored objects emerging from this process of crossbreeding—milk "pales," "milk maidens," milk urns—formed the basis of Nelson's work for a number of years. The metaphor of milk running through each project is an allusion to the impossibility of nurturance and fertility; the double bind created in nature for women.

The purity of these works and their

existence as hermetically sealed matter offered few blemishes through which the viewer could trace their coagulated content. In many ways they were the logical extension of Nelson's hypothesis of sterility.

In 1994, Nelson left the tap dripping on her milk urn and the mold was broken. Where once the works were ossified, the effect of *Spill* was to untighten the valve and create opportunities for reinvention.

Consisting of a plaster-cast milk urn, decorated on top with a nineteenth-century "lovers" figurine, and a blue felt carpet and plinth covering, *Spill* displays the essential elements of Nelson's overall project—the object and its museum support—with a sense of renewed complexity.

Given the arcane elegance of *Spill*, it seems rather incongruous that Nelson has cited the futuristic sci-fi flick *Terminator 2* as precursory to the work, and yet the connection between the film android's liquefaction and reconstitution provides a strong clue to the artist's investigations into the biomorphic transmutations effecting the ebb and flow of her ideas.

In *Spill* we see the crossover taking place in Nelson's practice between nineteenth-century thought and its repercussions in the twentieth century. Her work parallels that moment in history when science fiction emerged as a strong literary impetus for the description of a world entering a new millennium. Theories of time travel and vitalist doctrines informed debates about the prudence of railway travel, H. G. Wells created his proto-*Star Trek* machine, and Mary Shelley brought life into a replicant.

Spill also represents the crossover in art from figuration to abstraction, and from art formed by sentimentality to manifestos of utopian modernity. The droplets of plaster milk that have been released from the nineteenth-century vessel of romance collect in Nelson's work to form new visionary patterns in the shape of Jean Arp's paintings and sculptures.

It is no small coincidence that Nelson should have chosen the idea of accidental seepage and leaking as the point of artistic rebirth, since her work has consistently dealt with the human reproductive system as well as the system of replication occurring in the art museum. Her work is often a take on the Darwinian explanation of creation as proceeding from the liquids of the earth rather than the celestial heavens. The evolution of species is caused by the emission of seed that will fertilize the egg. Given the strike rate of sperm to egg, procreation can be viewed as a fluke instead of a certainty—a notion especially evident in Nelson's small pedestal work, *Turkey Baster* (1993).

Spill, in its title and appearance,

reveals the "calamitous event" used by Nelson to create novel causes and effects enabling a reinvestigation of seminal works in the catalogue of modern art history. *Incident 1960* is the logical extension of this catastrophe theory, and provides further evidence of Nelson's recent inventiveness.

Plaster casts of pieces of broken flowerpot sit atop a pedestal. In their

shattered state they have become null and void while simultaneously achieving new status as objets d'art. As with all of Nelson's work, the date in the title gives a clue to the elaborate meaning of this work. 1960 was the year French artist Yves Klein took his famous "leap into the void," his action being a grand moment in the theory of immateriality.

Much controversy has surrounded this



INCIDENT 1960, 1994, 2 EA. PLASTER, WOODEN PEDESTAL AND LABEL, 160 X 59 X 36 CM. COURTESY ROBERT LINDSAY GALLERY, MELBOURNE.

artist's alleged lunge into space from a two-storey building near Paris. Two reproductions exist: one appearing in Klein's newspaper *Dimanche*, and another that emerged later in the Krefeld exhibition catalogue. Discrepancies occur between these two pieces of photographic evidence. In *Dimanche* a cyclist is seen riding along the street onto which Klein

is about to fall. In the catalogue the cyclist does not appear.

It is now known that Klein's leap as pictured in either version is a faked incident. He'd arranged for an altered photograph that cut out the net used to catch him. In the spirit of this event, of the total void created by the lack of evidential truth, Nelson has manu-

factured her own "moment" in history, morphing it together with Klein's.

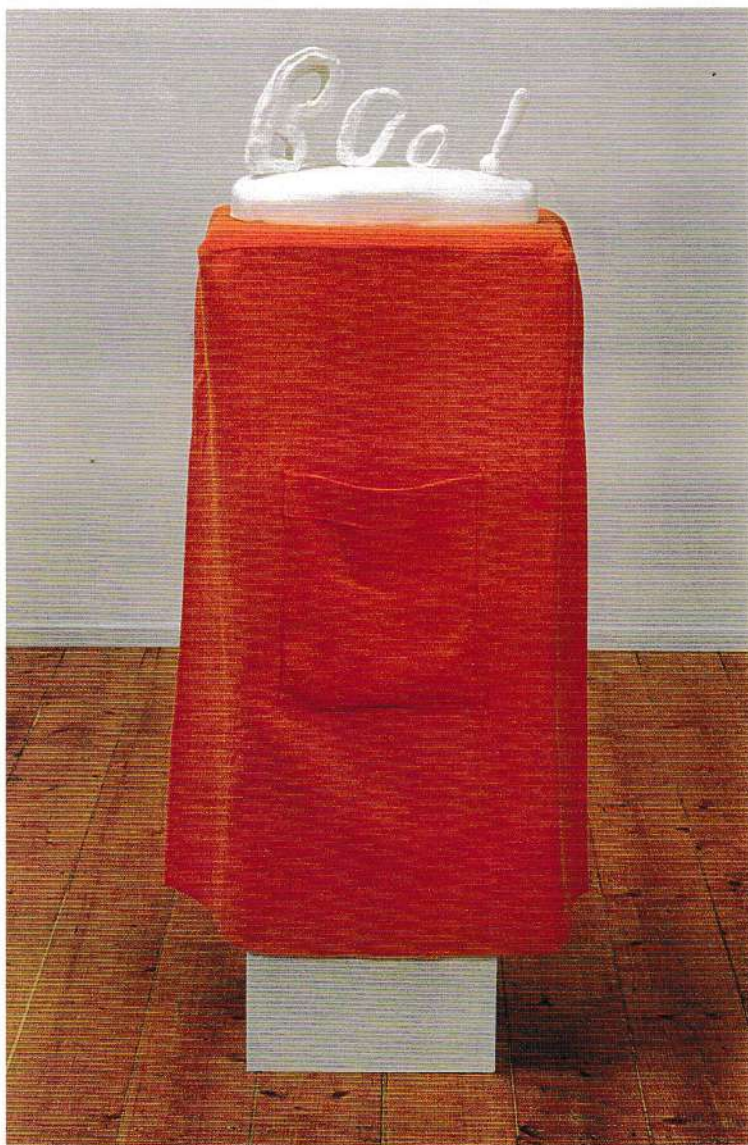
The facsimile pieces of flowerpot represent a material reaction to the performance of Klein. While he is left for posterity—in his photographs, in the heroic midair of his leap—Nelson has completed the incident with the calamity of two smashed pots, which incidentally have been catapulted into the void along with Klein. But unlike Klein, the pots have succumbed to the force of gravitation.

Nelson reassesses here the importance of Klein's leap, which amounts to nothingness as opposed to the somethingness of extant pieces of matter. It is a speculation that turns round on itself constantly. The pots are as nothing in their disintegrated state, yet reconstitute themselves as momentous after the fact.

In a 1993 work, Nelson extruded the word *Oops!* in doughlike plaster and put it on a plinth. *Incident* links up with *Oops!*, and other works like *Boo!* and *Spill*, to continue her project of initiating and then depicting this sense of accidents causing other actions. It is all part of her strategy to deliberately unhinge the expected linearity of events.

It is also an impure history of art. These stark, reductionist works are like white noise, radiating interference patterns across the waves of artistic reception. Like bacteria cells, they form curds and whey in the materials. They swirl around in the atmosphere. They jam up the works.

Because of their appearance, Nelson's objects can be misinterpreted as pristine. But far from being squeaky clean, they can be grubby, even scatological. And just as she has drawn attention to Klein's leap and its illusory fidelity by spilling mud out of her pots onto the terrain of this modernist fable, Nelson has levered the lid off Piero Manzoni's *Artist's Shit* in the 1995 work *Untitled* [see front cover], and laid a long winding white turd on a pedestal for our viewing pleasure. One small poo for mankind, one big whoopsie for Nelson.



BOO! 1994, PLASTER, FELT, PEDESTAL, 122 X 30 X 40 CM. COURTESY ROBERT LINDSAY GALLERY, MELBOURNE.

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