

Raquel Ormella

Work 3

Living in other people's houses / essay by Wayne Tunicliffe



Living in other people's houses 2002

Essay extract from Wayne Tunicliffe, curator, *Bittersweet*, Art Gallery of NSW, 2002

Raquel Ormella uses a more direct form of urban realism to incorporate content, and particularly political content, into her practice. Ormella utilises both the visual language and rhetoric of street protests, left wing politics and protest graffiti. She makes banners, signs, t-shirts, graffiti, videos and zines, which she exhibits and distributes in public contexts as well as in art galleries. They have an amateur workshop aesthetic and also recall the interlocking style and agendas of 1970s political, performance and conceptual art. While her works rehearse the classic issues of left-wing politics – ownership and economics – Ormella inflects them with her own anxieties about making and exhibiting art works - production, distribution and reception - and the vexed issue of political efficacy in art practice.

Entitled *Living in other people's houses*, this project centres on questions of ownership and use, primarily of property and of the conceptual material art works are made from. It has evolved from previous projects and events, including Ormella's contribution to an Artspace exhibition *Temporary Fixtures* and the brief history of the artist run gallery

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Squatspace. As part of the research for a work she made for *Temporary Fixtures*, Ormella interviewed a number of artists who, prior to its redevelopment, had been squatters in the Gunnery building now occupied by Artspace and other arts organisations. One of the artists Ormella interviewed pressured her to use this research to make a documentary rather than an artwork, as a more effective way of representing the history of use and occupation of this site and the political actions that had occurred when it was a squat.

Squatspace, in a pointed word play on Artspace, was an artist run space set up by Lucas Ihlien and Mick Hender in a disused shopfront in the row of empty buildings occupied by squatters on Broadway, Sydney, in 2000. A very public battle ensued with South Sydney Council, who owned the site and continued to manage it until it was taken over by the developers Australand, which generated a vociferous debate over ownership, occupation and the use of real estate in the inner city. The buildings themselves became a forum for protest when their facades were painted with slogans and commentary on the progress of the squatter's battle with the council.

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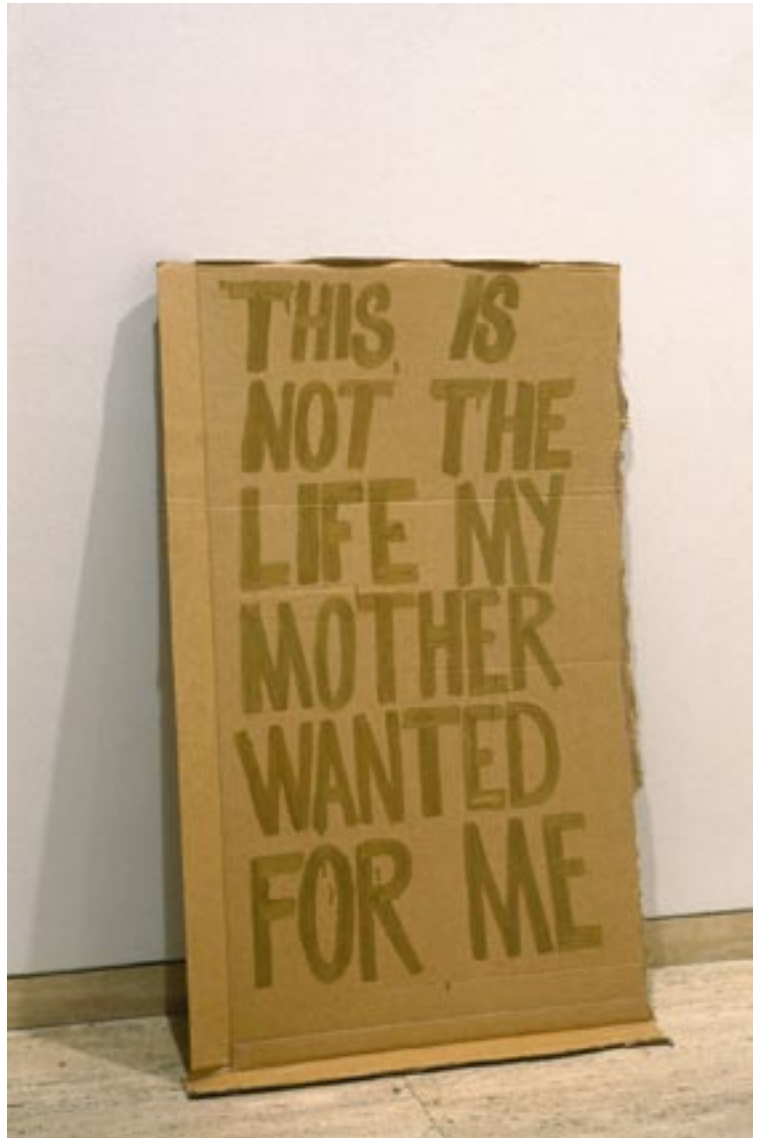
Ormella was associated with Squatspace and the Broadway squats, though not directly as an organiser or occupier. Ormella and Ihlien painted the words 'Brief Utopia' on the front of the building, a slogan which already had a history.

The poignancy of 'Brief Utopia' and its suggestion of optimism and defeat, was an arresting statement. The ambition of Squatspace to provide an affordable and inclusive art venue was admirable and its short life is to be lamented. The question of what art works could be made in response to the life of the squat and what degree of involvement was needed to establish a form of ownership of the experience, informs the works Ormella has either made or has invited other artists and friends to contribute to this exhibition. The artist's anxiety about using this material and who to ask permission from is conveyed in the banner with the text *This would be easier if I was making a documentary*. This uncertainty about efficacy and content animates Ormella's practice, particularly in such a prime piece of real estate as the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

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Other works include a zine Ormella has produced with Ihlien and Hender, which recounts the history of the Brief Utopia graffiti at Broadway and at The Verge, an artist run space in Perth where they had painted it previously and which was also closed due to the site being redeveloped. Other components, including a T-shirt with the slogan 'Undocumented Homeless' and the sign *This is not the life my mother wanted for me*, both personalise and universalise the poverty and career uncertainty many artists experience. On a more irreverent note, another zine is the current issue of *Flaps* by Regina Walter and Ormella. This issue is called 'Nicked' and has stories about their shop lifting experiences. The question as to whether a documentary would be a more effective political record remains unanswered; but it is a fact that this material can form the conceptual source for a provocative exploration of personal and collective social agency and for political agency in art practice.

1. Temporary Fixtures, curated by Jacqueline Phillips, Artspace, Sydney, March 2001. More information on Squatspace follows later in the text.