TYPE: Simone Hine
The Farm, Brisbane, 16 - 17 May 2003

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> *nos vetera instauramus, nova non prodimus*
>   - Erasmus [1]

> *... most suggestive," said Holmes. "It has long been an axiom of mine that the little things are infinitely the most important"*
>   - Arthur Conan Doyle [2]

Type, the latest work from Brisbane artist Simone Hine, is an installation piece composed of six exquisitely handcrafted boxes and their mysterious contents. In one box sits a small screen repeating a close-up image of a typewriter typing; another tiny television shows a shadowy female figure, alone and reverentially carrying one of these boxes across a grassy landscape; she peers down as if fascinated by the contents. One box contains fragments of heavy paper, rough-cut and imprinted with typed text, offering variations on a simple self-reflexive sentence. Another holds tiny hand-painted boards in an impressionistic style that depict a scene echoing the video image of the wandering woman. One is empty. These fragments, held gently in the dark wood of the boxes, are rarefied by their careful enclosure and seem to speak of an infinite importance in 'little things'. Each is steeped with a sense of something sacred. Like a grandfather's watch or a dead mother's engagement ring, the contents are heavy with someone else's significance, their depths ultimately unknown to all but their keeper. They are like personal treasures whose meanings and narratives are elusive to an outsider. For the outsider however, there is almost a voyeuristic pleasure in peering into someone's private effects, and imagining all the possible stories that might lie behind and link them.

Over the continual 'clack' of an old typewriter, a sound that accompanies the work, the artist herself comments on the boxes, "I still feel like I'm carrying them" [3]. So what one could call the 'central scene' - the female figure carefully carrying a box – appears to be the artist herself. *Type* seems then part-performance, or at least, the fragmentary documentation of a performance, installed into the space of the gallery. As an installation it is a deviation from Hine's earlier predominantly performance-based work, however it does contain elements and echoes that are clearly reminiscent of her previous performances. In this way Hine's work reminds one of German artist Joseph Beuys whose artworks and installations were born directly from his performance art, from his 'Actions' as he called them. For both artists, the installations themselves seem to become relics, leftovers and mementos of their performances. What we are left with are specimens, residual representations, and the remaining ephemera of some half-glimpsed drama.

In particular, it is the video element of *Type* which allows this compression of performance and installation. However, the more curious thing about the video technology deployed in *Type* is its intersection with something decidedly organic. Unlike the slick synthetic arrangements of video found in work by artists such as Gary Hill, Hine has her electronic medium nestle amongst surfaces that speak of the human hand and the natural world. The most obvious example of this juxtaposition is the floor of real grass above which the boxes are set. In the usual white cube of a gallery space, it is a strange sensation to have to cross a small field of grass, feeling its living fibres press down under the feet, in order to view the work. The boxes above seem to grow out of the grass. Kyle Weise's essay accompanying the exhibition, points to the boxes "hovering" on plinths - "that most invisible of gallery objects" [4]. But do they hover? On first sight, a preoccupying, perhaps banal, question became: "where are the wires? How do these televisions keep working? Powered by the forces of the boxes themselves? Or perhaps by batteries?" I imagined cables than ran down into the interior of the plinths like roots or veins. Far from invisible, the plinth itself became a mysterious part of the work, feeding the contents of the boxes from the organic matter of the grass below. This organic gesture subtly repeats itself in the hand-painted boards and handcrafted boxes, they diffuse the utterly flat and glowing medium of the television screens. Perhaps 'Type' suggests possibilities of a contemporary co-existence between nature and the digital, an almost cyborgian sense of someplace between the human performance and its mechanical (re)representation.

Simone Hine
Installation view of *Type* 2003
Courtesy of the artist and The Farm
Photo: Simone Hine

There are also hints here of a personal myth-making. The source or story behind these boxes is not offered but they seem to contain teasing possibilities of a narrative. The contents become the elusive specimens from a larger tapestry of story that we cannot read, but are invited to imagine for ourselves and thus participate in. Their enigmatic enclosures recall American artist Joseph Cornell, who produced beautifully contrived boxes which tell the story of his obsessions. For example his *Untitled (Ostend)* is a wooden box containing a broken wineglass, a glass ball, a metal ring, nails and a broken piece of white piping. Like the boxes in *Type*, *Untitled (Ostend)* has an insistent sense of mystery and nostalgia, "a kind of poetic theatre of memory".

As its name suggests, *Type* is also bound up in ideas about words and their reproduction. Weise suggests that *Type* enacts and manipulates the strange "double vision" always required of a reader – that is, that the text itself is visualised, read with the eyes, in tandem with the scene which is invoked by the text and visualised in the mind. In a third reflex, the type describes its own

construction: "A mechanical typewriter imprints words onto a page" [5].

"Standardised print is an important aspect of the conditions for such reading", writes Weise. Yet I have some disagreement here. Does the typewriter really produce what we now think of as 'standardised'? Does it not instead suggest an almost nostalgic air of something past, something before the smooth and easy, totally impersonal, hyper-fast and homogenised printing we now pump out into the world (without a thought or obstruction) through the personal computer and home printer? There seems instead something here which harks back to a time when type was something laborious – and when the machine needed to be carefully and painstakingly negotiated – there was no delete function on these old machines, no 999 levels of undo. A thin metal arm, topped by a single metal character, was struck down through a ribbon of ink to press against a page of paper; mistakes might be disasters, requiring a complete rewrite, or a messy and fiddly application of the white-out bottle. Perhaps the typewriter, rather than being a cipher for our modern condition of utterly 'standardised print', represents an in-between point, a recent past, somewhere between the individual

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idiosyncrasies (Weise points to "unique pictorial qualities") of one's own handwriting and the completely identity-less printing process of the digital age. The 'type' of the typewriter still contains a sense of the contingent, a sense of a time when writing was not so separated from the body or even from the organic processes of chance in nature. Even in the typed fragments of text found in one box, the printing is imprecise and varies, some words and letters darker or sharper than others.

One of the first times a typewriter was mentioned in a fictional work was in the Sherlock Holmes detective story "A Case of Identity". The way Holmes solved the mystery, by identifying an impostor's typewriter, seems to support this argument for the less than 'standardised' nature of the typewriter's printing:

> "It is a curious thing," remarked Holmes, "that a typewriter has really quite as much individuality as a man's handwriting. Unless they are quite new, no two of them write exactly alike. Some letters get more worn than others, and some wear only on one side . . . in this note . . . in every case there is some little slurring over of the 'e,' and a slight defect in the tail of the 'r.' There are fourteen other characteristics, but those are the more obvious ... I think of writing another little monograph some of these days on the typewriter and its relation to crime". [6]

Weise's essay, citing Freidrich Kittler's ideas about type, suggests that writing, after the typewriter, "can no longer be seen as the expression of an individual soul". Weise claims that language conveyed through the typewriter causes a "separation of language from the controlling 'expression' of the author". Yet what is it about the typewriter itself that causes this? Languages and words are always slippery things, always shying away from authorial control, even if they have the merely momentary and un-mechanical existence of conversation and spoken words. One could deny the possibility of any communicable meaning, claiming that the intention behind a work cannot be known and that each reading of a text is a re-creation of it. In fact, with Holmes' monograph handy, we may instead be able to capture the 'individual souls' of the typewriters themselves.

1. "we restore old things, we do not produce new ones"
2. Conan Doyle, Arthur (1891) 'A Case of Identity'. Originally published in *'The Strand'* magazine for September, 1891.
3. In conversation with the artist, May 2003.
4. Catalogue Essay: Weise, Kyle (May 2003) *Type*, ex. cat. The Farm: Brisbane.
5. Printed words included in the installation.
6. Conan Doyle, Arthur (1891) "A Case of Identity". Originally published in *'The Strand'* magazine for September, 1891.