

Sandra Bridie, b. 1968.

Interpolation #7:

Stephen Bram,

Adjacent Space,

August 1995

(a fiction)

1996

Interview with Sandra Bridie by B. S. Hope
August 1995

B. S. Hope: Sandra, could you describe the premise of your exhibition, which will take place in Adjacent Space from 14 August 1995 to 25 August 1995?

Sandra Bridie: ... Sorry, my mind just went blank. Could we turn off the tape recorder and start again?

... Take three! Sandra, could you describe the premise of the work which will be seen in this space?

OK. What I do is to interpolate into the work history of my peers. It's very complicated, but that's what I do. And this piece is an interpolation into the work of Stephen Bram.

I'm confused already! What's an interpolator?

I'll use my dictionary here, hold on [*finds the word in the dictionary*]; '2. To alter or enlarge (a book or writing) by inserting new matter: to tamper with by inserting new or foreign matter, 3. To introduce (words or passages) into a pre-existing writing, *esp.* to insert (spurious matter) in a genuine work without note or warning'. OK, that's 'interpolate', but under 'interpolation' there's a bit more; '3. The action of introducing or inserting among other things or between the members of any series b. *math* the process of inserting in a series an intermediate number or quantity ascertained by calculation from those already known'. And while we are looking at definitions, an interloper is similar, but more dastardly; 'one who thrusts himself into any position or affair, which others consider as pertaining solely to themselves'. So to interpolate is a very dicey activity.

Which all sounds pretty abstract, so let's get more concrete. What's the nature of the project Interpolation #7: Stephen Bram?

You know the work of Stephen Bram, don't you? Well, my history with him goes back about ten years, socially as well as occasionally exhibiting with him in various artist-run spaces like this one. Stephen is one of my peers and therefore has the credentials to be the subject of an interpolation. To cut a long story short, although I know Stephen better than many of the artists who have been subjects of my interpolations, it took me a long time to ask him if he would mind me interpolating into his practice. I was concerned about how it might go, as in recent interpolations a series of issues have manifested themselves; let's call them miscommunications. Anyway, they have resulted in an unhappy relationship between certain artists/subjects of interpolations and me. Confusion or miscommunication is, it seems, part of the territory under investigation, but it has become quite nasty on a couple of occasions of late, and I didn't want to betray Stephen's trust in any way. Considering this – and Stephen was familiar with these examples – I thought he might be disinclined to participate, but when I asked him he seemed quite happy to see how an interpolation into his work might play out.

Normally with an interpolation what I do is look at the exhibiting history or CV of an artist and try to imagine an exhibition which has not been executed, one that could possibly exist within the gaps of the information the artist has given me. I ask the artist questions like 'are there any jottings about work you haven't gotten around to doing, or ideas you thought of at midnight, flashes that don't bear up to scrutiny in daylight? Is there work that has not been completed, that you have set aside? Is there a trajectory in your work which you haven't followed?', these sorts of things.

I asked Stephen all of this, but he had another idea. His idea was almost what I would call an extrapolation, or future work, except that it does exist within his body of work – even if it is currently just one, tentative exploration. Stephen wanted me to pursue a line of enquiry using the sphere as support. Until recently he had produced

two-dimensional works, paintings, drawings etc., but lately he has been making three-dimensional structures, or floor pieces, as he calls them.

The interpolation, which will be seen in *Adjacent Space*, is kind of a projection into the immediate future. Stephen himself has made just one of these spherical works so far, but he sees himself making more of them in the future. He asked that I make some of the spheres under his instructions, and that's what I did. I got some polystyrene balls from a craft shop, the kind you make Christmas decorations out of. I stuck pins in a couple of imaginary vanishing points and tied cotton around the circumference of the sphere, attaching it to the pinheads. With the different sets of vanishing points connected by the cotton, there was an irregular grid effect, which is not dissimilar to the underlying structure of Stephen's paintings. I then painted the surface, breaking it up into configurations modelled on Stephen's work, painting in a typical palette of murky greens, browns, creams, black and white. When Stephen saw the result, he said that the spheres were too perfectly executed, a bit neat – I think he meant 'a bit neat' to be his

How are these works going to be installed in Adjacent Space? I know normally you do not show the actual objects that you have made, but rather what you call 'proxies'; life-size photographic reproductions of the work installed in a manner closely in tune with the exhibiting style of the model artist.

Luckily my answer is going to be different to your question! Yes, here is a change for both Stephen and myself I think – at his suggestion, I might add. OK, so rather than me exhibiting the 'proxies', or life-size photos of single objects hung around the gallery 'à la whoever', instead I will be showing an installation of the actual spheres hung in *Adjacent Space*. The spheres will be suspended from the roof at irregular intervals around the space.

I was wondering why formerly you chose only to photograph the objects that you make, why you chose to present the proxies, whereas now you are choosing to show the actual objects. Could you please answer the following questions: why was it

so important to exhibit reproductions? And why is it you can now show the actual interpolated object?

In my case, it's all clarifying or simplifying things by degrees, isn't it? I am so intent on confounding things.

To answer the first part of your question, it has always been crucial that my work is not mistaken as an original by the signature artist. Do you understand? I have never wanted the work to function as a hoax, to take the viewer in. This at least is my intention. I know, however, that many people do in fact mistake them as by the model artist, but these people do not read the titles of my works! As you can see, it's always this very fine line I am treading, but that's the game I choose to play. By using photographs, reproducing an image of the art object, I intended to create a distance for the viewer to take in my activity as interpolator, the photo providing a screen, or distance, so there wouldn't be the distraction of the work being viewed as an original aesthetic object made by the artist. By using photographs I hoped there would be at least two things working to inform the viewer that the work was not to be mistaken as an original by the signature artist: the fact that my works were reproduced images of objects made 'after' someone, and my titles – for instance *Proxy 1, B. S. Hope*, etc. – added to the title of the whole exhibition, *Sandra Bridie: Interpolation #* (whoever).

As a result, with the reproduced works my wish to avoid being misinterpreted was enforced in so many ways I was in danger of labouring the point, and instructing the viewer too closely on how to perceive the work. Hopefully in this Stephen Bram interpolation, by using installation rather than photo documentation I have counteracted that. There is one less announcement of my intentions, and you can look at the pieces as aesthetic objects if you wish. And why not? You can walk around them and enjoy a real experience of assimilated artworks! Real proxies, and not reproduced images of proxies. At this stage, I'm not particularly interested in finding out whether this step I've taken is a step forward or a retrograde one.

What sort of work did you do prior to defining yourself as an interpolator?

It's been a very natural progression. When I was at art school in the early '80s my work resembled (or more precisely imitated) that of the students around me. I don't think I was especially influenced by what I saw in galleries or art magazines and stuff. When I got to my last year, I began reviewing my last three years' output and it was only then that I realised I had in fact been mimicking the paintings and subject matter of the students whose studios were in close proximity to me. Each body of work that I executed functioned almost as an installation of another person's work. I would fill up my studio with paintings 'after' a particular student. Once my studio contained a cohesive body of this work, I would flounder about what to do next, be in a state of malaise or depression for two or so weeks. I couldn't continue. All that was left for me to do at this stage was to pull the work down, empty the space, and look around again for inspiration And then the cycle would begin again, without my realising it; I would gradually fill my space once more with imitations of another student's work.

When I finally saw this fact clearly, it was like a moment of enlightenment. You see, all this time I thought I was creating original works out of the void. That's what I thought these regular bouts of depletion or malaise were about. Once I realised that the work I was making was in fact a selective imitation of the work of others, it defined the area of my endeavour most clearly. It was very comforting to discover this, and it gave me a strategy for a whole body of work, which paradoxically functioned conceptually in opposition to the students whose work I was assimilating. Well, in opposition at least to the notion of originality still so highly prized in art schools. When I left art school my project was set, I would consciously recreate in the style of my peers, but I had to find the gaps in their oeuvres, and that's how the idea of interpolation came about.

Generally, what is the frequency of your involvement with the artist/originator?

Hmm, generally it depends.

Well, specifically, what was the level of your involvement with Stephen Bram for this project?

I presumed at the outset that it would be pretty minimal, that he would just give me initial instructions, and I would take it from there. I never want to pressure an involvement beyond what the model artist is willing to offer. But Stephen seemed content to work with me constructing the project at most stages as we went along. For instance, he suggested where to buy the spheres; he stipulated that I use an initial coat of gesso on the polystyrene balls; to use cotton threaded around pins stuck into the balls to demarcate the sections to be painted, and so on. The process for this interpolation turned out to be more of a collaboration, I guess, though I don't like to use that term – perhaps more like me working under instruction from a supervisor.

Stephen would suggest alterations, or ways he might have done things, and I would take this on board, or not. My understanding of his process was limited – I'm not the mathematician he is, my interpretation of his work was mostly informed by looking at his paintings, the works that I have of his in my house. I know Stephen quite well, so our discourse had this natural pace. With other model artists whom I know less well I am happy to go with that degree of ignorance, to make mistakes, taking off from just one aspect of their work. I sometimes deliberately misconstrue aspects of the model work, make the installation crappy if the work is usually seamless, or vice-versa.

How have other interpolations functioned – is the strategy always the same?

I assume a few different postures when gleaning information for the work I am to do. I shall try to think of appropriate titles for my methods for the sake of this interview. For example: 'rummaging'; I find incomplete work or work that has been set aside in the artist's studio or storage space, and go through the available material to ascertain the gaps in the 'collection', so to speak. I make notes toward ideas, partial installation shots, and then I pad out the work

from the premise of these fragments. All this is done with the artist's permission, of course. 'Inhabiting'; this is another approach where I inhabit the artist's studio for a set period and pick up the threads of their practice from what the artist leaves there. 'Detective work' is like a game in which the artist leaves me clues, or very little to go on, so I must sketch out an installation from my memory of their work based on the snippets they leave for me. Sometimes, as with the Stephen project, it's very straightforward. We just sat down and talked about what we would do, and met from time to time to discuss progress.

Do you always invite other artists to be interpolated? Has anyone proposed an interpolation into their work?

So far I've invited artists, though I am open to propositions from artists for interpolations.

Let's talk about the problematics of your work, which I think you consciously set up. For example, have you had any conflicts with the originator artist, where they felt you stepped over the line?

Well yes, and I don't wish to talk about it, except to say that I consciously set up the problematics between original and copy and originator and assimilator. These are questions of ownership of a product, artistic property. This must be very finely negotiated, the model artist needs to be consulted every step along the way – twice, otherwise misunderstandings do arise. So I try to do this consultation as much as I can.

To date I've only had two conflicts, these are recent, but they have been doozies! They were so unpleasant that at one stage I considered taking up another vocation! No, not seriously, but I did consider working in a different mode. Fortunately, this piece, *Stephen Bram Interpolation #7*, was pleasurable to conceive and execute, and Stephen and I did not fight.

How many more of these interpolations do you foresee yourself doing?

I foresee one more project in this series, another interpolation where I exhibit the actual objects and not photos of them, and then I will close the chapter on 'Sandra Bridie, Interpolator'.

Where do you show the interpolations?

I exhibit works as much as possible in the types of spaces the model artist shows in, ranging from commercial galleries to outdoors; city spaces; artist-run spaces (obviously); even installing work in people's bathrooms.

I'm interested in your relationship to the originator's gallery in particular. Have there been any objections to you showing imitations in a successful commercial gallery?

This is another matter, which needs fine handling. Where I exhibit the works is based on discussions with the artist. If we decide that the work can be shown in a commercial space, then together we approach the artist's dealer and propose the exhibition. This has been done three times, each time the director has been very cooperative and interested and helpful when it came to setting the work up in their gallery.

In financial terms, what is the value of your work? Is the value gauged in relation to the that of the original artist's work? What agreement have you reached regarding sales of the works?

In Stephen's case, if any works sell we'll split the money 50–50 after his dealer takes her percentage. In the case of the photographed 'proxy' works it was more complicated to assess who owned what part of the reproduction, should that sell. I think I settled on 80 percent to me and 20 percent to the originator on the few occasions work has sold.

Aesthetically, you can only enter the work at a certain level, given the limits in time on your familiarising yourself with another artist's process and content; do you see this as a disadvantage?

Do you? As I have been trying to make clear, my intention is not to make an object that has the depth or resonances of the original, I am not competing with that. My work is with resemblances; it does not bear close scrutiny, even more so when the work only had to be *made to look like* another's work when photographed. I am not a forger wishing to confound the connoisseurs. My project is about – what? Relationships I guess; relationships between an original object and a copied one, relationships between an artist who makes original objects and one who copies those objects. Something that is not often accounted for is the interaction, the conversations that go on between me and another artist behind the work you see. The objects I make are not the result of a lifelong preoccupation; they result from a superficial apprehension of the look of an object, and an understanding of the subject matter from where I stand. I do not try to internalise the thought processes of the originator. If I did the process would be even more impossible than it already is.

This is an insidious occupation in a way, isn't it? What is it, exactly, that interests you in deliberately imitating other people's work?

I would hope that I have already answered this question. OK, a different tack I suppose what interests me is the point of juncture between original and copy, what are the differences?

Have you ever had anyone do work that resembled your own? I think it is very interesting when two people arrive at the same point via different routes, and then their paths diverge once more. What was it that they had in common? What was it that made the work look identical when clearly it was not? I ask the artists I work with to talk to me in general terms about how their work came about, and I compare what they have to say with my presumptions about how their work got to be how it is. My presumptions, of course, are based on what experiences I bring to their work. Sometimes my presumptions coincide with how the work actually came about, though of course very often that's not the case. I think it's also a kind of formal thing; the idea of a point, a juncture, a moment of coincidence, coming from divergence, returning to that, but at one

point a thing can look identical to another. Does that make any sense at all?

It might when I come around to transcribing this interview, but you lost me when you were saying all that just now.

Your work has been savaged by certain critics claiming that it is merely 'post-modern posturing, ... shallow and vacuous reproduction', or – and I like this one – 'a chameleon of the contemporary'. What is your answer to these critics?

They can think what they like. I think the one about being a chameleon is a very apt description of my process, that aspect of the proximity I have to the artists I interpolate. I operate within a very local context, at art school unconsciously, with those who shared walls with my studio, and now consciously with my peer group. So the idea of the chameleon changing colour according to its surroundings is good. As to the rest of what those savage critics say, I think it's a bit unkind.

Are there any parallels to your endeavour in other art forms?

I've been wondering about that one. I don't know, I suppose the cover version; the homage is done 'after' an historical model by a 'master'. This project has similarities to and is antithetical to that. I'm not sure if I am imagining this, but I had an idea that there exists in classical music (I have absolutely no expertise in this area) certain space given in a concerto or whatever where the soloist can improvise upon the main themes in that piece. Do you know about this? No? Maybe I made it up; anyway, if such a thing did exist my endeavour would have parallels with that.

Someone said – I can't remember who – that there are parallels in the nature of your position to that of the parasite. A parasite finds an area to inhabit another creature, then works its way in. Can the concept of the parasite then be inverted somehow? Rather than you assimilating into the oeuvres of others, are you in fact inserting your work into theirs – changing their work from the inside?

[Pause] I suppose so. Well, no, I don't know how much others' work has changed due to my relationship to it. Although perhaps sometimes I am a protagonist to play out possibilities that the original artist is not ready to put their name to. For example (I don't know if this is answering your question, but anyway ...), take Stephen's work; he usually exhibits it in regular sequence at eye level along a wall. Normally there are a limited number of works, in small series. For this piece, he asked me to exhibit the works in irregular fashion, at uneven height, in the round. So for him in this work I was actually trying something that was experimental, so he could assess the results. Now whether he wishes to pick up on anything I tried out here is up to him. Someone likened my activity also to that of a research assistant, which is a very benign way of looking at it, more benign than likening it to a parasite.

What would you say is the value of your work; could you broadly characterise the qualities of your work?

My work is mapping out a trace of relationships with other artists in a particular place or places; it has a very particular sense of locality about it, and sense of time. Currently my work is defined by the fact that I am a thirty-year-old practising artist in Melbourne in the 1990s. It can also be seen as a series of portraits of artists. This mode of work alters my outlook on the artist through assimilation, as does the homage. Sometimes my 'interference' has altered the direction of the signature artist's work, though not often.

Shall we finish here?

Yeah.

With grateful acknowledgement of Stephen Bram

ADJACENT SPACE

NO.8

SANDRA BRIDIE

INTERPOLATION #7: STEPHEN BRAM

INTERPOLATION; inserting in a series an intermediate number or quantity ascertained by calculation from those already known.

Bridie's project is to interpolate into the artistic biographies of her peers in Melbourne. In **INTERPOLATION #7: STEPHEN BRAM** Bridie materializes work 'after' colleague Stephen Bram, producing an installation of suspended spherical works.

INTERPOLATION SERIES 1-8 was devised in 1987 when Bridie began asking some of her peers to participate in interpolations into their work, "what I do is, look at the exhibiting history or CV of an artist and try to imagine an exhibition which has not been executed that could possibly exist between the gaps of information the artist has given me"

INTERPOLATION #7: STEPHEN BRAM broadens Bridie's project in two ways. Bridie usually interpolates back into the exhibiting history of her subject whereas in the work seen here, Bram suggested that Bridie pursue an inquiry into works of his which don't yet exist except for one tentative piece. Bridie sees this interpolation as "more like an extrapolation or future work", and her and Bram's roles akin to that of research assistant to supervisor. This work also differs in the final object, what Bridie calls her 'proxies', which until now have been lifesize photographs of single pieces made 'after' the signature/model artist. The BRAM 'proxies' extend spatially to include larger details of the work installed a week ago in **ADJACENT SPACE**.

Our viewing experience oscillates between a new sense of depth on the one hand, and a recognition of the mirroring effect of seeing a photographic reproduction of an installation in **ADJACENT SPACE**, the same space that we now stand in.

B. S. Hope

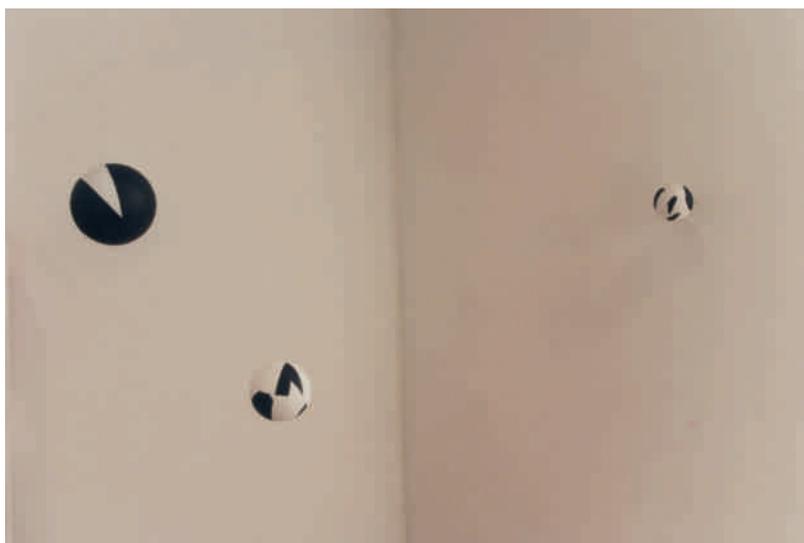
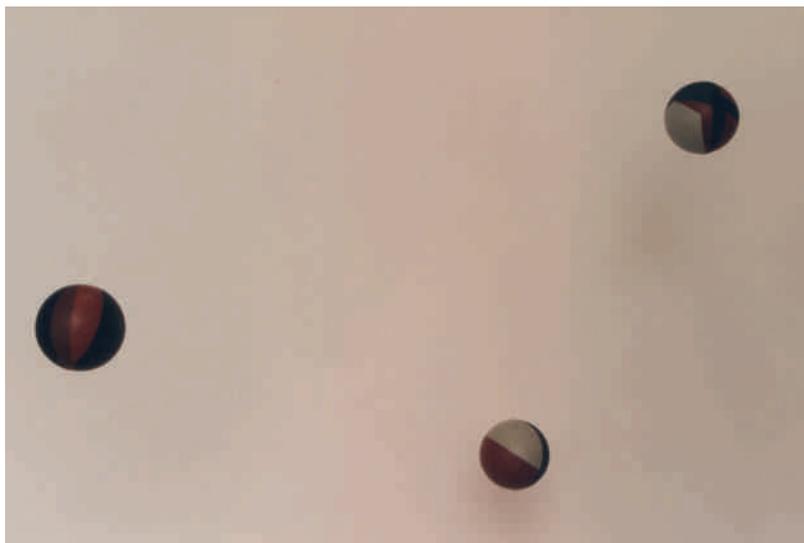
Didactic panel from exhibition at Adjacent Space, 1995

Digital print on paper, 20 x 30cm, 1996



Proxy installation A, Stephen Bram, untitled, 1995
C-type photograph, 51 x 34.5cm, 1996

Proxy installation B, Stephen Bram, untitled, 1995
C-type photograph, 51 x 34.5cm, 1996



Proxy installation C, Stephen Bram, untitled, 1995
C-type photograph, 51 x 34.5cm, 1996

Proxy installation D, Stephen Bram, untitled, 1995
C-type photograph, 51 x 34.5cm, 1996



Proxy installation E, StephenBram, untitled, 1995
C-type photograph, 51 x 34.5cm, 1996

Proxy installation F, Stephen Bram, untitled, 1995
C-type photograph, 51 x 34.5cm, 1996