

JULIA McINERNEY, *Archipelago*

by Helen Hughes

An archipelago describes a cluster of islands across a stretch of sea. Initially coined to describe the islands of the Aegean Sea, from the Greek *arkhi* (chief, principal) and *pelagos* (sea), the word became generalised in the English language to describe any sea containing numerous islands from around the beginning of the seventeenth century.

For French curator and critic Nicolas Bourriaud, the archipelago is closely related to the terms ‘cluster’ and ‘constellation’. For his 2009 Tate Triennial *Altermodern*, he used the concept of the archipelago to describe the co-existence and relative independence of the world’s cultures. He turned to the writings of the twentieth-century European émigré, W.G. Sebald, and his notion of wanderings or excursions, to connect these individual points on the world’s map—adapting them to navigate the globalised conditions of the contemporary.

Writing several years later in 2013, the British philosopher and art historian Peter Osborne sketched a similar proposition in his attempt to describe the essential qualities of contemporary art (which he periodises as beginning in the late 1960s and stretching up to the present moment). Though he does not use the word ‘archipelago’—opting instead for the interplay between the fragment (what we might call the island) and the whole (the archipelago)—Osborne’s theory proposes a particular ontology for contemporary artworks. Extending Robert Smithson’s notion of the site/non-site relationship, Osborne argues that one artwork, or what he calls one instantiation, *stands in* for a much larger, potentially invisible network of artworks and events that are dispersed across time and place. For viewers of such artworks, our perception of a single instantiation is conditioned by our understanding of its being a fragment—at once inherently partial, yet also symbolic of the complete. Basing his understanding of the fragment on the Jena Romanticists’ definition of the term, he explains:

On the one hand, [the fragment] epitomizes self-consciousness of the finitude or partiality of knowledge: it is not only self-enclosed but self-enclosing—a self-limiting form, conscious of its incompleteness, yet nonetheless also relatively self-sufficient. On the other hand, constructed from the systematic *standpoint* of its negative relation to the idea of a system (totality or lack of limitation), it carries the *idea* of totality within itself, both negatively, conceptually, and—this is the important bit—positively, in its figural or formal self-sufficiency, its independence from other fragments.¹

An understanding of the relationship between the fragment and the whole, the island and the archipelago, and how it might be understood in regard to both the ontology of the artwork and its positionality in the globalised, contemporary art world can help orient us towards this new body of sculptural works by Adelaide-based artist Julia McInerney presented here under the exhibition title *Archipelago*.

The exhibition is comprised of five artworks made up of a total of seventeen (indiscreet) sculptural objects placed in the two spaces of GAGPROJECTS. Together these objects choreograph the viewer’s walk through the space. Of these five artworks, two (*The Walk* and *Leaves*, both 2017) are made up of networks of numerous smaller objects that are dispersed throughout the space. Their interconnectedness is signalled both by their shared formal properties and their umbrella titles. The overall exhibition’s interconnectedness, on the other hand, is signalled by a sculptural cue that greets viewers at the gallery’s entry vestibule: here, a readymade, silver Rimowa briefcase that has been permanently sealed by a locksmith sits on the floor, waiting for its owner to pick it up and keep moving. Titled *The Arrival* 2017, it marks the beginning (and end) of our walk through the space and between the various nodes of McInerney’s sculptural installation. It is a metonym of circulation throughout the space.

In McInerney’s archipelago, this peripateticism—or act of walking—is not visualised through the literary prism of Sebald’s wanderings or excursions as it was for Bourriaud, but rather through the much stranger and less well-known writings of the twentieth-century Swiss author Robert Walser. (Though it should not surprise us that Walser was a major influence on Sebald, who memorably referred to him as the ‘clairvoyant of the small’.) Walser’s idiosyncratic writings—and his literary and philosophical sensibility more generally—have maintained a deep impact on McInerney’s sculptural practice since she produced her *Instrument for Robert Walser (a brass bell melted down and recast into a single beam, raised, held in a vertical position, and released)* in 2016. This work referenced a walk cut short in one of the many walks that profoundly structure Walser’s stories. Thus in McInerney’s archipelago, we begin to walk, and think about walking. And it begins to feel as though the best vantage point for perceiving these sculptures is a moving one.

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Travelling past the Rimowa suitcase and into the main space, the nine component parts of *Leaves* are glimpsed jotted around the gallery's floor. These flat, low-lying sculptures are executed in numerous different shapes referencing Walser's idiosyncratic 'microscripts' or writings from the 'Pencil Zone'. These microscripts reference a body of work that Walser produced whilst recovering from a nervous breakdown in Waldau sanatorium; he wrote the texts in microscopic handwriting (sometimes encoded) on tiny scraps of paper, arranging the words perfectly in geometric clusters on the otherwise blank page—almost like concrete poetry. McInerney's sculptures are made of sand-cast aluminium mixed with fragments of a second melted-down Rimowa suitcase (like the one we just passed at the door), and are covered with a black enamel. These flat sculptures are at once troughs or trays, desktops (complete with inkwells—filled with opaque, black squid ink), and a page (or leaf) from a book. Their titles are derived from numerous Walser texts—some microscripts, some novels—that each suggests continuous movement: *Softly, softly walked*; *Dear gentle roads*; *Slowly onward*; *Distance upon distance*; and *Everything, everything And here the walk ended*. Its overall title, *Leaves*, may suggest a final or departing movement.

The theme of walking in Walser's oeuvre is notably explored in his 1917 novella *The Walk*, which chronicles the largely aimless wanderings of a first-person narrator around a town and its countryside. Here, the gesture of walking becomes a means for thinking and generating literary observations for the narrator, who is also a writer, much like for the book's author himself. The narrator of *The Walk* explains: 'Without walking, I would be dead, and would have long since been forced to abandon my profession, which I love passionately.' Walser was renowned for taking long, regular walks—and in fact was found dead, on Christmas day in 1956, lying in the snow having suffered a heart attack on one of his walks, strangely echoing a scene from his much earlier 1907 novel *The Tanners*. (Both this fictional and final walk are referenced in McInerney's earlier *Instrument for Walser*.)

McInerney has created a body of work specifically named after Walser's *The Walk* for *Archipelago*. It is a suite of five sculptures—two pairs, and one singular piece—each a concrete plinth supporting a slowly spinning glass lens. Each sculpture's individual title has been derived from passages located towards the end of Walser's *The Walk*. In each pair of sculptures, one lens is concave and spins clockwise, and the other convex and spins counter-clockwise—alternately pushing the light and thus the image captured through the lens closer to and further away from the viewer. The lenses send the light travelling. In the fifth, single work, the optical lens is perfectly flat—neither concave nor convex. These lens works may be read as a complement to *Leaves*: magnifying glasses to read the microscopically small writings from the 'Pencil Zone'.

McInerney's exhibition takes its title from the smallest and, perhaps, most subtle work in the show. *Archipelago* 2017 is a little cast of a mould for three fishing sinkers executed in coconut oil—the mercurial material that sets in a solid, opaque white form at temperatures below 24 degrees Celsius, and melts into a transparent liquid substance at temperatures above. While the scent of coconut oil may connote oasis-like, island life and archipelagos literally, as a highly elusive and changeable sculptural material it also suggests unattainability—or ungraspability. Indeed if we were to try to hold the sculpture in our hands, it would quickly lose its form, softening before melting into a liquid. It can only retain its stable form in the cool, climate-controlled confines of the gallery, where it is almost invisible: white on a white wall.

Walser once said of his work that:

My prose pieces are, to my mind, nothing more nor less than parts of a long, plotless, realistic story. For me, the sketches I produce now and then are shortish or longish chapters of a novel. The novel I am constantly writing is always the same one, and might be described as a variously sliced-up or torn-apart book of myself.ⁱⁱ

The island, the fragment, the archipelago, the whole. Like Walser's total literary project, McInerney's new body of sculptures in *Archipelago* negotiates this relationship between one and infinity. Each time they invite our scrutiny, they simultaneously seem to push our attention away and onto the broader body of work or onto the exhibition as a whole. This dynamic is perhaps best captured in the spinning lenses of *The Walk* that invite us to look through them, only to distort our vision and ultimately send it travelling to other parts of the show. In this way, McInerney's work keeps us moving—physically and mentally.

ⁱ Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or not at all: Philosophy of contemporary art*, London: Verso, 2013, pp. 59–60.

ⁱⁱ Robert Walser, 'Eine Art Erzählung', cited in George Fragopoulos, 'The Walk by Robert Walser', *Quarterly Conversation*, Issue 29, 3 September 2012, <http://quarterlyconversation.com/the-walk-by-robert-walser>, accessed 30 July 2017.