

PAIGE ALDERDICE & SHANNON LYONS: STORE

'Store' is a new, site-specific work by Paige Alderdice and Shannon Lyons. It functions as a viewing platform into a concealed room where ceiling tiles that once spanned the central space are now stacked. Amongst from the piles are other building materials and artefacts from the former Men's department that closed more than 10 years ago. The viewing room, lit with fluorescent tubes, presents a kind of detached safety that rests tentatively on your faith in a fresh coat of paint.

The Basement and Infinity

What happens to a basement when a building is demolished? First the ceiling falls in.

The fictional poet Carlos Argentino couldn't allow his ancestral home to be torn down because he needed access to the basement cellar. In the cellar was the Aleph, an occurrence of infinity: "the only place on earth where all places are – seen from every angle, each standing clear, without any confusion or blending."¹ You can look into the aleph and witness any sight in the universe; mundane activity of distant strangers; words on the pages of closed books; discrete lunar craters; your own blood flow. It is the point where all points converge.

First a glass of pseudo-cognac, and then down you dive into the cellar. Let me warn you, you'll have to lie flat on your back. Total darkness, total immobility, and a certain ocular adjustment will also be necessary. From the floor, you must focus your eyes on the nineteenth step. Once I leave you, I'll lower the trapdoor and you'll be quite alone. You needn't fear the rodents very much – though I know you will. In a minute or two, you'll see the Aleph – the microcosm of the alchemists and Kabbalists, our true proverbial friend, the multum in parvo!

As is common with magical phenomena, it's not as simple as locating the aleph and staring into it. A ritual is required. Here, the basement is not just a setting, the ritual is dependant on the features of the room. The vantage point is so precisely aligned with the floor, that if you rested your head on a pillow your eyes would be too far from the ground and the the Aleph would be invisible. The Aleph is less a point in space – although it is still that – than a spell you cast between architecture and your body.

And basements are well poised for this kind of discovery. They are dark and poorly ventilated, a common setting for suspect activity. Their role as the subconscious of the multistorey home is well documented. In Australia, basements are such a rare architectural feature, that their resonance seems to have more to do with film tropes than with experience. On a family road trip into the remote North West, a bartender offered to show us a ghost. He opened up a trapdoor beneath tiled carpet, and my parents, my brother and me, climbed down a ladder into the dark. The limestone basement was empty except for a kangaroo skeleton with an Akubra hat on.

The existence of Argentino's Aleph is as precarious as the ghost in those marsupial bones. Jorge Luis Borges, the Aleph's narrator and author, believed Argentino was going mad, that he was plotting to kill Borges and bury his body in the cellar. Even after Borges has witnessed the Aleph his revenge is to violently ignore it. The house is demolished and the Aleph in the basement is lost.

When a building is demolished the ceiling falls in, and then the basement swallows the structure back into the earth. Anything that isn't removed is buried. While some artefacts remain to be uncovered – a silicon swimming cap, a pair of Nike shoes – others, like the aleph, rely on a co-presence of architecture and inhabitants that is unlikely to repeated.



◆ The new Fremantle shopping complex (seen above) bounded by Queen, Henderson, William and Newman-sts is now taking shape. Target date for completion of the project is

A postscript for the Borges short story allows for the possibility of other Alephs. One example is from True History, possibly the first European fiction about about space travel, and alien lifeforms. The narrator discovers a mirror on the moon in which you can see all activity on earth reflected. Another, a column in the mosque of Ar in Cairo which contains the entire universe. Of course you can't see it, but you can place your ear on the column and after a moment perceive its busy hum. Maybe we can allow for an infinity described in ceiling tiles.

Jack Wansbrough, exhibition curator

1. Jorge Luis Borges, El Aleph, 1945. Translation by Norman Thomas Di Giovanni in collaboration with the author.

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