

*Boundaries of Beige*  
MARZENA TOPKA

9 August - 20 September 2014

FREMANTLE ARTS CENTRE



## FOREWORD

*Boundaries of Beige* at Fremantle Arts Centre is a contemporary textile installation, a rigorous body of work, bringing together large and small scale textile works, sculptural and hanging pieces and large projection video works. The exhibition as a whole offers an opportunity to explore ideas of day to day organisational structures, which paradoxically offer us both frustration and a key to mapping our lives.

Its central piece is an ambitious cubed hanging work that spans the formidable distance of the largest of FAC's gallery spaces. The work was conceived of and initiated by Marzena and completed with the help of volunteers through studio time in FAC's Artist in Residence program. As with all the work in *Boundaries of Beige* this central piece evokes a fluid barrier, one instructing our movement and regulating our bodies, but also one that eventually allows passage through its own porosity.

Marzena Topka's *Boundaries of Beige* is the culmination of many hours working material and dwelling over the video camera in her Artsource studio in East Perth and has been conceived with the help of development funding from the Department of Culture and the Arts.

Dr Ric Spencer  
Curator, Fremantle Arts Centre



## BOUNDARIES OF BEIGE

Beige defines a range of light brown or yellowish tints and is considered a neutral colour without distinctive traits. As an unremarkable hue, often beige's primary function is to create balance or calm within its surroundings. When placed alongside other colours this anaemic hue is a chameleon able to radiate the warmer or cooler tones of its companions: a colour shifter capable of penetrating the borders of saturated chromas. Yet its neutrality, which enables it to steal the chi of other colours, is also its greatest limitation. For in the case of beige, even this exceptional transformation cannot elevate its status, rather it only serves to expose it as a phony in a world of colour.

A sense of distrust, derived from the colour beige's neutrality, has seeped into our collective conscience. Beige's neutrality is, for all intents and purposes, not neutral. Roland Barthes wrote in *The Neutral* that it, 'doesn't refer to "impressions" of grayness, of "neutrality," of indifference. The Neutral ... can refer to intense, strong, unprecedented states' (Barthes 1978, 7). In this context, he implied that the neutral signifies a unique state whose meaning is never unaligned. Similarly, beige's neutral characteristics are not meaningless but carry the burden of adverse implications drawn from a perception that it is somehow deceptive. In our current vernacular, this conviction exceeds the perimeters of colour and is now applicable to any person, place or thing. As a reference to a person, its most common urban iteration, beige's innocuous tones are used pejoratively to typecast an individual as homogeneous, non-idiosyncratic or neutral. In other words, a beige person lacks his or her own style or personality, somebody who hangs in a pack and feeds off the life or eccentricities of others. And in a world where difference is a commodity, a person's inability to be individual inevitably raises suspicion.

It is the complexities of beige, a colour whose perceived limitations stem from its neutral traits that surfaces in Marzena Topka's exhibition: *Boundaries of Beige*. In this setting, beige exists as a loose metaphor for the organisational structures that govern our lives. The insidious, dishwater dull, common-place meanings aligned with beige's neutrality match the pedestrian ho-hum-ness of the repetitive organisational structures we frequently utilise to manage life. For Topka, these everyday structures express an idea of order and calm yet gradually nest in, and infest, our lives.

Organisational structures are human constructs put in place to organise, measure and manage all facets of personal or corporate life. Such constructs figuratively exist as living and breathing bodies, fattened on humanity's obligatory sense of necessity, duty and responsibility but also, its self-imposed routines and habits. Often an organisational structure will become so repetitive and familiar that its presence no longer registers in our daily existence - like an invisible gas staining the recesses of one's psyche with

endless revelations of procedure, regulation and instruction. Accordingly, the habitual nature of an organisational structure is not without conflict. On the one hand, it creates a level of order, unity and continuity that soothes and cajoles the mind; and on the other hand, it surfaces as a mind controlling agent with the ability to define and erect boundaries, dictate codes of behaviour and reinforce “how to” manuals that regulate the user’s way of being and thinking. In this sense, it matters little if the user repeatedly undertakes a leisure activity or a work based task, the constant routines or procedures governing it are never neutral because the mind cannot choose to feel comfort and at the same time refuse control. One cannot eliminate the other; the two must come together to form meaning and it is the sense of unease surrounding this awkward union that permeates *Boundaries of Beige*.

For Topka, grids act as imperceptible managers of organisational structures and appear to neutrally serve those who place their faith in science, technology and rationality. Visible and undetectable in plain sight, grids order and regulate daily life through maps, diaries, calendars, work rosters, programs, flow charts, meal planners, timetables and price lists – the list is endless. On the surface, the grid gives an impression of objective duty: inhabiting human living and working environments under the modus operandi that regulating time or planning routines, activities and rituals will alleviate chaos and create calm. Yet Topka suggests the grid is not impartial; it distorts as much as it is a distortion in itself. For once its geometricised body-like structure has invaded the psyche of its disciples it begins to dictate their routines, legislate their habits and reinforce habitual ways of being, both in the activities they have undertaken and in their reaction to life and its responsibilities. Thus prolonged exposure to grids inevitably exacerbates mind-numbing voids in its victims, spaces in which the calming is no longer soothing but sedating, literally anaesthetising the user’s brain.

Topka is working with, but noticeably against, the grid in *Boundaries of Beige*. The exhibition incorporates installation, film and small-scale sculptures as well as a sound performance by Beige (Adam Burges, Jeremy Cope, Anetta Nevin, Ben Rose and Jerome Turle). In all of these disciplines, aside from the sound based performance, Topka explores the inauthenticity surrounding organisational structures through the construction, reconstruction and deconstruction of beige inspired geometricised bodies. She uses repetitive and painstakingly slow processes such as unpicking thread or crochet to create distorted grid-like forms that are then corrupted as they pass through different material and fluid states.

In *Boundaries of Beige*, a work titled the same as the exhibition, Topka has created a large-scale textile installation spanning the width of the gallery. The installation is comprised of beige coloured string that has been crocheted and formed into hollow cubes. The work is not unlike a giant handmade fishing net and it is easy to imagine it being flung over the side of a boat to haul in a catch. Topka’s work however, is emblematic of more than a snare to catch aquatic organisms. As a grid-like net, *Boundaries*

*of Beige* could be symbolic of any structure such as an almanac, timetable or planner whose scale has been exploded and deformed to heighten how we are trapped in daily routines, responsibilities, addictions or norms. For Topka, nets are something we use to catch prey but also something we get caught up in, a pattern evident in the relationship between structures and people. Although these may appear balanced and reciprocal, the moment a person enters into this type of contract or commitment they become trapped in another dimension. In this respect, people change when they enter a structure as much as they change the structures they enter into, and it is the unavoidability of this reality that suggests such liaisons are never neutral or devoid of suspicion.

Returning to the origins of the grid, Topka’s *Geometrisation of Bodies* is loosely grounded in a sense of apprehension stemming from geometry’s perceived objectivity. In Greek philosophy, geometry was elevated as an essential means of understanding the world. Plato put forward an argument for the study of geometry in the *Republic* suggesting via Socrates that, “. . . geometry draws the soul toward truth, fostering philosophical thinking, elevating what is currently allowed to descend” (Plato 2001, 273). He believed that “the world was constructed with geometric simplicity and elegance” (Fowler 2008) and when studied through geometry the planets and celestial bodies would reflect a perfect spherical order. Centuries later in his *Meditations*, René Descartes employed a sceptical questioning method to assess those things we deem true yet contain doubt (Broughton 2001). In regard to geometry, his method of doubt established that people’s knowledge of space was fallible because they had no direct access to the truth however truth was still determined and elevated via geometry.

The work housed in Topka’s *Geometrisation of Bodies* series is concerned with the idea that bodies are neutral entities when they enter into organisational structures. In this domain, office clothes are reoccurring motifs used to regulate, unite and placate bodies in corporate spaces and for Topka this act of normalising is never free of meaning. Her work explores this premise through two separate wall hangings made of deconstructed beige office clothing that has been pieced together using the following rules: 1) unpick all seams and 2) reconstruct the clothing into squares and rectangles. Her self-imposed rules do not permit her to alter the form and because of the curvilinear nature of the original cut pieces, she is unable to create straight edges or exact right angles so a perfect grid is impossible. Her deconstructions resist the idea of a geometrical truth and highlight the boundaries of the body through those structures that attempt to constrain it.

In *Of Milk and Honey*, the largest body of work in *Boundaries of Beige*, Topka is referencing a phrase written in the Hebrew version of the Bible, which refers to agricultural abundance in the Land of Israel. In the Bible, Moses has a vision in which God speaks to him from a burning bush and promises to lead his people into ‘a land flowing with milk and honey’ – the promised land (Bible Hub 2014). In our current vernacular,

the term more accurately specifies a disappointment: a promise of all that is plenty turning sour. For Topka, capitalism is symbolic of this disappointment. The technological advances associated with this system initially implied life would be more comfortable and affluent, yet its propagation has only served to increase workloads and generate more organisational structures to manage people.

In the *Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre examined the physical and social dimensions of space and noted that systems governing social spaces such as capitalism are not given but constructed (Lefebvre 2007). This idea frames Topka's work in *Of Milk and Honey*. For the structures, which range from malformed contour-like cubes encased in life-depleting wax to immensely layered impenetrable 3-dimensional grid forms, are indicative of what happens when one is habitually exposed to organisational structures through larger systems. In this sense, Topka's account of capitalism's governance is not expressed through accurate grid representations; instead the works are rigid, disordered, cavernous and tightly packed precisely because the constructs have soured and society itself is numb to the realisation.

Guided by the same conceptual premise as *Boundaries of Beige*, *Nests for Numbers* includes a series of independent hollow crocheted cubes. In this body of work, Topka's malleable and/or fixed material and process choices (beige string, starch and crochet) prevent the sculptures from resembling accurate grids and in some instances from standing up or supporting their own weight.

Conversely, in the *Meltdown* series of films, Topka extends upon the ideas informing all of the above-mentioned works. In this cinematic space, she attempts to fully exorcise the organisational structures by setting the grid-like bodies on fire. In several of the films the structures poetically burn to ash and we are freed from the sense of unease they have posited in our lives. The moment is short-lived though, for in another film, one of the structures metaphorically rises from the ashes and it is its foreseeable return that reignites unsettling feelings. This film specifies that these constructs, which are of our own making, are only temporarily neutralised because there is always some other routine, ritual or procedure to enter its place.

The band *Beige* also features a sound performance in the exhibition. *Beige* is a side project of *Brown*, an experimental noise band. Their performance titled: *Real Life* consists of five pre-recorded sounds independently captured by each member of the band and played together simultaneously. For Topka, each sound is a structure that expresses its own order, unity and continuity and has the potential to comfort the listener. This notion is sabotaged when the sounds are played together: Barthes suggested sound is not neutral, even silence can be loaded and in this setting, one cannot escape the meaning each sound initiates when it reacts with the others. Topka also considers sound more invasive or atmospheric than the visual elements of the exhibition suggesting that the listener is forced to endure the noise – they cannot shut it

down unless they choose to leave. And it is this reality, that sound may no longer be comforting but still endured, that aligns it with organisational structures.

As a colour, beige's perceived boundary of inauthenticity arises from its neutral traits and it is this underlying reading that Topka effortlessly weaves into *Boundaries of Beige*. In doing so she invites her audience to rethink how organisational structures govern our lives. If these structures contain traits that have the potential to cancel each other out, Topka infers this encounter is not impartial because the conflict it engenders creates an unsettling atmosphere that gradually and permanently marks everything and everyone it comes in to contact with.

Dr Anna Nazzari

Dr Anna Nazzari is an artist, writer and lecturer at Curtin University's School of Design and Art.

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*Geometrisation of Bodies*, 2013. Deconstructed office clothing, 192 x 96 cm.



opposite *Geometrisation of Bodies*, 2013. Deconstructed office clothing, 142 × 128 cm.

overleaf *Geometrisation of Bodies (detail)*, 2013. Deconstructed office clothing, 192 × 96 cm.







*Nests for Numbers*, 2013. Cotton string and starch, from 2.5 × 2.5 × 2.5 to 13 × 13 × 13 cm.



*Nests for Numbers*, 2013. Cotton string and starch, 50 x 50 x 50 cm.



*Nests for Numbers* (detail), 2013. Cotton string and starch, 50 x 50 x 50 cm.



*Nests for Numbers*, 2013. Cotton string and starch, 30 x 30 x 30 cm.



*Nests for Numbers* (detail), 2013. Cotton string and starch, 30 x 30 x 30 cm.



*Nests for Numbers*, 2014. Cotton thread, 5 x 26 x 26 cm.



above *Of Milk and Honey*, 2013. Cotton thread and wax, 15 x 34 x 31 cm.  
*Of Milk and Honey*, 2013. Cotton thread and wax, 5,5 x 16,5 x 12,5 cm.  
*Of Milk and Honey*, 2014. Cotton thread and wax, 3,5 x 36 x 36 cm.

opposite *Of Milk and Honey*, 2014. Cotton thread and wax, 125 x 125 cm, orientation variable.

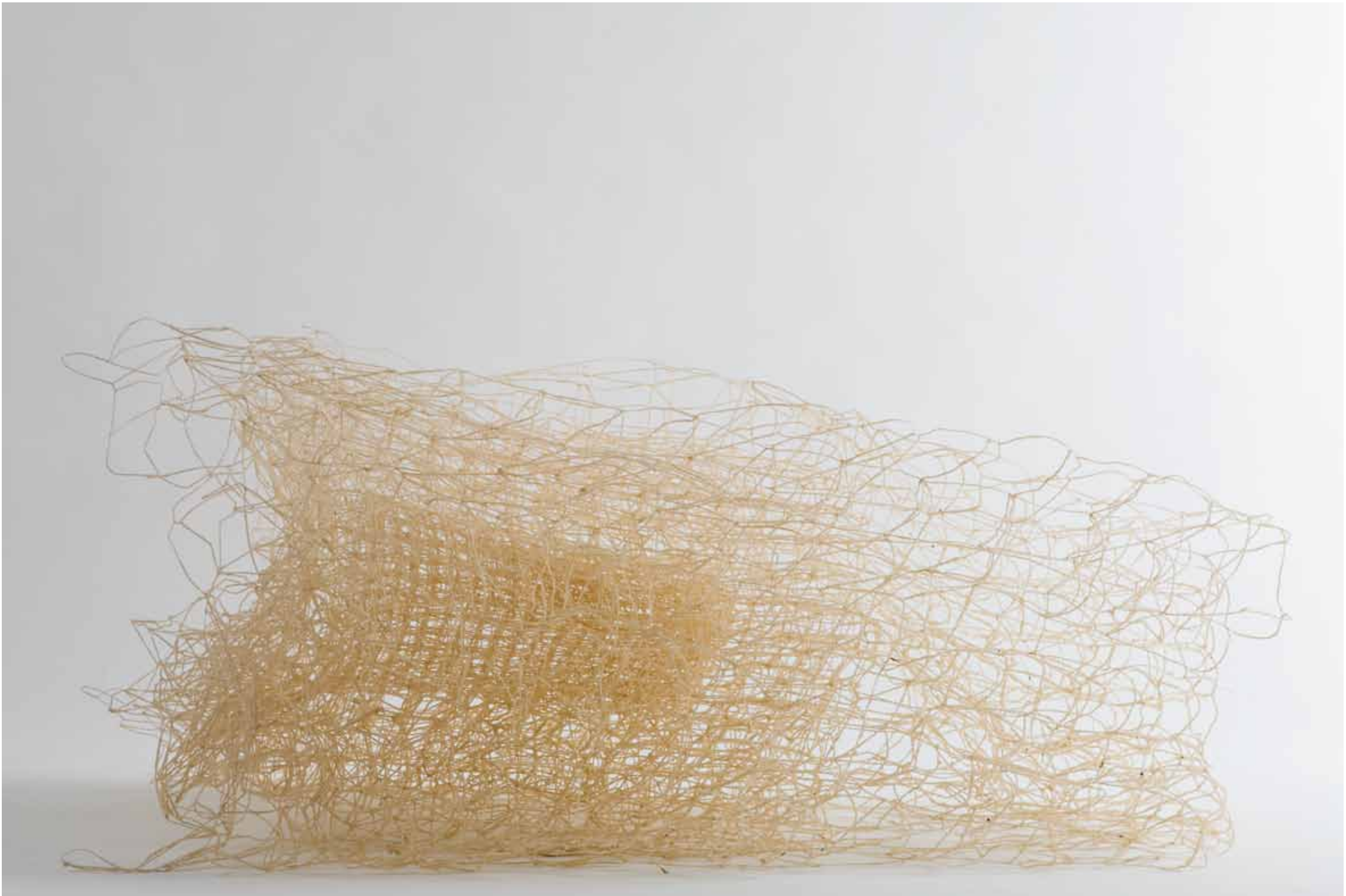


*Of Milk and Honey*, 2014. Cotton thread, string and wax, 17 x 68 x 30 cm.





*Of Milk and Honey*, 2014. Cotton thread and wax, 1 x 34 x 29 cm.



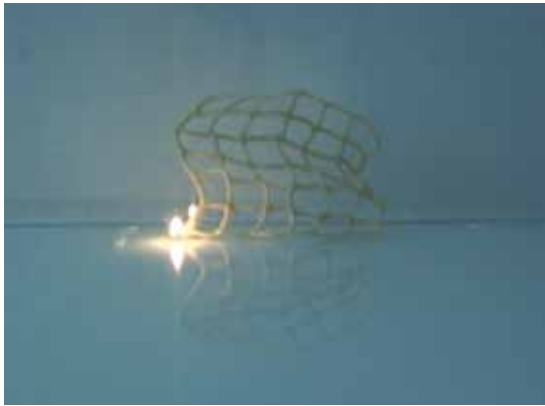
above *Of Milk and Honey*, 2013-14. Cotton thread and wax, 42 × 125 × 63 cm.

overleaf *Of Milk and Honey* (detail), 2013-14. Cotton thread and wax, 42 × 125 × 63 cm.





*Meltdown*, 2014. Film still, 1:53 min.





*previous page, rows 1-3*

*Meltdown, 2013-14. Film stills, 13:55 min.  
Meltdown, 2013-14. Film stills, 7 min.  
Meltdown, 2014. Film stills, 5:23 min.*

*this page, rows 1-2*

*Meltdown, 2014. Film stills, 9:49 min.  
Meltdown, 2014. Film stills, 1:53 min.*

## BIOGRAPHY

Marzena Topka was born in Chojnice, Poland in 1969. She arrived in Australia in 1983 and initially settled in Adelaide, South Australia. She moved to Perth, Western Australia in 1985 where she currently resides and works out of an Artsource Studio in East Perth. She studied art history at the University of Western Australia graduating with a BA (Fine Art) (hons) in 1992. She also completed an Advanced Diploma at the WA School of Art, Design and Media, Central TAFE, 2003 (now Central Institute of Technology); BA (Art) (hons) 2005 and a Master of Creative Arts at Curtin University, Bentley Western Australia in 2011.

She was awarded a prize for innovation upon graduating from Central TAFE and in 2004 was selected for the *Hatched National Graduate Exhibition* showcasing new art from Australia's top graduates. In 2009 she was awarded a Galerie Düsseldorf Scholarship. In 2006 and 2012 she received funding for exhibition development from the Department of the Culture and the Arts.

The artist had a solo exhibition, *Light weeks away...*, at Galerie Düsseldorf, Mosman Park in 2010 and participated in numerous group exhibitions including *Flawless Measures* at MelodySmith Gallery, 2014; *LP the times they are a changing!*, Galerie Düsseldorf, 2013; *Open by Necessity*, The Museum of Natural Mystery, North Perth, 2012; *GET smART*, John Curtin Gallery, 2010; *Wallpaper*, Central TAFE Gallery, Perth, 2010; *Safety Measures*, The Moores Building Contemporary Art Gallery, Fremantle, 2008 and *Salve*, Breadbox Gallery, Northbridge, 2006.

Topka's work is held in numerous private collections.

Since 2005 Topka has worked as a tutor and unit coordinator at Curtin University, School of Design and Art, Open Universities Art Studies.

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