



Kate Mitchell: Self Help for the Super Hero

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Last year I was in New York City. An Australian locked in an American summer. I spent my days on somewhat of a pool seeking tour: divining a swimmable body of water. I found myself in Central Park at Lasker Pool and, as tended to happen I was waiting. Waiting for the pool to reopen after a baby rumble of thunder. So I sat by the lake, under some trees, by a small path, saw some mini turtles and wrote in my notebook. Probably something of not much consequence, just a time passing scribble. And then excitement plus: up opened the pool. So I stood, left my notebook behind and walked away for a swim. So silly. And I didn't realise until I got back home, about a good hour away on the train. It wasn't the notebook that I was upset about. It was what was inside. A letter from my grandfather, which I knew knew knew was important. Important that it stayed around longer than I knew he would, or could. When we were young my grandmother always wrote letters and postcards from far away: the pictures of famous paintings, the scenes of mountains and beaches so distant from my middle of New South Wales. In my twenties, I had been overseas many times and never had my grandfather written to me—we talked every now and then—but mostly it was postcards sent from me, and no reply because I would be home soon. New York was different. I wrote. He wrote back. Signed with love (and I miss you!), in his old age, post politician, he opened up. And these already keepsakes I kept in the back of that notebook.

When my schoolboy error dawned, my first thought was *why did nobody tell me?* Somebody (God by any other name) knew that I left that notebook behind. A gentle, figurative light bulb would have been nice. But no, left to my own devices it was gone. I hurried back the next morning before work and trawled the area, scavenged the garbage bins, talked to groundsmen but to no avail. And what did I really expect in a city of twenty million people? Quite frankly, I expected to find it and in desperation I even put an ad in the Village Voice lost section thinking somebody must have it. Somebody must have seen it. Purely *because* it is a city of twenty million people. *Because* it is an island, contained. And because everything in New York City is so visible and mapped. In fact, if the history of the world was told through novels, television and film then we could safely say that Central Park was the only park that had ever existed. How could anything *ever* disappear? It was all so *there* and stuck on the island.

Needless to say I never found the notebook nor the letters inside. I wrote to my grandfather and told him about the loss and luckily for me he wrote back, so one last letter remains after his death. But the incident itself kept me thinking about New York as an entity, an object in and of itself. And I wasn't alone in my musing. I discovered that in the history of the comic book—so many of which were set in New York—Manhattan had been flooded by tidal waves, confined to giant bubbles, lassoed and levitated. ¹ In Spiderman and the Fantastic Four, New York City was in fact a solid mass; a place able to be captured but also kept for safekeeping once the enemies arrived. And of course, as a uniquely, mythological, global city New York is the perfect land for the world of superheroes as it is the home of endless opportunity, of projected possibility. It is a location of finite proportions in the present but in the future the city can be anything and most importantly, you can be anyone. By placing superheroes like Peter Parker, Reed Richards and Susan Storm within the all too real city of New York—where they must simultaneously face everyday love-life dramas and dwindling job prospects alongside world enemies at large—these comic book idols are able to cast the spell of belief that within all of us is the potential for the exceptional.

And here we stumble upon Kate Mitchell. A woman practicing the art of alchemy: a girl converting the ordinary into the extraordinary. Mitchell delves into her well of childhood books, comics and television series and acts out so-called fictional tasks in a characteristic, stoic manner. She takes on the confidence of New York City, but she doesn't just dream. Like her superhero cast, she presently picks herself up and gets down to business, indifferent to the pleasure or the pain. Mitchell performs various challenging tasks, like in *I am not a joke* (2008) where she saws a circular hole in the floor surrounding her body, not to escape an invisible foe but to simply prove that she is capable. It is no joke; there are no rehearsals and no fantasy realm setting. She works hard (to the bone) and on this alone she succeeds.

Mitchell's box set of video tasks reminds me of Betsy Byar's children's book, *The 18th Emergency*. ² The main character, Mouse, is struggling to deliver a solution to a very big problem, a bully called Marv Hammerman. As a way of trying to deconstruct his issue, Mouse summons a set of seventeen predicaments that one might face in the jungle. Such as, being faced by a lion or perhaps, quicksand. Novel and credible ways out include sticking your arm all the way down the lion's throat so as to choke him and render him helpless, or when confronted with quicksand to just lie down, don't struggle and no one will sink. Simple. Mouse attempts to use these urban-reality-removed incidents to solve his everyday dilemma and yet he fails, resolving to just face his oppressor, get time waiting over with and get the shit beaten out of him. It would seem that Mitchell too attempts her mythological missions in order to grasp some greater truth. Perhaps, like Mouse, Mitchell is learning that life is purely an endurance test and the invisible enemies are not the lions, bears or tigers but rather, time itself.

I feel, though, that Mitchell's work has taken a turn. It is a new, perennially positive season. No longer is she producing frank, video documentation of bodily acts of superhero superiority. In her recent solo show at Chalk Horse, *Don't Touch My Rocks*, Mitchell seemed to be redeploying her focus away from video and exploring other mediums as a way of archiving her feats. There are other differences too; the performance is now not always in the past, but may also be a future act, or perhaps the present: one counting the very minutes we sit and watch.

Don't Touch My Rocks consisted of seven bodies of work: all presented in varied mediums, from installation and video to drawing and sculpture. At first, I found this a little disturbing. Like most people I like my patterns of observation and when works aren't presented in the same manner it throws me right out into a world of awkwardness. Yet, as we are discussing the notion of time and endurance, it is the act of time spent which allows the viewer to absorb and discover the work of Kate Mitchell.

A major point of divergence is the fact that the works presented in *Don't Touch My Rocks* are no longer purely physical feats. The works are mental exercises. In *Magic Minute* (2009) the artist promises the buyer of the work one minute of consumer-directed positive thought at a pre-designated time, 11.11am, everyday for the duration of one year. Importantly, Mitchell displays her name within the work in the typewriter font of a name added at a later date. Although the object itself is beautifully crafted, this subtle, 'insert name here' tool allows the everyman access to the powers of positive thought. *Magic Minute* is almost a certificate of appreciation, and you too could have your name inserted here.

Funnily enough, I used to have a boyfriend who was Australian Rules football obsessed. He was a superstitious boy, perhaps formed during years of sporting rituals, and if he happened, by chance, to look upon his watch at 11.11am on any given day it was a sign to him that it was going to be a good day. A good day because 11.11 visually mirrors the symmetry of Aussie Rules goal posts, the ultimate end for the footballer. Like *Magic Minute* the superstition of my ex-boyfriend relies heavily on the assumption that life is out of our hands and it is here that Mitchell steps in to play super-spiritual-life-sculptor to the happy customer now reaping the benefits.

Mitchell has graduated to a new level of superhero status. She has passed her physical challenges and now she must concentrate on certain psychological trials in order to test her powers and strengths. And yet as a viewer, I have already seen her complete and succeed in her various video experiments and thus naturally believe in her ability to carry out her next bout of rounds. *Healing the Healer* (2009) is a prime example, as Mitchell presents a large quartz crystal wrapped in a bandage. At first sight, yes, it is a funny and simple gag. Mitchell though, could have represented this idea as a video, a locked-off shot of the artist unravelling cotton in a bid to lovingly nurse the crystal back to health. Yet, the object post-performance sans artist is so much more poignant. It is not just a witty one-liner: the presence of the object mid-health begs the question, can Mitchell actually heal the healer? The artefact prompts us to imagine its varying states of sickness in relation to its alleged current growing glow. It is the state of flux exuding from the all too static crystal, which reveals the strength behind Mitchell's new dawn of thinking.

Mitchell has moved beyond the New York City dreaming of 'I can be anything'. She has become the anything. *Don't Touch My Rocks* is almost a lesson in letting go. In 9-5 (2009) Mitchell locates herself within an ambiguous space within the dry, hot inner landscape of Australia. In a pseudo-religious manner she heads off to work an eight-hour day, similar to that of the suit pilgrims of the city. She stands



MAGIC MINUTE

At **11:11** am

This card entitles the owner to receive and reap the benefits from directed & concentrated positive thought. For the next 365 days, Kate Mitchell will think positively about the owner for one minute starting at 11:11am and ending at 11:12am.

Owner

Date Start *Date End*

Sign *Sign*



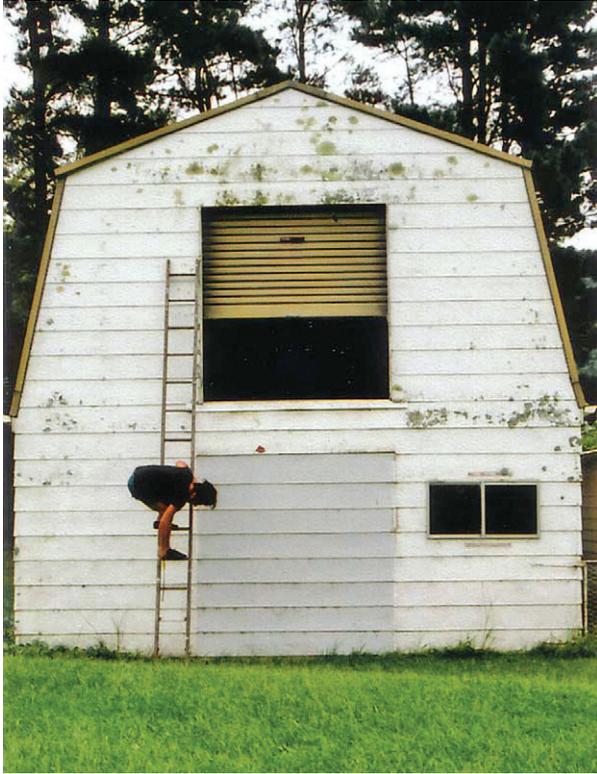
centre to the camera like a human sundial, mapping the movement of that day and every other day the sun rises. Akin to a monk during a vow of silence she appears to do nothing. Unlike in her previous videos, here she is not herself active but rather the activity is played out via the time passing over her. Mitchell presents us with her body clock in a bid to belittle her mental achievements to date, to let us know that in the end the ultimate rulers are the seconds, minutes, hours and days. *My life in nuts (so far)* (2009) further strengthens this point as Mitchell builds a desert campfire of peanuts, one peanut for every day of her life up until the opening of *Don't Touch My Rocks*. Mitchell reiterates that in all her learning, throughout all of her physical and mental challenges, the thing to know is, that we are not superheroes. We are the mortal beings who will not live forever. We are here for but a speck. But as Mouse tells us, Superman might be faster than a speeding bullet and able to leap tall buildings within a single bound, but even he can't help himself from being tuned down to a small white dot.

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1. Peter Sanderson, *The Marvel Comics Guide to New York City* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007).
 2. Betsy Byars, *The 18th Emergency* (London: The Bodley Head, 1974).

Facing page: Kate Mitchell, *Magic Minute*, 2009, German etched watercolour paper.

Above: Kate Mitchell, *Anger Management II (Good Luck to Ya)*, 2009, digital still, DVD, 2 minutes 20 seconds. Photo: Silversalt.





Above left: Kate Mitchell, *LifeAfterLife*, 2008, video still, DVD, 27 minutes 18 seconds.

Above right: Kate Mitchell, *Anger Management I (Piece of Effort)*, 2008, video still, DVD, 8 minutes.

Below: Kate Mitchell, *9-5*, 2009, video still, DVD, 8 hours.

Facing page: Kate Mitchell, *I am not a joke* (detail), 2008, production still, DVD, 5 minutes 30 seconds. Photo: Craig Bender.