



No man an island as tribute proves all art

Shaping is the essence of Ken Unsworth's work and his plan to honour his late wife Elisabeth is shaping like no other, writes **Steve Meacham**.

It might be described as the most elegant and romantic party of the decade. Or, perhaps, the most expensive and ambitious multimedia event – part exhibition, part installation, part performance art, part cabaret – ever mounted in Sydney by a single artist.

But ask Ken Unsworth, the veteran sculptor, how he would describe his latest and largest creation, *A Ringing Glass*, and he points simply to the elegant invitations that have gone out to the 168 guests who will be conveyed by chartered ferry to Cockatoo Island on May 28.

"An event to honour Elisabeth Unsworth," it reads, adding that by accepting "this invitation and the following conditions you are entering into a sacred contract with Elisabeth and Ken".

Guests are promised an unforgettable evening: black tie; four-course banquet by Belinda Franks in the Grand Ballroom; four major installations; dancing to a 19-piece orchestra; a recital by the violinist Mark Berriman; two performances by a modern dance troupe; a chamber orchestra and a wind quartet; and songs from the Namibian-born crooner Natalie Gamsu.

But the loudest applause will be reserved for the most unusual piece of entertainment: "a posthumous recital by Elisabeth Unsworth", who died in October after a long illness, aged 85.

As for the conditions, all guests have agreed to sign up for two free dance lessons – either in Sydney or Melbourne – so they can join in the ballroom dancing.

If you're wondering where the grand ballroom is on Cockatoo Island, Unsworth, 79, and his 40-strong workforce have built it from scratch inside the gigantic galvanised turbine hall, which used to power the former naval dockyard. Since February, electricians, carpenters, plasterers, engineers and riggers under the command of the project manager, Richard

Harrison, have travelled each day to the island to deliver Unsworth's monumental vision.

By the time the guests arrive the turbine hall will encase two reception suites, three exhibition spaces, a film room and the elegantly draped, candelbra-lit, parquet-floored ballroom.

The event is being paid for by Unsworth as a unique tribute to the woman he loved since they met as teachers in rural Victoria in 1955.

How much is it costing? Unsworth won't say. But Harrison lets slip that when Unsworth first briefed him on what he wanted to do, he said to the sports car-driving artist: "Ken, do you realise you could buy a brand new Ferrari for that?"

At the waterfront Birchgrove home he and Elisabeth shared for 15 years, Unsworth shows me the final sketches he made for the installations. "She saw two of them and thoroughly approved," he says.

She had been seriously ill for eight years, during which Unsworth nursed her, eventually requiring full-time help. The two had discussed what he planned to do once she died: hold a very personal, one-night exhibition at a commercial gallery somewhere in the city.

It was his friend Tony Bond, of the Art Gallery of NSW, who suggested Cockatoo Island as a venue. Even though Unsworth can reach the island in less than 15 minutes in his motor boat, he'd never been there. It was opened to the public in 2007, but he'd been too busy looking after Elisabeth.

Bond took him there in November. "As soon as I saw the turbine hall, I could see the whole project," Unsworth says. "I could see dancing and an orchestra ..."

Music and dancing had always been a shared passion. "We first danced together in a Greek milk bar in Hamilton at about 11pm," he remembers.

Born in Paris, raised in Egypt and Africa, Elisabeth Volodarsky

was a talented pianist who gave her first concert in Alexandria when she was seven. But she sacrificed any ambitions as a concert pianist when she moved to Australia in 1953, newly widowed and with a young son, John Mitchell Crouch.

She met Unsworth in 1955 and married him the following year. The family moved to Sydney in 1961 and she taught at St Catherine's School in Waverley to finance her husband's artistic studies.

Her son died of a brain tumour in 1976, aged 36, which prompted her to set up the John Mitchell Crouch Fellowship for surgeons and surgical research.

"[His death] knocked her about, but she threw all her efforts into supporting me," Unsworth says. "She had a critical mind. She could see through the rubbish, and she didn't hesitate to say it."

All the art works Unsworth has created for *A Ringing Glass* reflect their joint love of the piano. The evening's climax features a spectacular descending piano and recordings of Elisabeth, playing and singing.

The entire celebration, without a single speech, will be filmed by Paul Green. Afterwards the installations and the ballroom will be open to island visitors until the end of June, a remarkably public display of enduring love for a woman whose husband admits – always steered clear of the spotlight.

Indeed, Unsworth acknowledges in the program notes he has written for the evening that "Elisabeth always demurred and downplayed recognition of her talents and the offerings of her life".

So what would she think of it all? Unsworth laughs loudly. "She would be furious. She'd say, 'Why are you wasting so much money on such a thing?'"

Ken Unsworth's *A Ringing Glass* (Rilke) will be open to the public on Cockatoo Island, June 1-28.



Elisabeth Unsworth ... died after a long illness.



Ken Unsworth in the ballroom he has created within Cockatoo Island's turbine hall. Photo: Tamara Dean