Artists
Caroline Ali
James Birkin
Sade Buckle
Leah Carless
Gregory Dunn
Csilla Farkas
Sharon Farrelly
Amelia Greville
Anna Horton
Cheryl Howard
Lucy Hutchinson
Morna Lockie Anrig
Emily Mulenga
Santhanha Nguyen
Sikander Pervez
Ali Reed
Sarah Sehra
Anna Smith
Glen Stoker
Hannah Sutherland
Wendy Ann Titmus
Barbara Witkowska
Chris Wright

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New Art
West Midlands
2014

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Notes on an Exhibition

Birmingham Museums Trust is once again delighted to be taking the lead in developing the second multi-sited exhibition *New Art West Midlands 2014*. As last year this partnership involves The Barber Institute of Fine Arts and Grand Union and welcomes the new addition of Wolverhampton Art Gallery for 2014. The exhibition showcases some of the best work produced by graduates of the region's five University art schools: Birmingham City, Coventry, Staffordshire, Wolverhampton and Worcester.

Our three selectors were Mel Brimfield (artist), Paul Goodwin (independent curator, researcher and Professor at CCW Graduate School, University of the Arts, London) and David Harding OBE (artist and Founder and Head of Environmental Art department, Glasgow School of Art 1985–2001). All three have written polemicist essays for this publication, *Notes on an Exhibition*, that explore current developments in the field of contemporary art for emerging artists, graduates and students, but also the wider art world. Mel Brimfield has written a rallying cry for more performance art, Paul Goodwin's text, *The Exhausted* examines art production in the face of closure of certain cultural horizons and David Harding's essay, first published in 2004, explores the condition of art schools and higher education ten years ago. In addition, Neil Mulholland has been commissioned to respond to Harding's text with hindsight in 2014 contributing *Juche: Art School State of Mind*. The 'in conversation' with Lisa Beauchamp, Rachel Bradley and Jane Morrow interrogates feminist art practice in the light of the fact that the majority of artists selected for *New Art West Midlands 2014* are female and Robert Wenley examines the New Art West Midlands exhibition at The Barber Institute of Fine Arts and the dialogues curating contemporary art interventions in permanent collections creates. Finally, the history and current status of the strong artist-led culture in the West Midlands region is outlined in *Then: 1970–2008* by Rachel Bradley and *Now: 2008–2014* by Cheryl Jones.

Cover: *Blonde*, Lucy Hitchinson (2013)

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Performance Art is Good For You

Mel Brimfield

SPAM, Emily Mulenga (2013)

Amongst the submissions for *New Art West Midlands 2014*, relatively few live works cropped up amidst an overwhelming swathe of sculpture and painting. It isn't surprising. Economically speaking, it hasn't always appeared to be the smartest move for the ambitious, upwardly mobile art student to adopt a primarily performance-based practice. All of the qualities that apparently make live art valuable are the very things that virtually guarantee its commercial failure – which of course is frequently the point, and a key part of its allure to the idealist.

This short polemic is a rallying cry to artists of the West Midlands region – take a second look, and join the fastest growing non-cohesive movement in the art world, comprising angry members who wouldn't even momentarily define themselves as such for any reason.

Here are four things you may not have considered:

1) *Will-o'-the-wispy*: The oft-cited authenticity, spontaneity and radicalism of a medium whose ontology is defined largely by its disappearance can't help but exercise a certain mythic tug. For the wilful obscurists amongst us, there is much to recommend it, then. The considerable imaginative space around the partial documentation of one-off 'seminal' performances irresistibly provokes an ever-thickening fog of interpretation. For enthusiasts of a particular bent, it's precisely the slippery resistance of performance history to any kind of objective overview that makes it such an intriguing subject for research. An elusive tracery of virtually unknowable events, retrievable only via indistinct, grainy photographs and footage shot from the wrong angles at inappropriate junctures, coupled with conflicting critical accounts, inflated second-hand anecdotes, myths and gossip. It's the stuff of Borgesian literary dynamite! Throw in the residual distortion of a multitude of faulty museological, curatorial and archival approaches to assimilating such gaseous matter, and the vista of a highly specialist, sparsely populated research field shimmers into view. If nothing else, be sure to both document and 'document' performances, so you own these works and ensure their future posterity. Painters can't do that.

2) *Lemons into lemonade*: The medium suffers from something of a persistent image problem in the UK, largely owing to a strong emphasis on institutional representation of work primarily taking the body and its associated gender and identity politics as a central focus. Viewed as far as is possible within its original political, sociological and cultural context, much of it retains an undeniable charge – it's an essential part of the fabric of art history. Still, for the layman, the 'performance artist' will always be naked and given to executing baffling ritualised feats of endurance over interminable time frames – an unfortunate case of form overwhelming content in the popular imagination. The most cursory of glances through the archive reveals the lie – just witness cardboard-caped Hugo Ball's arcane nonsense chant garbling, Andy Kaufman's insistently unsportsmanlike 'Intergender Wrestling' bouts, Laurie Anderson's car park horn honking orchestrations and Stationhouse Opera's cognition-boggling misalignments of live and film action…the list is endless – it's a dazzling panoply of wonders! Take the advantage of possible genuine surprise afforded by ill-informed negative public bias; the performance arena may be one of the few left where radical, highly visible innovation is still possible within the visual arts. Better get a move on though – it's filling up.

3) *Hybrid vigour*: Performance is a portal to any number of other worlds. In the wake of eye-wateringly savage public funding cuts across the sector in the last few years, there has never been a better time to approach institutions and agencies of all varieties with cunningly contrived inclusive schemes to combine audiences for the arts – economic necessity posits interdisciplinarity as something of a hot programming potato again and performance artists are uniquely positioned to make the most of it. Seek out adventurous theatre practitioners, choreographers, composers and musicians, comedians, magicians and writers to collaborate on formally uncertain genre-busting live work. The intention is far from cynical – what better way to challenge lazy assumptions about what live art might be, than to dazzle with co-opted virtuoso talent enacting complex conceptual content? Rather than clinging onto an outmoded view of theatre as fodder for passive audiences – who need their plays to have a subject and a legible story – know that it's every bit as crammed with experimentalists testing formal limits as any medium within the visual arts, and that there seems to be a public that want to see the results. What might happen if an overwhelmingly high level of artistic innovation in the UK demanded a radical rethink of performance production models generally? Generating grass roots collaborative action is more interesting than waiting for institutionally sanctioned platforms to spring up though, and it can make for a splendidly vibrant social life – hey, we can put on a show right here!

4) *Diversity in action*: In the course of recent teaching experience, I've observed a palpable upswing in numbers of students exploring the possibilities of performance for camera, and indeed this is evidenced in some selections made for *New Art West Midlands 2014*: Emily Mulenga and Amelia Greville. The relevance of somewhat fetishised ideas of immediacy and authenticity that surface in virtually any discussion of live art seems slowly to change complexion in the face of recent scripted performance work, referencing broader conventions of theatre, comedy, cabaret, TV and film for effect (although content often continues to focus on gender and identity for its subject). Perhaps it's logical given the acceptability of the decorative as a trope within contemporary painting and of structured narrative and character development within film and video practice, that the taboo of live art, at least formally resembling entertainment, is no longer problematic. To shift between performance and film for gallery exhibition seems more tenable. The good news is that straddling a multiplicity of camps is both conceptually bold and invariably makes for a broader selection of commissioning and exhibiting opportunities – satisfying live art and gallery audiences simultaneously is suddenly a feasible ambition.

Yes, performance art is good for you.

Mel Brimfield is an artist.

The Exhausted

Paul Goodwin

Exhaustion seems to be the sign of our times. Everyone is exhausted: students, teachers, artists, dealers. Wars and conflicts are proliferating throughout the globe. The social fabric of society is continually under attack from so-called 'austerity cuts' that decimate common social and cultural institutions and programmes. Political and business elites respond to the impeding crisis by enriching themselves and consolidating their power while oppositional voices are fragmented and dissipated. We now live in a 'Prozac Nation' on the back of a 500% increase in the use of anti-depressants over the past twenty years in the UK alone.[1]

The art world in particular presents a peculiar case study of the exhausted nature of our times. In times of crisis artists and art schools in particular have historically responded with critical and radical vigour. In the 1960s, art schools such as Hornsey School of Art in London were at the vanguard of revolutionary occupation movements and student protests against foreign wars and the predation of global corporations. In the 1980s a group of radical art students responded to the racial crisis of Thatcherism and police brutality towards black youth in Britain by organising a series of challenging and oppositional exhibitions and artworks that led to the formation of the Black Arts Movement in the West Midlands.[2] However recent decades have been characterised by a relative absence of such public radicalism in art schools in the face of the aggressive neoliberal reorganisation of art education on a market-driven model that has largely transformed students into paying and debt laden consumers while teachers and staff are increasingly pressed into various forms of administration and managerial functions in response to these changes. In fact there is a profound sense of apathy and political disengagement of many students in colleges and universities across the country. Critic Mark Fisher has argued that depression is endemic among young people in the UK and that students seem resigned to the fate that is being presented to them by the ravages of neoliberalism. For Fisher this attitude is a form of 'reflexive impotence' where students know that things are bad but also know there is nothing they can do about it.[3]

According to Italian media theorist Franco 'Bifo' Beradi, the future – or more precisely the future horizon of social thought – has effectively been 'cancelled' due to the overstimulation of the senses and hyper acceleration of our techno-cultural environment caused by the colonisation of all aspects of life by global finance capitalism and its impact in shaping and dulling subjectivities.[4] In other words, we live in an endless present where any form of resistance is appropriated and there is a chronic inability to even imagine a future beyond an all pervasive form of 'capitalist realism'.[5]

If we live in exhausted times as some thinkers seem to suggest, how does this closing of cultural horizons and imagination manifest itself in art? And what impact does it potentially have on the aesthetic choices and practices of students who enter art schools and are graduating in these times of capitalist realism? One consequence of the inability to imagine the future is a fascination for the past. The growing attraction of past historical forms such as minimalism and abstraction is becoming more and more evident in student graduation shows up and down the country. The aestheticisation of anachronism, the recycling of 'traditional' materials and the raiding of the modernist language of the 1960s are arguably some of the characteristics of this lack of confidence in imagining and embracing the future. Faced with the never ending onslaught of commercialised visual stimuli in a political environment of austerity, retrenchment and lack of public political alternatives, many students have retreated into private universes and the consolation of traditional and 'pure' forms such as painting, sculpture, crafts and print-making. This has largely reflected trends in the wider contemporary art market where forms of 'remodernism', neo-formalism and object based (and market friendly) work have resurfaced in the last few years. The recent *Painting Now* show at Tate Britain, just

opposite Chelsea College of Arts in many ways epitomised this return to the safety of traditional media in a so-called 'post-medium' age. Featuring the work of five influential painters the exhibition attempted to intervene in the discussion about the 'contemporary' by arguing for a 'wide-ranging and critical discussion about painting' based on work that adopts 'traditional manners' thereby 'breaking from the conventions of painting'.[6] Many of the tropes familiar to current art school obsessions are present in this show: a restaging of the geometric vocabulary of geometric constructivism (Tomma Abts); a raiding of the archive of the influence of trompe l'oeil in early modernism (Lucy McKenzie) and references to Malevich and modernist architecture (Gillian Carnegie), for example. This is not to say that these artists produce bad work or that the persistence (and even celebration) of painting's relevance to contemporaneity is a bad thing. It does, however, lend some credence to the notion that in the current conditions of chronically unsettling capitalist realism, raiding the archive of modernism in its heyday – when the relation between form and politics, aesthetics and society were arguably more stable – is more attractive to many artists and art school graduates as a way of navigating the present.

How does one escape or bypass the strictures of capitalist realism in art? It may be instructive here to revisit the anti-heroic figure of Bartleby in Herman Melville's classic tale, *Bartleby the Scrivener*. Set in mid-nineteenth century Wall Street the story centres upon the enigmatic figure of a young office clerk, Bartleby, who when faced with the everyday pressures to produce work in his Wall Street office completely bucked the system with a simple refrain:

> "I prefer not to",
> He respectfully and slowly said,
> and mildly disappeared.[7]

If the stranglehold of capitalist realism on the artistic imagination is as strong as it currently appears to be, perhaps Bartleby's mantra – translated into a form of withdrawal from and resistance to the dictates of neoliberal art education – can provide a hint of how to respond to the crisis. The recent *documenta (13)* global survey of contemporary art in Kassel, Germany adopted this Bartleby-like theme of withdrawal and doubt as one of its leitmotifs.[8] Withdrawal and refusal may appear to be a pessimistic strategy to the condition of exhaustion in art. On the other hand, disengagement, doubt and strategic withdrawal – just saying "I prefer not to" when the need arises – may indeed be a starting point for a renewal of the artistic and civic imagination for our perilous times.

Paul Goodwin is an independent curator, researcher and Professor, CCW Graduate School, University of the Arts, London.[9]

1www.nhs.uk/news/2013/07July/Pages/Prozac-nation-claim-as-antidepressant-use-soars.aspx
2 See Keith Piper's essay in New Art West Midlands 2013 catalogue.
3 Mark Fisher, Capitalist Realism, Zero Books, 2009 p.21
4 Franco 'Bifo' Beradi, The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance, Semiotext(e), 2012
5 Mark Fisher, op. cit.
6 Tate website: http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/painting-now-five-contemporary-artists
7 Herman Melville, *Bartleby the Scrivener*, Melville House Publishing, 2010
8 *documenta (13)*, Kassel, Germany 2013 curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev
9 Goodwin is developing a new programme of curriculum development, teaching and research around black diaspora art and design practices with artist Professor Sonia Boyce.

Female Territory

In conversation with Lisa Beauchamp, Rachel Bradley & Jane Morrow

The starting point for this conversation is the large number of female artists participating in the *New Art West Midlands 2014* exhibitions and explores the significance of this circumstance at this time. The exhibition at Wolverhampton Art Gallery features works exclusively by female artists. In addition to *New Art West Midlands 2014*, a separate exhibition entitled *For the Record*, curated by Lisa Beauchamp and Rachel Bradley is being shown concurrently in the Waterhall at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. This exhibition has drawn work by female artists from the City of Birmingham's permanent collection and The Arts Council Collection and also includes work by two established West Midlands-based artists Faye Claridge and Barbara Walker.

Rachel Bradley: I spoke to a colleague recently about whether now was the right time to curate an exhibition of work by female artists and he reassuringly said that he didn't think there was ever a wrong time! The past couple of decades has seen intermittent interpretations of women's art, feminist art and work by female artists in exhibitions such as *Bad Girls* (1994, ICA London & CCA, Glasgow), *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (2007, MOCA, Los Angeles) and *elles@ centrepompidou* (2009, Centre Pompidou, Paris). There is no getting away from the fact that nineteen out of twenty-three artists in *New Art West Midlands 2014* are female and that a few of them, touching on issues of class and identity are making work within the political traditions of feminist art practice in the so-called 'Post-feminist' era, however subtly. But to start, does this proliferation of female artists tell us anything about the field in general or higher art education specifically?

Jane Morrow: I agree with your first point that there is never a bad time for an exhibition that takes a look at where we are at in feminist thought. To me, the current social and economic climate is bringing long-standing equality issues facing women into sharp relief on an international basis. If anything, things have become worse than they ever were.

Lisa Beauchamp: This is what makes the proliferation of solo exhibitions showcasing the work of female artists a very positive thing. Recent months have seen solo exhibitions by Dayanita Singh, Kara Walker, Sarah Lucas and Ana Mendieta in high profile London-based galleries. Right now, this lineage of women artists, especially those who made work during the 1970s, are being remembered and made visible in a way that seems to highlight how many of them have been dismissed over the past forty years, as well as at the time that they were producing their work.

JM: In researching Wolverhampton's recent exhibition of work by lesser known Pop artist, Pauline Boty, it was revealed that to get into The Royal College of Art she had to study stained glass rather than fine art, just in order to get a foot in the door. She wasn't taken seriously; in contrast to her peer group of male artists who were encouraged and allowed to flourish. Thus, the curating of her work at Wolverhampton was couched as a feminist, gendered critique of Pop.

RB: Some of the works in the *New Art West Midlands 2014* exhibitions could be described as feminist in the ways in which they assert revised narratives and hidden perspectives, many candidly engaging with autobiography. For example, Csilla Farkas' work *Her Drawers* (2013) directly deals with the stereotyped roles of women in domestic spaces as well as conflicted feelings of shame and protection that are linked to acts of domestic violence. Morna Lockie-Anrig's Minton tile styled flooring piece, *The Maid's Puzzle* (2013) considers the economic hierarchy of menial employment, the lower echelons as dominated by women. These tiles are made from pulped napkins gathered from her time working as a waitress. Cheryl Howard's series of illustrations *The Grandmother's Tale* (2013) is a feminist retelling of Charles Perrault's fairy tale 'Little Red Riding Hood' in the vein of Angela Carter's short story, *The Company of Wolves*. Another of her series, *High Tea* (2012) considers gender and class stereotypes in the debutante

Babs, Sharon Farrelly (2013)

system. However, it has become clear in discussions about *New Art West Midlands 2014*, that many of the female artists selected here, though not ignoring feminist concerns in aspects of their work, do not wish to be categorised as such; preferring conclusions to be drawn by the viewer in their subtler explorations of class, identity, girlhood, difference, queer politics and disability.

JM: I think Wendy Ann Titmus' sculptures of hands, feet and breasts made of beeswax and silicone are dealing with the female perspective in relation to the familial and inherited experiences as daughter and mother. These are 'human' works rather than being strictly female or feminist.

RB: Yes, in interview Wendy Ann talked about how she was a member of a women's art collective based at the Custard Factory in the 1990s, primarily making 'concrete text' prints, a format she has completely moved away from now. She is currently working with photography, as well as organic and pliable materials to make sculptures that challenge supposed advances in biomedical science. The haptic aspect of Titmus' work is also evident in Anna Smith's sculptures as she combines clay and silicone forms with other materials and objects to create works that question identity and body politics. Leah Carless too, has collected hair from the hairdresser's floor to make *Bare Wood Hair* (2013) combining it with silicone to make something that is both intriguing and repellent.

LB: Putting labels and categorising 'women's art' as a genre continues to be problematic mainly because a lot of overtly feminist art practice has been generated by Second-wave feminism which is viewed by many as a movement populated by Western, white, middle-class women. The original movement attacked inequality between men and women and many now think there is more work to do in looking at issues of identity on a much broader basis. Needless to say this would not be the position if the doors had not already been opened by the work of Second-wave feminism. We are not at the point of Post-feminism meaning 'after' feminism and, as discussed, feminism's potential to instigate change is an ongoing process, an unfinished project.

JM: I think the feminist movement now contains multiple voices that are fighting for equality on many different levels and within different social spheres. As we have seen in recent years, there has been a rise in direct activism, particularly in the environmental sphere, for example, with the Occupy movement that operates internationally.

RB: In addition different countries are moving at a different pace with Pussy Riot, for example, using the tactics and aesthetic of the Guerilla Girls' project and the Riot Grrrl movement of the 1990s to draw attention to freedom of speech, and inequality facing women and minority groups in Russia specifically, but also internationally.

LB: The female artists in *New Art West Midlands 2014* are from different cultural backgrounds and represent a mix of generations. In that way they have different perspectives on feminist art practice through time. Lucy Hutchinson said that her installation *For Home and Country* (2013) is more about class identities, intercultural and bi-lateral trade relations between the UK and Hong Kong, than feminism and the roles of women. She is also challenging the continued perception of the applied arts being a medium of female territory, portraying vignettes that reflect her self-defined class system as gold wallpaper. This interrogation of craft as 'lesser' media and its place in the art world hierarchy has a nice relationship with Grayson Perry's tapestries which Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery is showing concurrently.

RB: Sade Buckle is showing two sculptural works, *Gravidity* (2013) meaning the number of times a woman has been pregnant and *Oris* (2013) meaning the complex of muscles that encircle the mouth. By suspending hard-edged Perspex shapes to affect the interiority of the human body, these works appear to be minimalist sculptures, but involve intricately detailed etching reflecting the content of her source material, historical medical illustrations drawn by men of the female body.

JM: I like the way that she uses her materials almost to 'wipe clean' any emotional connection. The Perspex becomes a clinical material which evokes an abject element.

LB: Along with Ali Reed's precise, geometric laser-cut wood installation and Anna Horton's imperfect 'pavilion' work, I think Leah Carless' sculptures are also an exploration of minimalism as she juxtaposes the haptic, shaped Plaster of Paris 'bags' with rigid architectural features such as skirting boards and bannister spindles. She makes these sculptures of in-between spaces; they are

not gendered spaces. Chris Wright also considers interior space in her series of photographs of a disused, female-unfriendly and intimidating phone box in Manchester; a space made obsolete by the rise of the mobile phone.

JM: Again, though not overtly feminist practice, Sharon Farrelly's paintings are serious in their intent, not in their tone as an exploration of identity and personal phobias. Her use of camp imagery of comedy icons such as Larry Grayson and Les Dawson as well as Hanna Barbera cartoon characters derived from the television programmes of her childhood reflects upon the familial and autobiographical in a humorous, even joyous way.

LB: Amelia Greville's photographs use humour as well, as she explores the androgyny of identity, dressing up as the various characters from Frank Sinatra's song 'That's Life'. These characters are in flux in that they can't quite be pinned down and categorised in terms of gender. She considers stereotypes and attributable gender in her video work *My Way* (2013), in which she performs as six singers in a cheesy boy band. They are supposed to be different characters, but they are all the same in that they are all performed by Greville in a manufactured pop format.

JM: I think Emily Mulenga's work reflects a trend of young women using lo-fi digital media; it says such media is no longer the domain of the male geek alone. Mulenga's is a performative video work in which, like Greville, she dresses up and plays various different characters who are amalgamations of personalities derived from music, reality TV and celebrity culture.

LB: There are interesting explorations of female 'territories' in the landscape paintings of Santhanha Nguyen and Barbara Witkowska too. Nguyen's work reflects her Urbex trips to disused spaces which are no longer populated by human beings, but create an eerie sense that they once were. Witkowska's paintings *Target* (2013) and *Anatomy of Destruction* (2013) are fictional, futuristic landscapes that possess an other-worldly quality of escapism perhaps, as the real-world becomes harder to negotiate.

LB: In conclusion, perhaps what has become most evident from our conversations about the artists in *New Art West Midlands 2014* is that whilst themes or aspects of their work are indeed indicative of continued examination of identity and feminist politics of past practice, this relationship is anything but prescriptive. There is no need to refute such lineages, but these dialogues and comparisons may positively enable a wider reading of this work. A balance has been reached that cleverly hovers between appropriation, critique and renewal for the current generation. It will be fascinating to see how the work of these artists develops in years to come.

Lisa Beauchamp is Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, Birmingham Museums Trust.

Rachel Bradley is Project Organiser of *New Art West Midlands* and an independent curator.

Jane Morrow was Exhibitions Curator, Wolverhampton Art Gallery (2012–13). She is now Artist Development Curator at firstsite and Studio Network Manager for the Essex Network of Artists' Studios.

Her Drawers: Baby, Csilla Farkas (2013)

Artist-led Culture in the West Midlands

Then: 1970–2008

Rachel Bradley

Since the early 1960s the West Midlands region has been host to a buoyant and evolving set of artist-led and artist-run initiatives, networks and communities that have been started, revised and reinvented, closed and reopened with each new generation. Historically, such initiatives have coalesced around 'found spaces' or sites in urban centres; others have explored radicalism in new media or configured alternative identities and formats, often separatist and opposed to the institution. Artist-led culture has always been self-defined and self-organised by both groups and individuals in response to artistic, political and social environments sometimes using institutions as catalysts, its associations derived from the artists' milieu at the time of its emergence.

A cursory history of the 'artist-led' in the region might start with Ikon Gallery founded in 1964 by Trevor Denning, David Prentice, Colin Finn and Jesse Bruton, Art & Language at the art school in Coventry and Birmingham Arts Lab which, along with MAC, played a leading role in the development of the wider arts centre movement[1] of the 1970s. Jubilee Arts was an artist-led initiative set up in West Bromwich in 1977. The 1980s bore collectives such as The Blk Art Group which interfaced with the municipal gallery sector in organising the exhibition *Black Art an' Done* at Wolverhampton Art Gallery in 1981. Led by artists Keith Piper and Eddie Chambers (who met whilst studying at Lanchester Polytechnic, Coventry) the group was later joined by Claudette Johnson and Marlene Smith. Artist-led activity in the region during the 1980s and 1990s largely focused on setting up studio groups and 'Open Studios' events in Wolverhampton, Coventry, Shrewsbury, Stoke, Rugby and Leamington Spa. The Bond Gallery, founded in 1990, was at that time the only artist-led space in Birmingham and the artists' group Fine Rats International including Ivan Smith and Francis Gomila emerged to organise the seminal site-specific public art project, *Under Spaghetti Junction* (1993). During the 1990s Birmingham Art Trust (BAT) became a major force in artist-led activity that involved Una Rose Smith, Gary Kirkham, Graham Chorlton and Karen Trusselle along with groups that coalesced around The Custard Factory and Lee Bank Studios. In the wider region collective 'happenings' were organised at Eagle Works, Wolverhampton by Mick Thacker, Sylbert Bolton and Bridget MacDonald and by a cluster of artists in Leamington Spa including Simon Lewty. In 1994, BAT co-ordinator Angela Kingston organised a series of pop-up exhibitions in empty shops that included works by Kim Pace, Carolyn Morton and Nayan Kulkarni; a peripatetic project called *Art Safari* and a one-off, DIY exhibition in her small King's Heath flat called *Semi-Detached*. VIVID and Capsule (Lisa Meyer and Jenny Moore) were up and running in the late nineties along with the regular networking event *Boozy Schmooze* organised by Anne-Marie Pope. Junction, directed by Alison Deely was a subscription umbrella organisation set up to improve artists' networking in the region that ran from 1999–2001. *In the Midst of Things* (1999) curated by Nigel Prince and Gavin Wade showcased work by local, national and international artists including Cornford & Cross, Dan Graham and Andrea Zittel across sites in Bournville.

In 2003 Midwest[2] was set up in response to a tender advertised by ACE West Midlands to organise an artists' development programme for the region. Midwest tried hard (with successes and failures) to move away from a traditional model of organisation to provide a loose structure; a sounding board for artists to use as a catalyst and forum for creative thought in artist-led culture. Midwest had a virtual and real-life on-the-ground presence; events and discussions took place in ad hoc spaces such as squats, a yurt at 22 Green Street and pubs such as The Spotted Dog in Digbeth and The King's Arms in Salford. *Documenta X* curator, Catherine David, was invited

to tour the West Midlands and meet artists, Maria Lind contributed to the event *Know Your Place – Can Policy Be Artist-led?* and Group Material's Julie Ault spoke at a Midwest associated event in Galway co-ordinated by Megs Morley that concerned the artist-led archive. Midwest's artists' trips extended up and down the UK with networking events in Edinburgh, Leeds, Sheffield, Newcastle, Glasgow and Manchester. Artists, existing and new collectives hooked up with their peers and artist-led organisations including Workplace, Star & Shadow and Globe Gallery (Newcastle); Collective Gallery and Embassy (Edinburgh); Transmission and Market Gallery (Glasgow); East Street Arts (Leeds); International 3, Castlefield Gallery and Bureau (Manchester); and Islington Mill Art Academy (Salford). Midwest could be joined free of charge and its website, populated and moderated by artists leading current debate and discussion on its Forum and Artist's Pages sections, boasted 1400 members by 2007. Midwest was a tangible critical mass.

Artist-led initiatives, artists, producers and creative individuals with projects already on the ground or in development at this time, playing their part in forming this artist's community include: Space Banana (Mary Anderton, Tony Place and then Jo Capper); The Foundation (Jo Capper, Ruth Claxton, Simon and Tom Bloor); The Springhill Institute (Reuben Henry and Karen Kihlberg); Periscope (Kate Pemberton, Stephen Earl Rogers and Tom Ranahan); Funding Pending (Sandra Hall and Lee Griffiths); [insert space] (Cheryl Jones, Matt Westbrook and Charlotte Smith); Colony (Mona Casey and Paul McAree), Spectacle and Corridor led by Greg Cox and Keir Williams respectively; AirSpace (David Bethell); Self Service which held regular events at The Lamp Tavern; POD Projects (Trevor Pitt), Faye Claridge, Rhonda Wilson, Liz Rowe, Pamina Stewart, 'Captain' Ed Wakefield, Tone Nyarkoh, Nikki Pugh, Marlene Smith, Katy Connor, Matthew Krishanu, Barbara Walker, David Cheeseman, Crowd 6 and Yoke and Zoom (Nina Coulson and Alex Johnson). In 2005 Midwest organised an exhibition of recent graduates from the regional art schools called *The Best Year of Our Live*s in a former jewellery works on Frederick Street (now a Tesco Express). Curated by Michelle Cotton (now Senior Curator at firstsite, Colchester) the exhibition included work by Stuart Whipps, Tom Vickery and Tamsin Gear; a pre-cursor of the *New Art West Midlands* exhibitions, initiated to concentrate support for emerging artists as an essential part of the visual arts ecology that sustains the whole art world. The organisers of Midwest recognised its 'shelf-life' as tied to cultural development at a particular time and place and purposefully decided to cease its operation in March 2008.

1 *Birmingham Arts Lab: the phantom of liberty*, 1998, Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery and 'Arts Centres: Every town should have one', John Lane, 1978, Paul Elek London
2 Midwest was set up in early 2003 by Jason E Bowman, Rachel Bradley and Julie Crawshaw. Responding to artists' interests, a series of discussions, activities and 'open space' events were organised over a five year period including: *Word of Mouth*, 2005 (international networking); *Know Your Place? Can policy be artist-led*, 2007 (self-organisation and artists' influence on arts policy); *Intellectual Property*, 2004 (artists' space, cultural quarters and studio provision); *Should Black Art Still Be Beautiful?*, 2006 (current debates in Black cultural practice in collaboration with Pogus Caesar, OOM Gallery); Artist-Led Study Day, Edinburgh, 2006 and *Up, Up and Away*, 2008 (What is Midwest?).

Now: 2008–14

Cheryl Jones

Spode Factory, Ali Reed (2013)

The West Midlands, and Birmingham in particular, is an exciting place for artists to be in 2014. Perceptions of the region have changed and a responsive and viable art scene has taken root.

In May 2013 Self Service published the first Birmingham Art Map[1], a quarterly guide to visual art activity happening in the city. For a place the size of Birmingham to have only recently produced such a guide is remiss, however only in the last few years has it has felt like a truly joined-up visual arts ecology exists, where enough organisations, festivals, institutions, temporary projects and ad-hoc spaces make a map seem like a worthwhile and ongoing concern. The map acts as a simple archive, an asset missing in recent years, charting many of the individuals and groups mentioned in the 'Then: 1970–2008' text, who continue to work in Birmingham. Evidence of such initiatives and their stories (aside from the odd hard to find catalogue or flyer) are too often missing for new artists and practitioners emerging from or arriving in the city, hiding the histories that helped prepare the ground for the scene that now exists.

The time period I am writing about is particularly pertinent to me because 2008 was the year that the founding group of artists and curators started meeting to form Grand Union. In Birmingham it also marked a step-change in artist-led activity. The financial climate was changing, Birmingham Artists (BAT) studios closed, along with their project space Periscope and there was a desire amongst artists to create a new studio group model. Ikon had opened a new space in Digbeth in May that year and in September, Eastside Projects (which from the outset received regular funding from the Arts Council) was set to open just around the corner on Heath Mill Lane, with VIVID sitting in between. Until that time artist-led activity – The Springhill Institute, Colony, Spectacle and others – had been operating mostly in the Jewellery Quarter, so there was a discernible shift in focus to the other side of town.

The Springhill Institute provided a successful model to follow. Springhill's international residency programme brought new artists to the city and sent West Midlands' artists abroad. It created a space where practitioners could make work for public events and exhibitions, hangout, talk and collaborate. When it ended this type of dialogue continued to happen in pubs and at openings, but somehow felt less serious or productive, aside from more organised activity such as Self Service's *Pub Conversations*[2] and the activity of the newly formed Extra Special People (ESP) associate scheme at Eastside Projects. Despite some nomadic organisations and projects, more permanent spaces were needed to focus activity.

The lack of affordable studios and space to make work was, and for many still is, a key issue with current provision. Existing studios tended to be cold, damp and insecure, so particularly unsuitable for those working on paper or with digital or photographic equipment; not really ideal for anyone with serious aspirations to be a working artist.

This context provided the impetus to set up Grand Union. The aims were to create a work place that housed good quality, secure and warm studios; a project space to present an experimental public programme of exhibitiona and events; and a place to build a network sharing ideas, skills and resources. Opportunities to collaborate and exchange were at the heart of our vision and since opening in 2010, it feels that these key ideas are manifest not just in our own organisation, but across the visual arts community in Digbeth and further afield. Our base at Minerva Works has developed into a lively hub, where we have been joined by Ikon Gallery's Slow Boat,

VIVID Projects, Stryx, An Endless Supply and Plane Structure, as well as a printers, an art shop, a theatre scenery fabricators and an aerial theatre company.

In 2014 the artist-led scene in Birmingham and the West Midlands continues to develop with a number of organisations and projects firmly established as part of the cultural infrastructure of the region. Building on initiatives like The Event (a city wide, biennial festival of artist-led activity which ran from 2007–11) the power of collaboration and connectivity can now be seen in many forms. Our activity is being written about by the national press with regular exhibition reviews and exhibitions from the West Midlands featuring in several of Frieze's 'Looking Back' series (Winter 2013). Other additions to the West Midlands' artist-led landscape include Lombard Method and A3 Project Space in Birmingham, Majestic Studios in Stoke which has been set up by ex-Staffordshire graduates including Ali Reed and Barbara Witkowska (both exhibiting work in New Art West Midlands 2014) and in Worcester, artists Nathaniel Pitt and Stuart Layton have occupied the Old Library space to show new work during the past year.

However, Birmingham still lacks facilities that enable artists to produce work – workshops in which to experiment with materials, equipment and processes; flexible, accessible space in which to develop ambitious, large-scale and technologically complex works. Artist Ruth Claxton is leading the research project Birmingham Production Space, working with architects and artists to develop ideas to create a space for making with cross-disciplinary collaboration including art, design, craft, engineering and social enterprises at its core. Karen Newman is setting up Birmingham Open Media, a similar production facility with photography at its heart, but again with an emphasis on cross-disciplinary working.

But to become truly sustainable artist-led groups need to have assets, to own buildings or to hold long-term leases. We need to work together to lobby local authorities and negotiate peppercorn rents and rates relief so that resources can be focused on production, not paying the rent. Primary in Nottingham is a notable model. In 2011 the local authority handed over an old primary school building to artists, on a long lease and for a small rent. This group of artists have quickly created fantastic studios and flexible working spaces as a thriving cultural hub with a lively public programme, proving that even in times of austerity ambitious ideas can be realised.

It's now our job to push further forward and work with others to create new models, develop infrastructure for practice, argue for more, build the audience, demonstrate the value of artist-led activity and create a context that retains and attracts artists, curators and writers by providing them with a viable place to settle and develop their practice. Joined-up thinking by, and with, artists is producing successful and sustainable projects and if the region continues to build on these strong foundations, then the next six years promise great things.

Cheryl Jones is director of Grand Union, Birmingham.

1 www.birminghamartmap.org produced by Self Service (Ruth Claxton and Cheryl Jones)
2 www.npugh.co.uk/tag/pub-conversations/

A Dialogue with History: Interventions as Display

Robert Wenley

Delicate Rose (in collaboration with Michelle, in remembrance of Max), Wendy Ann Titmus (2013)

As in 2013, a distinctive feature of *New Art West Midlands* at The Barber Institute of Fine Arts in 2014 is the creative use of contemporary interventions amid historic works in the permanent collection gallery. As a mode of display, interventions are nothing new – indeed they have become almost commonplace in UK galleries since the early 1990s – but, used judiciously and in a fresh context, they can still pack a punch. The juxtaposition of contemporary works with canonical art (or within historic interiors) can enhance the appeal, interest and impact of both. The relevance, direct or indirect, of the old to the new is made more readily apparent by such displays. It's a strategy that sometimes seems to be somewhat desperately embraced in an attempt to reverse the declining pull of an historic collection but, at The Barber, where this is emphatically not a factor, the more positive aspects prevail.

Historic collections – especially those of traditional galleries like The Barber, lined with old master and pre-modern paintings from an established canon of western art – are imbued with authority and status. In this context, interventions of work by contemporary artists (barred from inclusion in The Barber's permanent collection by the terms of the Institute's founding document) can seem radical and challenging, perhaps even threatening. The degree to which they may be perceived as revolutionary upstarts or as belonging to the same tradition as the historical works, and thus blessed with their aura, may depend on the attitudes the visitor brings to their viewing experience as much as the intent of the artist. Certainly, such placements provide implicit cultural

reference points, which are there to be exploited.

An intervention has the potential to draw from everything around it – the gallery setting and other objects therein – into its own meaning and impact, in a tradition stretching back at least to Duchamp's ready-mades. Interventions in turn should provoke thought and stimulate closer scrutiny of what surrounds them, sometimes providing a critique of these historic works, sometimes sharing common themes, formal values or techniques. They may be modern versions of traditional subjects, either chiming or contrasting with them, and so can be variously comfortable or awkward, delightful or unnerving. It is hoped that any danger that they might 'steal the show', or are used superficially, has been avoided at The Barber, where the curator has worked closely with the artists in the placement of artwork, in a process that is often seen as a creative act itself.

In addition to the display of works by *New Art West Midlands 2014* artists Caroline Ali, Leah Carless, Cheryl Howard, Glen Stoker and Chris Wright in the Lady Barber Gallery, five artists including Birkin and Carless have works as interventions in the Barber's permanent collection galleries. Wendy Ann Titmus's *Nurse and Child* (2012) is one of a series of works that explores the amalgamation of art and medical science to investigate the physical and psychological malfunction of human biological structure in relation to industry, disease, drugs and current treatments. The placing of her work in a vitrine alludes to both the precious and rare objects of Nature found in historic wunderkammern (cabinets of curiosities) and to traditional preserved medical specimens and taxidermy displays found behind glass. Her *Delicate Rose* (2013), a poignant representation of a mother's love and grief for her deceased son, is even more explicit in its reference to such models.

Sade Buckle is also drawn to medical subjects and her work explores the form, intricate details and beautification of the human body as expressed in historic medical textbooks. Her etched Perspex work *Oris* (2013) (Latin for mouth) is built up from layering of transparencies which create 'virtual mapped out' plane forms from segments of the body, mimicking dissection techniques. *Oris* shares with the anatomist the same time-consuming concerns for exactitude and was inspired by a startling medical illustration of the mouth found in J.B.M. Bourgery and N.H. Jacob's extraordinary and influential *Traité complet de l'anatomie de l'homme*, Paris, 1832–51. Its display among an array of imposing late-eighteenth century portraits at The Barber, some not just 'speaking' but singing likenesses, provides alternative opportunities to scrutinise this most expressive organ.

Leah Carless is also concerned with the human body; her intervention *Bare Wood Hair* (2013) interrogates human bodily connections to architecture, addressing the spaces we inhabit and their thresholds. The human trace or idea of the absent body is an important aspect of her work and manifests itself in materials that have bodily connections, in this instance human hair. In form it suggests the shadowy arc created by the repeated opening of a door over a carpet or rug, which provides the obvious if not essential clue for its place of display – in front of a door.

James Birkin's painting of the Mustard nightclub is a page from a visual diary, documenting neglected aspects of an urban landscape. Although sourced mainly from photographs, his series of paintings aims to capture a sense of loss and personal place that photography is not always able to capture. In this instance his paintings of a derelict nightclub in Coventry; a rotting monument to the past, gradually falling to pieces, but whose brash and dated decor largely survives within and without. As such, the juxtaposition of *Mustard Nightclub* (2013) with Jan Miel's Capriccio with the *Arch of Constantine* (1640s), a semi-ruined monument of classical antiquity, provides a happy marriage, sharing a common theme and even some fortuitous rhymes of architectural detailing.

In many ways the simplest work in the exhibition, and perhaps the closest to Marcel Duchamp in its combination of wit and menace, is Sikander Pervez's *Untitled (Castors & Chair)*, 2013. Like his other works shown elsewhere in *New Art West Midlands 2014*, this work directly challenges our perception of the functions of objects, fashioning mundane objects into something powerful and unsettling. Its effect is enhanced by displaying it with comparable simplicity, in a position that is at once ordinary and exalted.

Robert Wenley is Deputy Director, Head of Collections and Learning at The Barber Institute of Fine Arts.

Untitled: Castors & Chair, Sikander Pervez (2012)

Who Took The (He)Art Out of the Art Schools? – 2004

David Harding

Just the other day a friend announced that he had given up his teaching job to concentrate on his own art practice. He had a number of exhibitions in the pipeline and other opportunities for making new work as an artist-in-residence and a possible public art project. He simply could not keep the teaching going with the commitment he wanted to give to it and also do justice to his practice. He had been in what was regarded as a 'plum job' – running his own department, on a 0.5 contract at postgraduate level. My friend is part of a new phenomenon – more artists than ever before are able to make a living from their art and related activities so that less and less have the need to teach in art school. More worryingly, many of them have lost the desire to do so because art schools are very different places to what they themselves experienced as students. There is a crisis waiting to happen here. It is this – art schools need to have a fair proportion of teaching staff who are highly regarded artists both nationally and internationally, yet a decreasing number of them will ever teach in an art school. Art schools are no longer the attractive places for artists that they once were.

Art schools have always attracted some of the most highly regarded artists around. Many of these artists sought jobs in art schools because they loved teaching young artists and wanted to share their skills and visions with them. It was noble and rewarding work. Edmund Keeley captures the mood of what it was like after 1945 when he writes, 'We came out of the war with an almost religious belief in the power of art and literature. There was a sense of calling about being a teacher.'[1] Some artists taught full-time and managed to keep their art practice going without short-changing the school and the students. The hours, conditions of work and salaries were good and vacations allowed for unbroken, concentrated work in the studio. Some even had their studios in the art school itself and students would benefit from witnessing the artist at work and sometimes act as assistants. Artist–principals ran the art schools and some of them were charismatic shaping their schools with inspired artistic and educational leadership. These were prestigious jobs and their incumbents had clout in the art world. The mood of idealism described by Keeley seems now to have all but been extinguished in the face of materialism, managerialism and instrumentalism, and artist-led art schools a thing of the past. The question is, 'are art schools the better for these dramatic changes?' To attempt to answer this it is necessary to explore how we got to where we are now.

It seems to me that the seeds of the present crisis were sown in the mid-1970s when art schools began to want to see themselves as academic institutions offering degrees. For this to happen there had to be a substantial lecture programme and written work as part of a student's education with essays and a final dissertation containing around 10,000 words. This in itself was an important and worthwhile development, but much else that came with the degree status was simply not applicable to the education of artists. The university model is simply not a good paradigm for art education. In the former the emphasis is on the assimilation of existing knowledge whereas in the latter the emphasis is on creating new perceptions. However one of the most problematic and destructive aspects of this mimicking of universities, for both staff and students, has been the assessment of students' work using degree classifications. How does one assess art in terms of First Class, Upper Second, Lower Second and Third Class? The unease with which art school staff approached this disconnection resulted in awarding many more First and Upper Second degrees than is found in universities and has always been a bone of contention between the two. 'Mickey Mouse degrees' was the dismissive term used by university staff to describe the art school awards. Further, many art school staff will know of students who, awarded First Class degrees, make no waves in the art world and those with Second Class degrees gaining international recognition for their work.

As is well known, (though worth repeating again and again) things began to go seriously wrong with the Tory government of 1979 and it has continued, with 'extreme force', under New Labour's Thatcherite policies. One of Thatcher's first acts was to cut spending on higher education. Salaries were put on a downward spiral so that today they have fallen in real terms by 30 to 40%; result – teaching in art school is no longer financially attractive. Then managers began to replace artists in the running of the art schools; result – no clear academic leadership based on a mature experience and understanding art and art education. Teaching staff numbers were cut and student numbers increased with staff to student ratios moving from ten to one in the 1970s to thirty or forty to one today; result – in a discipline where the one-to-one tutorial is at the core of teaching, the workload drains many staff of the energy and will needed to continue their art practice at a consistently high level. These ratios also have to take into account the plethora of meetings and working committees all staff now have to attend. Heads of departments often find that much of their week is taken up by meetings and administration. And what are all these meetings; what are they for? Some meetings are, of course, essential and productive and no institution can get by without them, but many others are to do with the new and increasing demands of management, policy and administration. Quality Assurance Assessment, Credit Accumulation and Transfer, Enhancement Led Institutional Review, Modularisation, Student Centred Learning, Learning and Teaching Outcomes (all documents now begin with a long list of acronyms) among a plethora of other 'improving' strategies, have increased administrative and paper burdens; result – administrative demands on teaching staff penalise students; strategies are urgently being developed by which students can teach themselves and staff become 'time managers'; administrative staff and budgets increase while teaching staff and teaching budgets decrease. It is now normal for heads of departments to work excessive hours with no time-off in lieu. Of course this is a condition which applies to many areas of the public sector. But something is seriously amiss in the world of higher education when author A.S. Byatt feels compelled to say, 'Universities are depressed… they're terrified and cowering and under-financed and over-examined and over-bureaucratised.'

However, the crucial difference for art schools is that staff have to maintain a professional practice and pursue opportunities for exhibiting, for art projects, for residencies, for public art commissions and the like. While university staff have to publish their research results, teaching loads are much less onerous. It is quite a different matter to deliver lectures to several hundred students than it is to build a personal understanding with each student to assist their development as artists (art school staff would know all of their students by name). Vacations are no longer the opportunity to develop one's art practice as they have been shortened by institutional demands on staff time. Art schools have become businesses and they have had to find ways of making money. Short courses and summer schools are set up during the vacations which staff can be called upon to teach. To meet budget shortfalls all higher educational institutions have had to recruit overseas students. For some institutions the percentage of full-fee students is dangerously high as they now rely on these to operate. One London art school has several hundred Japanese students doing its Foundation Course. Fees from overseas students now fund the material and administrative budgets of departments and a percentage of teaching staff salaries. It would not take much of an economic downturn in some of these overseas countries for this source of finance to dry up with devastating effect on those institutions that rely heavily on these fees.

The Tory policy, carried on by New Labour, of appointing managers to run public institutions, rather than specialists of the discipline of the institution, has seriously damaged the ethos of art schools. The management demands on principals, heads of department and full-time staff has increased so much it has become increasingly difficult to attract applications from artist candidates for these posts. And for those few who do apply, the quality is often poor. After failure to appoint, the re-advertising of these posts is a norm as well as the often fruitless and costly headhunting. It is now a problem even to get active, highly regarded artists for part-time posts since the institutional demands often result in having to put in a full week's work for half a week's pay. However, there will always be an endless supply of more recent graduates willing to fill these jobs and, knowing no other conditions, having never experienced the culture of better times,

will just accept the status quo. What the hell…they have a job in an art school – which, on the surface, is still an attractive one – and say to themselves, 'well this is how it is.' Some will leave when they realise that the demands made upon them will begin to affect their ability to maintain their professional art practice.

I have to stress that I do not support unequivocally the way things were in the art schools in the distant past. There were abuses of the privilege of teaching in an art school. I have heard it described thus; 'In the old days it was like a gentlemen's club. If I wanted to go fishing for three days, I went fishing for three days.' However there was a quid pro quo. Staff would often work evenings and weekends when necessary simply for the good of students and the school. There was a strong sense of being part of a sharing community in which staff had a stake. This sense now seems to have gone. While I regard my own years as a student at art school in the1950s as some of the most stimulating and rewarding years of my life there were serious deficiencies. There was little or no art history and certainly no art theory, nor opportunities for critical or intellectual discussion and some students suffered from a lack of teaching and guidance. Constructive, worthwhile reforms were needed and in some respects these have made things better for the students in today's art schools, but in others this is not so.

One such is the notion of research in art education and the whole farrago of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). It has to be recalled that the funding for research came from the massive cut in the teaching budget of institutions resulting in cuts in teaching staff numbers. The ensuing competition for research funding suits the growing imposition of the market economy on education. In the art schools the response to winning research points has been the appointment of high profile artists on research contracts with no obligation to teach. Students again have lost out in this cynical misuse of education funding. Art education has become more about research and less about the art and as Pavel Buchler has said, 'Research is not the academic paradigm which fits the production of artists. There is a difference between know-how and knowledge, the latter can be consumed, written down and then forgotten; know-how becomes embedded through practice.'[2] Art schools now pass on knowledge that can be assessed. I have heard it said that the least interesting students are those doing PhDs by practice who suffer from what Christopher Ricks describes as, 'doctoral paralysis'.

Demands on students to be accountable with the early, constant rationalisation and justification of work through written 'learning outcomes' before the work is actually made, leads to shallow work. Where does Keats' 'negative capability', which he described as, 'when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without an irritable reaching after fact and reason', fit into the reformed, efficient and improved art schools. Where in our reformed art schools are the opportunities to fail which are so necessary to the taking of risks. The creative process cannot be hurried and time is needed for the kind of reflection in which nothing might be done but from which, as is often attested, synapses happen. As Anna Harding[3] puts it, 'Artists on the whole make a choice in their lives not to be ruled by the accountability culture, but to do what they believe in.' Yet the whole system in art schools, which demands 'compliance with the codes of procedure', is now dominated by such accountability. In reviewing recent novels about university life Laurie Taylor writes, they were, 'full of campuses in which management experts and development leaders, all speaking management jargon, are locked in a battle with the few people left who still believe that there's something more to universities than providing people with degrees that enable them to get jobs.' Aida Edemariam[4] believes that, 'this is the major battle still being fought, first joined under Thatcher and continued under Blair: the campus in now a site for a clash between two pretty fundamental values, the instrumental and the intrinsic, auditors versus intellectuals.'

But it may already be too late to save the arts schools from their present condition. In a review of Frank Furedi's recent book, 'Where Have All The Intellectuals Gone?' Dylan Evans writes, "(He) believes our grandchildren will curse us…I warmly recommend Furedi's new book to the politicians, civil servants, vice-chancellors and head teachers who control educational policy in Britain today. But if the cultural mandarins ignore this book, as they probably will, then I hope it will inspire rank-and-file professionals – lecturers, teachers, researchers – to resist the philistine agenda that they are urged to

implement, and to offer their students a grander and bolder vision of the life of the mind.' To restore the (he)art it may be we need to found new art schools.

This article was originally written and published by artist and New Art West Midlands selector, David Harding in 2004. See his website: www.davidharding.net

Note from the author (2014)
Since 2004 various groups have been formed to discuss what to do to try to oppose the way that art schools have been going. More recently, due mainly to the huge fees prescribed and the perceived lack of teaching being offered, small experimental art schools have been started. These prompted an article in the Guardian (22/10/13) with the title, *Alternative art schools: a threat to universities?*.

Further, it looks like one now has to have at least an MFA, if not a PhD, to even get a teaching job in art schools today.

David Harding OBE is an artist and Founder and Head of Environmental Art Department, Glasgow School of Art (1985–2001).

1 Edmund Keeley (b.1928) is an author, translator and Charles Barnwell Straut Professor Emeritus of English at Princeton University, New Jersey, USA.
2 Pavel Buchler was formerly Head of Fine Art, Glasgow School of Art and is Research Professor at Manchester School of Art, Manchester Metropolitan University.
3 Anna Harding is Chief Executive of Space Studios, London and was Programme Leader MA Curating, Goldsmith's London.
4 Aida Edemariam is a senior feature writer for The Guardian.

Juche: Art School State of Mind – 2014

Neil Mulholland

David Harding's spirited lamentation on the sorry fate of the art school could only have been penned prior to the global economic crash. The phenomenon of an artist happily able to choose between teaching and making a living from a combination of public grants and the art market has fast become the stuff of legend. In the past decade, even the most precarious jobs in art schools are scarce as funding has evaporated. While the private art market grew in visibility, it provided no formal educational support for would-be artists or any capital investment in their 'emergence'. Then as now, the market commodifies only established professional artists, artists who have already earned their cultural capital in the public sector. Even so, a relatively tiny proportion of artists are marketed, fewer still in recent years, since many of the late '00s start-up private galleries – with no capital investment or estate to keep them afloat – have gone bankrupt. With no public sector to educate artists in the future, will there be any contemporary art for the market to trade? How can you jump ship when there are no other ships sailing? Given such developments, is it possible today to sympathise with Harding's friend with the 'plum job'?

Such a leap from the public to the private sector in the '00s made by many artists has aided and abetted education's corporatisation. Well-meaning people's bad decisions are a factor in the potential crisis that Harding imagined. For too long art schools have suffered staff who do not want to be in education. For those who have no intention of being educationalists, the 'plum job' is merely a day job – its sole function is to support their practice. Students subjected to 'teachers' who harbour such a sense of entitlement are not a consideration, they are a means to an end. Who 'needs' to teach in an art school? Plenty of artists 'want' to; they are the committed people that we need in art schools.

What is to blame for this? Harding rightly blames Tory cuts to education in the 1980s and '90s for casualising the workforce of higher education, art schools included. In a neoliberal regime, government actively encourages us each to become our own corporation. As higher education has corporatised, its employees have adopted a business-minded self-regard and coldly weighed up their futures options. Yes, but did everyone have to play the mercenary so eagerly?

Was it really better by degrees before degrees? Harding's golden memory of 1950s art education is, surely, an exception to the rule. The failings of '50s art education, which he acknowledged, were legion. By most accounts, the majority of art schools then were regional backwaters remarkable for their lack of engagement with their emerging field (contemporary art) with new practices of learning, for their incomprehensiveness, their patriarchy, and for their intransigent anti-intellectualism. This is a post-war legacy that has been very difficult to shake off. It's largely the result of a lack of strategy on the part of the artists who ran art schools (poorly), the consequence of a 'pedagogy' that is tutor-centred, in which 'charismatic' masters instructed their willing apprentices to advance their own reputations and in which favouritism was rife. The art schools of the post-war era were gentlemen's clubs, grooming and policing future members. In serving the continuity of the status quo, they served their own ends.[1] Before the Diploma in Art & Design (DipAD) art schools held little hope of becoming comprehensive or meritocratic. As Harding was right to acknowledge, in spite of its many problems, DipAD (and the BA and Masters programmes that followed in its wake) generated a degree of transparency and parity that had been entirely absent in higher art education in the UK. Staff had to justify their value judgments to the wider world, making their critical engagement with their field and the wider humanities more robust. Of course, sophistry still exists in art schools, but it survives furtively, as an embarrassing throwback to the '50s. A different, meritocratic managerialism replaced the state corporatism of the old boys' imperialist network. Within a generation, working-class graduates began to work in higher education and brought with them radical reforms of

its canons and methods. But, managerialism existed equally before and after these reforms, it simply began to serve a different purpose. The fact that the quality assurance project has become instrumentalist should not cause us to forget the enormity of what it achieved in the 1970s. Equally, as much as we need to resist high staff to student ratios we also need to remember that art schools are part of mass education. If we are serious about opening access to lifelong learning, we have to find ways of doing more with less. The alternative is turning back the clock to the dark days of the pre-comprehensive era.

The university model of research, since governed by the same bodies, is no different to that of the independent art school. Harding's account overstated the differences. The freedoms, opportunities, and responsibilities that research represents is the same to an artist working in higher education as it is to a scientist. Only staff and PhD students in universities are charged with the creation of new knowledge (or, *really*, are in any position to deliver on this promise). Undergraduates are concerned with assimilating *and applying* knowledge. This was the case with independent art schools before they began to compete for research funding and remains so now. As Harding pointed out, cuts to the teaching budget meant that art schools had to split research from learning to address the gross deficit in public funding. This has, very slowly, changed the way that art schools perceive practice and learning as forms of research. While this can lead to some questionable research posing as art, and vice versa, it has, at least, generated a requirement that artists involve students directly in their research, and this means that staff must remain active. If art schools wish to engage in special pleading with regard to research it will do them no favours. They will lose access to research grants and thus to HE status, effectively rendering them 100% fee paying, private finishing schools.

Much needed reforms to learning and teaching to which Harding appeared resistant finally made their way into art schools in the '00s. Contrary to what Harding alluded, John Biggs' popular theory of constructive alignment in curriculum design did not necessitate the assessor or the student pre-determining the outcomes of their own work; it simply clarified the relationship between how the art student learned and how they were assessed. Biggs' constructivism is far from perfect, but it is, at least, adaptable. Indeed, educational constructivism, as inherently experimental and experiential, has lent itself particularly well to the forms of unlearning, self-directed, group, tacit, haptic and open learning that (allegedly) happens in art schools. It is expressly heuristic and concerned with constructing new knowledge from old. It is a peculiar irony that social constructivism has tended to dominate art practices since the 1970s. Artists making a living as educationalists have a duty to engage with the theory and practice of education and to relate this to their own (constructivist) art practices.

Prior to the arrival of educational constructivism, art schools, if anything, were focused almost exclusively on prescribing and assessing outcomes. The 'degree show' is a final paper, the capstone *par excellence*, a predetermined strategy of dissemination, against which all art students were ranked. The degree show neglected to acknowledge the learning processes that take place over the years spent in art school and it failed to offer students flexibility to make work that did not fit into the limited confines of a studio space. My experience of constructivism in learning in this century is a mixed one. I have thought long and hard about how to adapt and reform this approach. The space for me to do so, however, is there. Experimentation in learning is encouraged – it is central to art school education. Ways of learning are passed on to and through colleagues working in art schools around the world. Art schools have pioneered radical pedagogies of learning and lead the way within university level education.

Wha's like us? The essentialist argument that none of this is relevant since art schools are inherently different from universities, an exceptionalism that Harding advocated, has its attractions as much for those whose reputation rests on maintaining the modernist myth of limitless artistic agency as for middle managers of small specialist institutions clinging to their tin-pot status. It more commonly stems from an unwillingness to engage with anything 'outside the art school', an insular philosophy akin to North Korea's *Juche*. This is particularly misplaced since contemporary art has flourished precisely because it is (like the university itself) so extraordinarily *extra*-disciplinary. The inward-looking ideology that art schools exhibit towards pedagogy has no place *outside* of the art

Mustard Nightclub, James Birkin (2013)

school wherein art enjoys a healthy educational turn. If critiques of educational experimentation are to have any value, it is crucial that they attempt, at least, to understand educational theory and practice. Art schools are interdependent, not independent.

The great art school versus university divide is a false dichotomy since art schools, like universities, are mongrel institutions. Those big enough to have survived the DipAD reforms are Frankensteins sewn together from Victorian government art and design schools, Academie Francaise-style *atelier-ecole* (the ultimate in conservative *academe*) and the remnants of rule-bound medieval guilds, workshops and confraternal *Scuola*. In their pre-modern origins, opportunistic masters offering up tuition to apprentices in return for a fee, they are indistinguishable from the first English university colleges in Oxford and Cambridge. Today's universities are hybridised assemblages of formerly independent institutions, palimpsests of collegiate competition and cooperation. Given the university's quest to enable a holistic educational experience, a genuine understanding of the relatedness of all knowledge and peoples, it's fitting that art schools should come under their umbrella.

In this sense, the problem lies not with art schools being in universities *per se*, but with the corporate acquiesce of some careerist senior managers. As Harding wrote, managerialism and instrumentalism are rife in higher education and the public sector as a whole, and since art schools are part of higher education, they are not immune. Equally, however, their infection is not terminal. Those working on the ground and studying in art schools, like many students and academics, are an imaginative and resilient bunch. The art school has managed to negotiate changing contexts (as artists must). Art schools *must* be different places to what they were ten years ago, twenty years ago. As the world changes so does education. The process is reciprocal. Art schools have changed the environment into which their students graduate. Ye are many – they are few.

The conservatoire approach to which Harding refers – the received model of one-to-one personal tuition – is not a 'tradition'; it's a relatively new approach, one that emerged in tandem with modernism. Personal tuition sustains a particularly modernist artistic subject: a subject out of both time and place, a subject fixated with their own personalised ontology at the expense of knowledge. Harding's erstwhile programme at Glasgow School of Art, the BA in Environmental Art stakes its reputation in breaking away from this model, to some extent, asking artists to engage with different cultural, social, political and economic contexts.

Personal tuition need not be entirely abandoned, but it's not helpful to cling to it as if it were the *sin qua non* of 'good teaching', there are many other ways of learning to be an artist.

Founding new art schools that are uncorrupted by higher education management culture sounds like an indisputably good idea, so it is not surprising that many artists, lecturers and students have done just this in the past few years. There is an energy and idealism that echoes through the creative commons back to the free university and further still to the Agora. Crisis or not, there is a continuing need to generate such collective forms of learning, to learn in semi-structured public environments such as communities of practice and communities of purpose. However, many of the free schools of recent years have popped off as quickly as they popped up. This is because they are unsustainable. Such free schools need to be supported by volunteers and volunteers need to pay the rent, which means they have to find a job elsewhere doing something other than teaching and making art. There aren't many jobs elsewhere right now and so the gift-economy, so central to the flourishing of contemporary art in the '90s and '00s, is being throttled to death. The free schools are pint-sized versions of the institutions they are seeking to substitute for, state-let apparatuses rather than growing communities of practice.

Since free art schools are independent from the public higher education sector they aren't going to find a means of supporting themselves beyond the *laissez-faire* marketplace. So Peter Ashton Jones' and Marcus Harvey's Turps Banana School of Painting in London, for example, charges its students for tuition much in the manner of a confraternal *Scuola*. Turps Banana may well provide a valuable platform for aspiring painters and painting critics, but its very existence helps to justify cutting all public subsidy to the art schools that remain in the higher education system. Given the opportunism we are currently witnessing, Harding's closing remarks – 'we need to found new art schools' – is an unwitting call to privatise higher education rather than fight to reform it from within. Progressive reform is achievable. If it was possible to reform higher art education in the oligarchy that was post-war Britain, then it's possible now.

In conclusion, clearly a balance has to be maintained between an artistic practice and an educational practice but, as Harding's own pedagogy proves, it is both possible and beneficial to synthesise the two. As he suggested, by prioritising its business plan in the context of a transnational marketplace and minimising its global risks, the art school no longer serves the state or the local community, it no longer serves as a collegiate body and thus it fails to command a familial loyalty from its staff or its students. Of course, it's up to staff and students to resist this cynicism in the work that they do, within and through their institutions. Students and academics could learn together to offer more viable ethical approaches. One way that Universities are currently re-establishing their commitment to serve their communities, for example, is by licensing all publicly funded research and artistic practice as an open source, ensuring that it remains in the commons and cannot be exploited, exclusively, for private profit. A common commitment to art as a catalyst for change is a more attractive alternative to the hollow ring of the 'University of Excellence'.

It must be remembered that it was the comprehensive reforms to education of the 1960s that changed the demography of higher education, slowly coercing conservative institutions, such as art schools, to change their ways, by infiltrating them. But the institutions were not the origin of such reforms, the new students were their Trojan. Rather than founding alternative art schools, today's art school graduates need to raise the stakes and focus their attention on founding new states of mind.

Prof Neil Mulholland is Associate Head of School of Art, Edinburgh College of Art, The University of Edinburgh. He has taught in art schools since 1995.

See websites: www.neilmulholland.co.uk and confraternityofneoflagellants.org

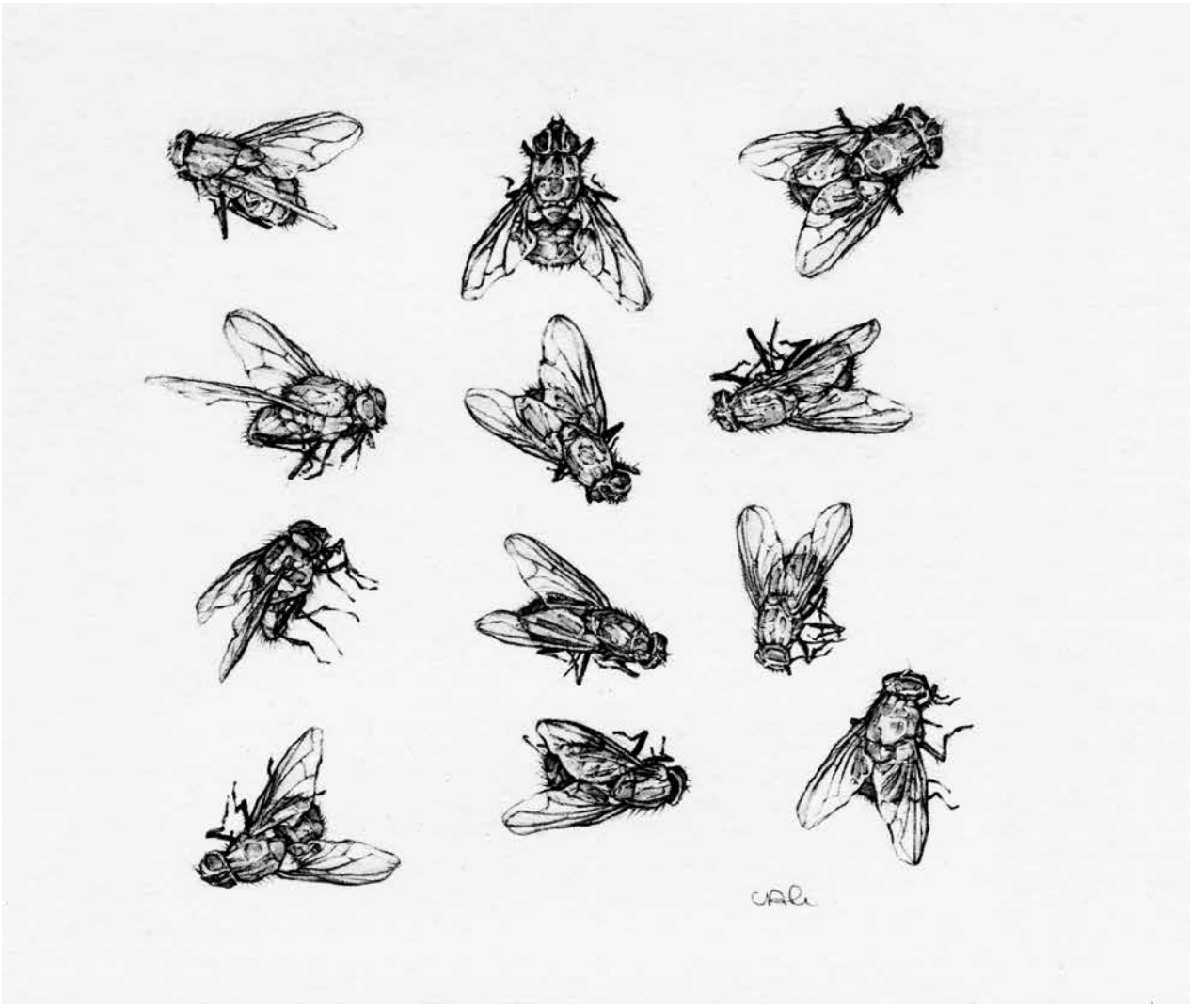
1 The corporate art school of the '00s and '10s described by Harding follows a different path. It produces a neoliberal subject, a 'bundle of skills' (learning outcomes) that is not only infinitely adaptable to the market but that is a catalyst of emerging markets, of new configurations of capital. The neoliberal subject is stateless and without community, it answers only to itself. It has no goal other than to 'spread' its domains.

ARTIST PROFILES

Caroline Ali

Caroline Ali's works interrogate the medium and act of drawing. By making time-based works and drawings on paper, she examines the function of drawing in observing, recording and tracing. Her recent body of work explores the physical traces evident in drawings as she directly engages with works in museum and gallery collections to create new 'evidence' of the act of drawing. Ali's works are manifest as secondary records of her encounters with original artworks such as Rossetti's pencil drawn self-portrait (1859), held in the City of Birmingham's collection. Her intent is not to create a representational image, but to trace her observations to explore theories of perception, visualising gaps in our recollection and memory.

For New Art West Midlands, Ali exhibits two stop frame animations *Fly Montage* (2013) which are shown in positive and negative formats. Originally a sheet of eighty-nine graphite studies of a house fly, made with the aid of a magnifying lens, each different drawing has been captured and superimposed, one over another, as a montage. Whilst the positive version *Fly Montage (positive)* (2013) evokes drawing with a pencil on white paper, *Fly Montage (negative)* (2013) imagines drawing with white chalk on a blackboard. The positive version imagines a fly in daylight, black against a white surface. The negative version, white against a black surface, is a fly seen at night, in moonlight or car headlights. This work examines sequential drawing that inherently refers to saccades (tiny movements) of the human eye; movements that form part of the visualisation process. The length of both of these films was determined by the time it took for Ali to draw the fly and the scratchy soundtrack of the films records this process.



Drawings for *Fly Montage (positive)* (2013)
Graphite on paper

James Birkin

Formerly a cinema, the now derelict Mustard nightclub in Coventry has paradoxically found a new lease of life in James Birkin's work. His acrylic paintings capture the abandoned interiors of the building, the bar and dance floor scattered with the detritus of mirrored furnishings and stainless steel fittings; the décor of the year 2000. Paperwork, ring binders and food remnants are strewn across *The Office* (2013). Once a hive of activity, this space now exists only as a time capsule of a particular place at a particular moment.

Birkin is interested in the depiction of the overlooked and the mundaneness of urban life which connects his concerns with those of George Shaw. But, whereas Shaw concentrates on exterior views, Birkin's focus is one of concealed interiors in derelict buildings, looking at the human trace of the past and the errors of decision-making by previous city planners. Buildings such as the Mustard nightclub have proliferated in recent years as familiar centre-pieces of the cityscape, their prevalence an indicator of today's economic climate as money to renovate or demolish is sparse. This situation reflects a continuum or cycle that continues to inspire artists, and Birkin is actively involved in the Mustard's 'Save It' campaign.

Birkin uses flash photography to take images of the dark interior setting and then transforms the images in paint, flirting with photorealism to capture the vibrancy of its former life. The camera becomes crucial in this 'restorative' translation of the interior, from dark and desolate to something almost warm and inviting. The paintings encapsulate the 'in between' quality of the building which moves from dereliction, through stasis to future renewal.

The Office (2013)
Acrylic on canvas
45 x 30 cm

Sade Buckle

Influenced by biochemistry and mechanics, Sade Buckle's intricate sculptures take their cue from the language and illustrations concerning the 'interiority' of the human body examined in medical science from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. For New Art West Midlands, Buckle specifically references the illustrated books of William Hunter and Jan van Riemsdyk's 'The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus' (1774) and Jean Baptiste Marc Bourgery and Nicolas Henri Jacob's 'Mouth' (1831). It is the detailed anatomical drawing and shading techniques used in these illustrations that allows Buckle to create so much depth and accuracy in her three-dimensional installations, communicating the actuality of their subject matter.

A concern with the detailed accuracy of MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) scanning and the physical mapping of the human body's interior has moved Buckle's research on from her earlier work which involved the casting of animal organs and dissections. Buckle's two works for the New Art West Midlands exhibitions, *Gravidity* (2013) and *Oris* (2013) consider trace, interiority and metonymical association. With an interest akin to those of artist Lindsay Seers, Buckle's installations delve into the unseen territories of the once living, breathing body.

Gravidity, the Latin word for pregnancy and Oris meaning mouth, suitably reflects the historical medical illustrations of Buckle's source material, but it is the formal realisation of transparent and brightly coloured, laser cut Perspex that reflects their modernity. The Perspex shapes in *Gravidity* are suspended on fishing line, floating in space thus enabling the viewer to walk around them. Its separate parts align from a certain perspective to create the whole. *Oris*, a sculpture etched with line drawings of the mouth with delicate precision aims to break down the physical boundaries between visible exterior and invisible interior.

Oris (2013)
Etched Perspex, metal screws
90 x 29.7 x 21 cm

Leah Carless

Human or bodily connections to architecture and furniture, our relationship to place and the way we inhabit space are key themes in Leah Carless' work. Carless demonstrates an enthusiastic curiosity for material properties and the processes she employs to manipulate them. She makes works that are responsive to her surroundings, interrogating her self-set parameters of scale and how the movement and touch of the body contribute to the haptic quality of her sculptures. The human trace and its bodily and domestic associations are evident in her choice of materials: tumble dryer lint, human hair, felt, fish scales and skin-like sheets of rubber. These materials, as in *Bare Wood Hair* (2013), often abject and chaotic in nature, are manipulated to appear more structured and contained.

Drawing Room (2013) is an abstract sculpture that makes reference to design, technical drawing and construction. It presents layers of materials used in domestic interior décor such as bannisters, spindles and skirting boards. Carless draws attention to textures by making subtle changes in solid materials, composing softer and more tactile elements that draw the eye towards the nooks and crannies of the structure. In doing so, she compares the conceptual theories of domestic design with the actuality of living in it. *Drawing Room* also emphasises the divergence of the precision of technical drawing with the near impossibility of rendering that exactness with the materials and processes she uses.

Carless has made new work for Grand Union which responds directly to the architecture of the space. At an industrial site in Digbeth, Grand Union's location has provided her with very different textures and types of architectural details to emulate and manipulate. Carless continues to examine her interest in human trace and the absent body in this work, but uses a new sense of scale.

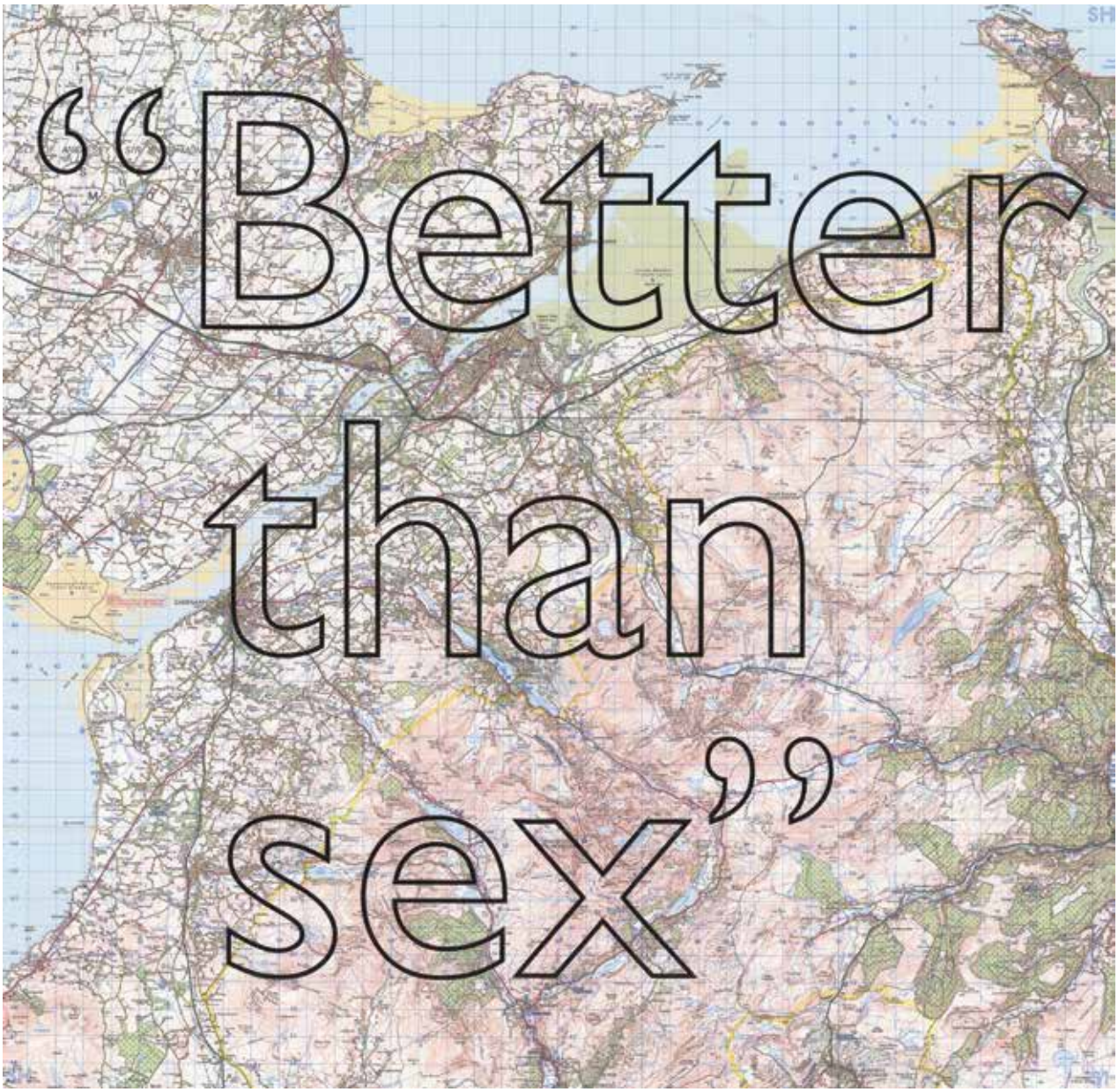
Drawing Room (2013)
Mahogany, pine, felt, resin, steel drill bit, plastic wheel, wood stain, emulsion
Dimensions variable

Gregory Dunn

Gregory Dunn describes his work as an exploration of 'geo-emotional' encounters, rather those of 'psycho-geography'. By this he means his concern is with the inter-relationship between the corporeal body and the physical, natural world; how material affects and how material is affected. Dunn examines how seemingly separate states or entities can break down and become entangled with each other.

His work, "*Yn well na ffycin*" (2013) explores emerging notions of nebulous boundaries, borders and cross-cultural misunderstandings. The black vinyl text in this work and its companion piece "*Better than sex*" (2012) are adhered directly onto the surfaces of Ordnance Survey maps of Snowdonia; here, he considers how demarcation lines are often broken down and become porous with regard to both landscape and language. The content of this work is emotionally explicit, indicative of a spontaneous and visceral reaction to encounters with the beautiful and often rapturous Welsh landscape.

Dunn's current PhD research, specifically focuses on historical notions of the 'Picturesque'. Originating from William Gilpin's description of the Wye Valley (1768), Dunn considers the relevance and applications of the 'Picturesque frame' today in human responsiveness and identification with the natural landscape.



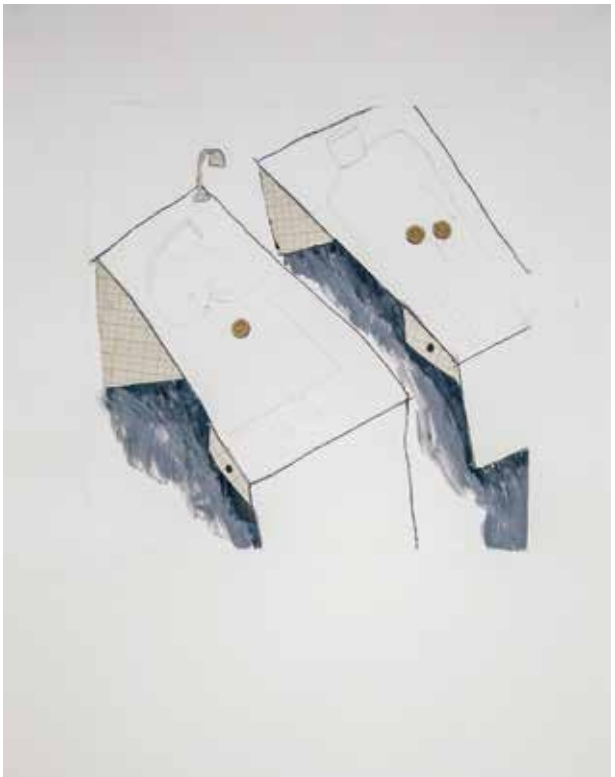
“Better than sex” (2012)
Ordnance Survey Map, vinyl lettering
100 x 120 cm

Csilla Farkas

Csilla Farkas was born in the year of the democratic transformation in Hungary and raised by a single mother during the 1990s when economic change post-communism, resulted in a decline in living standards for most of the population. Inspired by her politicised, feminist upbringing, Farkas' works on paper use ink and pencil drawing to create collages that engage with media stories which focus on gender relations and female stereotyping.

Farkas' installation *Her Drawers* (2013) consists of a series of collages and a kitchen dresser. The works are deliberately naïve as Farkas develops a metaphoric language to communicate the serious issue of crimes against women, specifically domestic violence. She comments on the persistence of gender inequality in the twenty-first century as the dresser becomes representative of a general female population. The neat, white set of drawers is used to display (and contain) ordinary objects, some placed on its surface, others hidden inside as a cache of mementoes. The set of drawers immediately places the viewer into a domestic environment, specifically the kitchen, as a gendered female space. Some of the drawers are lined with selected prints of Farkas' wall-based works which have provocative, emotionally-charged titles such as *Rape* (2013), *Rest* (2013) and *Baby* (2013). As these drawers are left ajar, the possibility of viewers interacting with the dresser is suggested – an open-ended invite to the gallery-goer who may be unsure of whether to open or shut the drawers within the gallery setting. This action or inaction becomes a metaphor for the 'turning a blind eye' attitude of society to domestic violence and crimes rooted in gender inequality, where feelings of shame and the condition of ignorance prevails.

Clockwise from top left:
Her Drawers: Shelter, *Rape*, *Income*, *Rest* (2013)
Mixed media illustration
75 x 55 cm



Sharon Farrelly

> My work is like Les Dawson playing his piano out of key to a piece by Sergei Rachmaninoff at The Royal Albert Hall. Some will get it … others won't!
>
> Yabba Dabba Doo!

Sharon Farrelly's paintings are 'spewed' narratives of imagery derived from the popular culture of her teenage years, updated with her preoccupations and phobias in the present. Often including an element of self-portraiture, the paintings are big, bold, bright and multi-layered appropriating images from newspapers, films, YouTube and the Internet to create a distinct iconography that reveals moments of contradiction and harmony in the expression of personal identity. Farrelly uses a variety of media in her investigation of painting as art-form including thick marker pens, monster graffiti spray paints, household paints, gloss, acrylics, charcoals, varnishes, tapes, screen printing inks and 'retro' paper clothes patterns.

The paintings reflect Farrelly's interests: from fashion design to fine art; from Americana to the history of space travel; from Hollywood to British comedy, she charts her version of culturally significant moments in a globalised world. In *Lend Me A Quid* (2013) a museum poster of classical figures is transformed into an allegory for modern day begging and in *The Last Supper* (2013) Farrelly draws upon her personal fears about mortality and medical procedures with the often repeated sinister image of a masked surgeon. Farrelly's work combines the seriousness of autobiographical events that stem from her time working for the police, prison and probation services with the escapist pleasure derived from viewing film stars at the movies; the amusement that springs from watching Hanna Barbera cartoons and the laughter generated from a closeted, camp 'Sunday Night at the London Palladium' with Les Dawson, Sid James and Larry Grayson. The work *Babs* (2013) is an homage to veteran 'Carry On' film actress Barbara Windsor and is one of the many pseudonyms including Fred Flintstone, Julie Christie, Paul Newman and Penelope Pitstop, that Farrelly uses as nicknames for her parents. Her aim is to engage the viewer with the careful placement of images and text, so they become lost in a space between recognition and familiarity.

Top: *Lend Me a Quid* (2013)
Acrylic and mixed media on canvas
100 x 70 cm

Bottom: *The Last Supper* (2013)
Acrylic and mixed media on canvas
390 x 160 cm

Amelia Greville

> I watch *The Jeremy Kyle Show* and *The Only Way Is Essex* and I sit by the window in coffee shops, so that I can watch passers-by. I read trashy magazines to find out who got fat, who's on drugs and which celeb couple got the latest OK 'wedding deal'. I am obsessed with my appearance.

Amelia Greville's photographs and video work are intentionally narcissistic and self-indulgent as she relishes dressing-up as different characters. She uses costumes, masks and prosthetics to create alternative identities and describes her performative art practice as a futile and ironic attempt to 'find herself'. The six photographs in the *That's Life* (2013) series depict Greville dressed up as the six characters in Frank Sinatra's song of the same name: a puppet, a pauper, a pirate, a poet, a pawn and a king. These theatrical portraits aim to explore the notion of multiple identities and concepts of originality and authenticity. Greville's intention is to assert that no-one is unique, no matter how much they might think they are.

In the companion video piece *My Way* (2013) Greville provides the singing voice to perform Sinatra's most well-known track, dressed up as the six characters once more. As a whole the work interrogates the contrasting meanings of the two songs. 'That's Life' is about the journey taken by the individual in finding a fixed identity and 'My Way' espouses the virtues of being original and therefore by default, authentic. Greville surmises that the idea of the individual as original and authentic is a flawed concept as the reality of identity is that we are all built on a range of others' identity projections which are in constant flux. She resolves this dichotomy by performing the song 'My Way' in the least original or authentic way possible in the generic guise of a 'cheesy' boy band.

Clockwise from top left:
That's Life: Pauper, *Poet*, *King*, *Pawn* (2013)
Digital photographs
84.1 x 59.4 cm

Anna Horton

Anna Horton's sculptures convey a decidedly Minimalist aesthetic and the strict geometric forms of her sculptures make reference to the work of Sol Le Witt. At first glance it is easy to misperceive Horton's work as reflecting a clear artistic trajectory that starts with Modernism and the purity of the art form and ends with Minimalism's eradication of artistic process. However, Horton's work diverges between these two movements as her sculpture explores the juxtaposition of precise geometry with the imprecision of the making process.

Horton's work is deliberately imperfect. On close inspection we see evidence of these imperfections as traces of written measurements, marks and fixings are left visible on the surface of the wood. In this way, she conflates formal properties of sculpture with the making process. Illusion also plays a key part in Horton's work as she uses Perspex surfaces reminiscent of Dan Graham's *Pavilion* pieces, to draw in the viewer and reflect upon the space in which the sculpture is situated. The lines of the wooden structure draw the eye around the sculpture, weaving in and out to demarcate carefully defined spaces. Simultaneous explorations of the rhythm of line, language of materials, virtual and actual space, illusions and reconfiguration are duly created.

The placement of reflective Perspex sheets along with black fixings and coloured wire in *Lines and Mirrors* (2013) work to interrupt, slow down and then speed up the viewing of the sculpture. The visual rhythm of the work is controlled in a similar way to Piet Mondrian's geometric paintings which control the viewer's eye. Horton refers to her work as having a temporary kit-like appearance that reflects an 'in-flux' nature which is inherent to the work but also a product of it.

Lines and Mirrors (2013)
Wood, Perspex
150 x 200 cm

Cheryl Howard

Cheryl Howard's series of illustrations have been produced as a feminist response to the different versions of 'The Grandmother's Tale', more commonly known as the story of 'Little Red Riding Hood'. The first literary versions of this story were penned by Charles Perrault in 1697 and later retold by the Brothers Grimm who were in fact inspired by earlier oral versions of the story. These oral versions were told amongst seamstresses in France as an initiatory rite of passage from girlhood to womanhood, also subject to a feminist retelling in Angela Carter's book of short stories 'The Bloody Chamber' (1979) that includes 'The Company of Wolves'.

Howard's works, *Leaving*, *Path*, *Wolf*, *Escaping*, *Growing Up* and *Rebirth* (2013) play on the multiplicity of narratives that have been generated over time in the retelling of The Grandmother's Tale. She brings to light overlooked versions of oral history which she feels have been subsumed into a patriarchal reading where the wolf is a sexual predator and the female awaits a man to rescue her.

Howard's use of red thread in her illustrations represents a coming of age for the protagonist from girl to woman, in its literal reference to menstrual blood. Seamstress motifs and the number three (often used in fairy tales) are given significance in the prints. The oral version of the tale gives the protagonist a choice of a pathway of either pins or needles, pins referring to maidenhood and needles to sexual maturity. The use of Victorian lace shaped as male genitalia is symbolic of the wolf and the sexually threatening implications of the tale. In readdressing the variances of a well-known children's fairy tale, Howard's work questions our understanding of the ways in which stories are altered and retold, acquiring different meanings in order to jolt us out of our placid acceptance of singular narratives.

In another series of prints called *High Tea* (2012) Howard looks at the hierarchy of the debutante system. In these works women appear laid out like cakes waiting to be chosen and cherries are used to represent maidenhood. By employing feminist strategies of appropriation Howard's work aims to destabilise and subvert meaning.

The Grandmother's Tale: Escaping (2013), *Leaving* (2013)
Mixed media collage
56 x 75 cm

Lucy Hutchinson

For Home and Country is a series of works that examine bicultural interactions in a globalised world. The works focus on cultural differences and the trade of cultural goods between China and the UK as Lucy Hutchinson articulates a new version of the 'class system', derived from her familial relationships and its recent history.

Hutchinson's installation consists of three elements. Firstly, she has made hand-printed, gold Chinoiserie wallpaper, which tells the story of each 'class' or 'tribe' within her family as working-class, middle-class and Chinese-class. Secondly, she displays three Chinoiserie printed face-kinis (masks used by Chinese people on the beach to prevent tanning of the skin which would indicate a lower class). Each mask represents each separate class, each differentiated by their design iconography. Thirdly, the masks are set alongside three self-portrait photographs, again each representative of Hutchinson's self-defined class system.

The wallpaper and face-kinis are covered in a print developed from eighteenth century Chinoiserie designs originating in the UK, particularly from Blackburn, Lancashire which is close to Darwen, Hutchinson's home town. They contain images of real-life experiences making reference to the everyday life of each 'class' of Hutchinson's extended family, as well as generalised impressions and stereotypes associated with each social group. The designs map out the journey taken from Lancashire to China. In the 'working-class' design we see the wallpaper-machine and The India Mill chimney in Darwen's town centre, along with William Morris-style birds; in the 'middle-class' design the Burj Al Arab hotel, Dubai is an icon of the stop-over on the way to Hong Kong, as well as a symbol of opulence. Alongside are references to a nineteenth century book for women on good taste in design. In the Chinese-class design there is the first colonial building in Hong Kong, Government House and a market stall where dog meat is hung for sale, ironically reinforcing British assumptions and stereotypes concerning Chinese culinary preferences and cultural differences.

In the three photographs *Brown* (2013), *Blonde* (2013) and *Black* (2013) Hutchinson dresses up in wigs and face-kinis to draw distinctions between her self-defined class system, each subject wearing aprons and shirts worn by nineteenth century textile mill workers. Hutchinson's identity is masked and branded by the face-kini that associates her with a particular social and cultural group, but conversely, the masks could also be read as providing protection, conserving a familial sense of belonging in the advancing globalised world.

Black (2013)
Digital print
89 x 100 cm

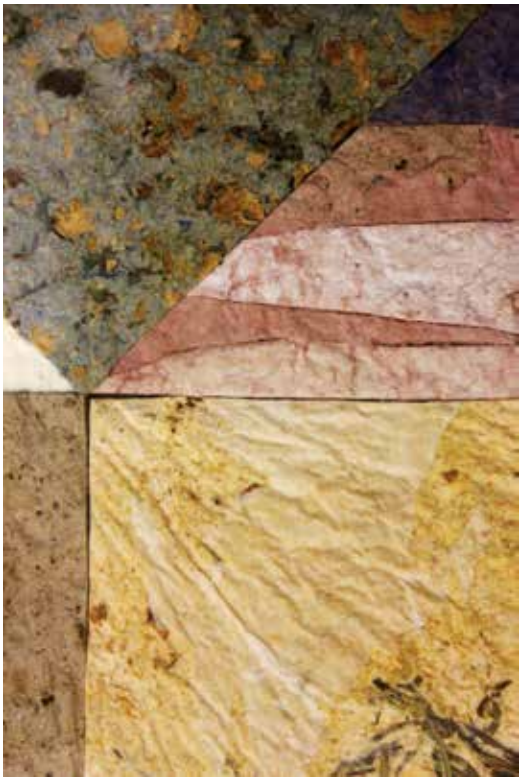
Morna Lockie Anrig

Morna Lockie Anrig's floor-based installation *The Maid's Puzzle* (2013) is inspired by modernist and neo-concrete art historical periods of the mid-twentieth century, underpinned by her empirical research that concerns process, psychological studies and the articulation of learning. For New Art West Midlands Lockie Anrig presents a tessellated floor installation reminiscent of the Minton tile patterns designed for domestic interiors in the late nineteenth century. However, Lockie Anrig's floor is not made of clay, but the pulped plate scrapings of dirtied, coloured paper napkins and general kitchen waste, reformed into papier-mache tiling.

This work was motivated by Lockie Anrig's experience as a restaurant waitress and the development of a process whereby she meticulously logged and documented the ingredients of each individual tile. A tension has been created through the juxtaposition of her initial, respectable encounters with customers in her professional role as a waitress and her subsequent hands-on approach to collecting their personal food detritus. This protracted documentation toys with the relationship between chemistry experiment and art and, as a method, invites the audience to question how we describe and value the process of acquiring knowledge and the investment of artistic labour. The more discerning will identify the hidden maze within the tile pattern which leads to the leftovers from a three-course meal.

The Maid's Puzzle is a quietly political work in that it draws attention to how menial jobs such as waiting tables are attributed a lowly status in the employment hierarchy. Political undertones are also evident in Lockie-Anrig's examination of food waste and recycling, though the lo-fi medium denotes levity in approach, rather than didacticism. The audience, by walking directly upon the tiled surface, is invited to be playful and exploratory, dwelling on the listings of each tiles contents.

The formal qualities of this work create astute, aesthetic characteristics of a modernist, abstract painting while drawing similarities with classic English tiling, referencing dining etiquette and the notion of class, the subservient role of the waitress and job hierarchies that emphasise the perpetual divisions of 'upstairs downstairs'.



The Maid's Puzzle (2013) (detail)
MDF, paper napkins, card
304.8 x 365.76 cm

Emily Mulenga

Emily Mulenga's videos parody the multitude of personal images found online. By tapping into these photos, the cycle of consumption, the reuse of such images by anyone, anywhere and at any time, Mulenga questions the boundaries between public and private spheres.

Mulenga features in the videos and performs to mimic the characters she finds online, appropriating, altering and re-using identities as they 'appear' on the internet. In doing so, she questions the extent to which the lines are blurred between what is reality and what is artificiality, cleverly highlighting the construction of these public personas. Indeed, it is the manner in which these media platforms, notably MTV, play a part in the creation and magnification of stereotypical personalities, leading us to question the original intention and purpose of the imagery; specifically how 'real' it was to begin with.

The low production value of the work stands in direct opposition to the apparent highly polished, surface perfection and lifestyle of the people or 'personas' that feature. This approach is endemic of the many homemade video snapshots that fill up YouTube. Using a green screen to create a moving image collage, Mulenga employs a non-linear perspective on a shattered world by performing herself and the videos become an exploration of self-portraiture as well as performative personas of current internet wannabes. Mulenga's work highlights the aspirations that the characters in the videos want to project or claim as their own, but also the widely felt contemporary necessity of having an online presence. Trash, glamour, celebrity – for Mulenga, everyone wants to be a part of it.

SPAM (2013)
Stills from video work
3 minutes 8 seconds

Santhanha Nguyen

Santhanha Nguyen is a skateboarder whose paintings are informed by her interest in urban and derelict spaces. By skating to often abandoned or 'out of bounds' areas of cities, Nguyen aims to explore psychic connections between people and landscape. She captures these spaces using photography transferring her chosen imagery into large scale oil paintings. Her use of colour is testament to the abandonment and isolation of the places she visits; her canvases convey an eerie but intended drabness, replicating the sense of detachment evoked by the place she has experienced. Nguyen's practice is informed by artists such as Laura Oldfield-Ford, whose work incorporates outdoor pursuits and walks, and she states other influences as Casper D. Friedrich, Jorn Vanhofen and Ivan Shishkin.

Nguyen's work connects with a contemporary interest in Urbex phenomena; the urban exploration that sees members of the public access forbidden or hereto inaccessible areas of towns and cities. The journalist Robert McFarlane (The Guardian, September 2013) documents his meeting with a fearless Urbexer on a night time jaunt. Whilst he notes the risks of this largely male pastime, he also emphasises the new perspective that Urbexers have on the city, where the usual constraints on urban movement don't apply.

Nguyen's painting *13* (2012) depicts a car park, the title referring to the 13th floor which, as a suicide spot, was closed off to the public by the local authority due to health and safety regulations. Nguyen's work examines the darker side of places that are seemingly mundane to create a 'surfing ocean' world-view of the skateboarder who operates away from authority and out of reach from the laws of acceptable behaviour.

13 (2012)
Acrylic on board
123 x 83 cm

Sikander Pervez

Sikander Pervez transforms mundane objects, such as chairs, walls and plinths into detailed statement sculptures that challenge the perception of the usual functions we assign to those objects. Visual impact is paramount as he experiments with materials intuitively, learning about them through a process of transformation which lends his sculptures an energetic and anthropomorphic quality; as if just about to become animate. Pervez gathers these objects for their material properties, as well as other characteristics, but the imperative for selection is that they have functional properties, making them instantly recognizable to the viewer. With his additions and interventions in applying castors to walls and recyclable plastic strips to chairs Pervez works with everyday materials to subvert as well as exaggerate their original function.

Pervez examines the poetic and formal values of sculpture to create new, fetishised objects that directly address the Marxian idea of the exchange-value and use-value of commodities. Therein, Pervez is concerned with de-functioning the function of objects. In *Untitled: Castors & Chair* (2012) he uses castors taken from discarded office chairs to de-functionalise and objectify yet another chair through the application of wheels to the surface of the seat. In *Untitled: Chair & Plastic II* (2012) he combines plastic strips, the recyclable wastage from Uncle Ben's rice packets, with a seat-less wooden chair to create a sweeping train of bright orange 'hair'. This train, however can also be made useful if employed to suspend the chair from the ceiling, as Pervez explores different configurations of gallery display. Pervez also creates installations that utilise and respond to the space in which they are situated in a way that they become part of the artwork and vice versa. In *Gallery* (2013) he responds to the concept of the gallery space as a 'white cube' by adding castors to temporary walls and plinths that are part of a regular display configuration used in the art studios of the University of Staffordshire.

Untitled: Chair & Plastic II (2012)
Chair, Uncle Ben's rice packet trimmings
Dimensions variable

Ali Reed

Ali Reed's work is site-specific as she takes the foundations of buildings and alters them into simplified shapes to reconfigure the aesthetics of existing architecture. By using materials such as tape, geometric blocks, stacks of laser-cut wood and card, as well as wall drawings she manipulates the shape of the building in which her artwork is situated. By depicting a certain space within another version of its own space she creates a curious situation in which viewers are seeing the building that they are in, yet viewing it in a contradictory manner as its altered compositions play with individual perceptions of the space.

Reed has created a new work that responds to the marble archway and high-roofed architecture of Gallery 13 in Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. She has produced a layered piece that explores the architectural footprints and gallery layouts of the partner venues in *New Art West Midlands 2014* including The Barber Institute of Fine Art, Wolverhampton Art Gallery and Grand Union. The installation involves site-specific wall drawing, wooden and cardboard stacks that work with two and three-dimensional approaches to suggest the labyrinthine nature of Birmingham's nineteenth century gallery interiors. Reed also references the Brutalist, modernist architecture of the gallery's exterior site in its close proximity to John Madin's soon to be demolished, Birmingham Central Library (1973), to explore the tensions between historic and contemporary design approaches.

Reed places components next to and on top of one another to create geometric stacks reminiscent of the models of city plans created by architects. These stacks are often used to recreate the original composition of existing buildings. As with all of Reed's work there is always a vantage point wherein the shape of the intervention will make sense as a whole, but from any other angle, the 'correct' perspective is eradicated. Her line drawing is technically two-dimensional, but because of its relationship with the existing architecture of the gallery, these lines seep over several surfaces. The work inadvertently becomes three-dimensional as the space and the perspective of the viewer become manifest as part of the artwork itself.

Staffordshire University, Stoke-on-Trent Campus 1 (2013)
MDF, hardboard, card, mountboard and paint
Dimensions variable

Sarah Sehra

Sarah Sehra creates large installations and films through performances that emulate ritualsand ceremonies. Gathering materials from her everyday life and experiences as props she plays out choreographed rhythmic movements that link mythological tales and spiritual practices. The materials she uses leave a trace of her movements and a symbolic record of an event or happening. Sehra is interested in the use of myth; not in its modern sense, as a word to describe a falsehood, but as an allegory or parable to decipher meaning in an event or situation.

Her film, *Kullulu, Kullulu* (2013) shows Sehra giving a masked performance using organic materials such as wax, feathers and bright blue pigment to create a 'floor painting'. Each element is symbolic of various spiritual connections between human beings and the natural world, particularly the natural landscape. The blue pigment is reminiscent of the natural dye 'woad', the only source of blue colouring in Europe during the Stone Age. The feathers point to Grecian mythological characters such as Icarus whose attempts to fly with wings of wax and feathers led to his death, as well as making reference to materials used in performance work by artists such as Joseph Beuys, Alastair Maclennan and Marina Abramovic. Sehra plays with these materials which are already immersed in ancient and contemporary cultural symbolism, allowing multiple interpretations. As she collected feathers for her performance she came up with the term 'Kullulu' to describe the cooing of pigeons, a term which means 'to veil or crown' in Akkadian, an extinct language used in ancient Mesopotamia[1].

For her new work at Grand Union Sehra has researched 'The Fates' or 'Moirai', as they are known in Greek mythology; three female Goddesses who control the destiny of man, or the 'thread of life'. These mythological figures are the focus of a new abstracted film that records a performance by the artist wrapping herself in thread. This wrapping process will constrict her movement and embodies conflicting ideas of comfort and swaddling with those of restriction and bondage.

[1.] Eds. Black, Jeremy A., George, Andrew, Postgate, J. N., A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian, Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 2007. Page 166.

Kullulu, *Kullulu* (2013)
performance, 60 minutes
Stills from film by Jakki Carey

Anna Smith

Anna Smith makes objects that have a direct relation to the human body by sculpting abstracted figurative forms using clay. She enjoys the material versatility of clay; in its unfired state it can be moulded, pushed, pulled, stretched, affected by gravity and pressure, sharing many of the same qualities as human skin. Smith is very aware of the trace the artist leaves on the clay and how this haptic quality of her sculpture becomes manifest through the process of making. These ideas and processes can be seen explicitly in *Torso* (2013), exhibited at Wolverhampton Art Gallery for *New Art West Midlands 2014*.

Abjection, particularly in relation to the body, runs through Smith's work, as she puts contrasting materials and textures alongside one another. For example, in *Organ and Sack* (2013), exhibited at Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery, she contrasts the organic, natural surface of the clay with the shiny surface of the metallic glaze. The fleshy, bulging Sack almost spills over the crisp, sharp edge of the birch palette emphasising the visceral nature of the work.

Smith's new work for Grand Union takes this a step further, as she subverts materials used in prosthetics, such as latex and silicone, in conjunction with mobility aids such as hand rails, to create ladder-type structures that have been stripped of their usefulness. These surrealist works flop around on the floor, almost possessing a life of their own, but unable to stand upright. Smith's sculptures are self-portraits, often directly referencing parts of her own body in their size and shape.

Torso (2013)
Ceramic
47 x 47 x 40 cm

Glen Stoker

'Walking practice' is at the heart of Glen Stoker's work as he uses this particular medium to ponder the politics of urban space and place in the post-industrial city. Stoker studied politics in Stoke-on-Trent in the nineties where he continues to live and work, witnessing first-hand the city's attempts at regeneration over the past two decades. During this time he has become fascinated with hinterlands, and brownfield sites surrounding the city centre. These sites often are fenced off to the public or used as temporary car parks that generate incomes for these 'holding' spaces as developers wait for them to become profitable again.

Stoker's series of photographs *Walking in Circles Pt. 1* (2013) takes Richard Long's recurrent motif of circular walks as a starting point, documenting the inner city ring-roads of six cities as a set of defined walking routes. The photographs present Stoker's selected experiences from his five three-day walks around the ring-roads of Derby, Wolverhampton, Coventry, Leicester and Nottingham as he investigates the relationships between social, physical and psychological spaces; utopias, dystopias and heterotopias. In the second part of this work Stoker responds to the empty landscapes located around Stoke-on-Trent's ring-road, with performative walking interventions. He cites the failed national housing scheme Pathfinder, as a catalyst for these 'crusade-style' walks. These interventions are documented very differently as mesh banner prints, stretched over metal fencing barriers, their large scale emanating an air of protestation inherent to their public situation.

Stoker has developed new gallery-based and public works for New Art West Midlands inspired by walking Birmingham's famous architectural 'concrete collar', cited by some as a mechanism to prevent the growth of the city[1]. Rather than making photographic documentation for these performative journeys, Stoker utilises hazard tape, barrier materials and sealing methods used by land developers to create wrapped sculptural interventions. Work is sited in the Digbeth landscape, allowing viewers to share a taste of Stoker's physical and metaphysical walking experiences themselves.

1 See 'How to Kill a City', by D.K., The Economist Blog, 31st May 2013, [http://www.economist.com/blogs/blighty/2013/05/birmingham]

Reliving Room (2013)
Mixed media
Dimensions variable

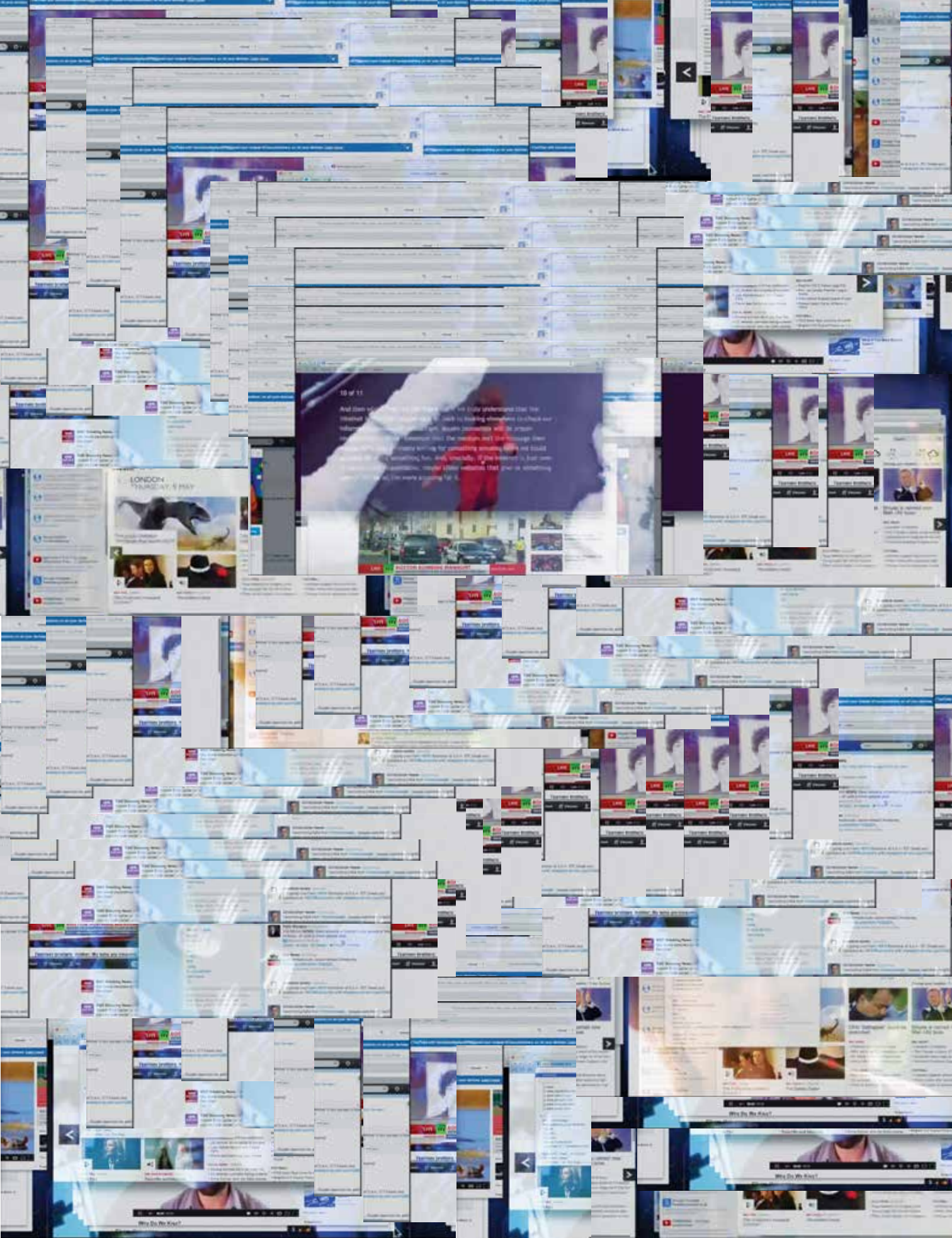
Hannah Sutherland

Information overload, rampant changes in technology and questioning the methods and uses of broadcast media are at the core of Hannah Sutherland's films and installations. Sutherland samples imagery, sounds and information from films and advertising that litter the internet, creating fast-paced videos with an anxiety inducing edge.

Her video work *Requiem for a News Anchor* (2013) uses the score of the film *Requiem for a Dream* (2000) and a ranting, polemic by the late American comedian George Carlin damning the 'Illuminati' or 'The Big Club' – the large corporations which in their profit-making motives, have ultimate ideological control over governments and societies on a global scale. Sutherland has remixed the speech with the soundtrack to create a short, trailer-length piece using the medium as the message as the pace of the punchy film trailer plays with our familiarity with that format. However, this is not a simplistic conspiracy theorists point of view. The imagery that Sutherland has put together represents multiple political leanings and standpoints which allow for more nuanced and complex readings.

Sutherland has used various presentation techniques for her video works and is interested in how the viewer physically relates to them, our experiences of broadcast media on a day to day basis, and our representation within it. For her new video work at Grand Union, Sutherland uses a speech made in 2011 by former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton about internet freedom as a soundtrack. She has experimented with larger projections to create a more immersive environment, with a nod to the cinematic experience. Sutherland's production methods directly reference the paradox that exists in the 'access to information' versus 'control of copyright' debate. She knowingly straddles the line of legality, using what she can get away with in order to question and explore notions of authority and authorship and the outdated systems and language that support them.

Requiem for a News Anchor (2013)
Stills from film projection
4 minutes



Wendy Ann Titmus

Wendy Ann Titmus' sculptures explore the relationships between art and medical science interrogating advances in biology, attitudes to disease, genetics, organic therapies, prescriptive drugs and contemporary treatments. Her aim is to investigate the relationship between life and death through the physical and psychological malfunctions of the human biological structure. Titmus examines a diversity of disciplines using the language of sculptural installation exploring the alignment of Western society's biomedical model, which has grounded mainstream medicine since the nineteenth century, with the approach of a radical, new 'medical cosmology' that is rooted in an older and more global framework. Ancient mythology, world religions and advanced medical science form part of this framework as they contest our orientation of reality.

In her recent body of work, *The Physic Garden* (2012) Titmus investigates the intimate relationships between men, women and nature. She examines the historical and contemporary context of 'The Physic Garden' and the use of medicinal plants for the advancement of medical science; its objective of prolonging life by curing human biological ailments. Disembodied limbs, breasts, hands and feet made from beeswax or silicone are juxtaposed or combined with organic materials such as wood and bark; taxidermy and jewellery to explore mortality, growth and human reproduction.

In the works *Nurse and Child* (2013) and *Mammary (Gl)andium II* (2012) Titmus seeks to resolve the psychological quandary that arises from facing certain death by constructing various immortality narratives. Some of her sculptural configurations evoke a sense of multiplication; suggesting that these hands and feet have reproduced in situ. The sculptures have a haptic quality and Titmus often displays or documents them in natural settings to suggest an innate intimacy between human beings and nature. The conceptual paradox of Titmus' work aims to provoke an indeterminate response from the viewer as it acknowledges the open-endedness of personal interpretation.

Nurse and Child (2013)
Mixed media
Dimensions variable

Barbara Witkowska

> As flies to wanton boys
> are we to th' gods,
> They kill us for their sport.[1]

Barbara WItkowska's paintings are beautifully detailed imaginary landscapes that allude to man as a destructive force of nature. Works such as *Anatomy of Destruction* (2013) suggest that brutality and cruelty are moral payback for human beings' evolutionary achievement at the highest levels of intellectual and emotional development. Human beings are able to create definitive beauty and compassion at one end of a spectrum, but at the other, ultimate horror and destruction. Witkowska is interested in antagonism in human nature and its contradictory components, in other words the polarisation of good and evil.

Witkowska's paintings attempt to explore our sense of the world and understand human nature through metaphysical investigation. She draws inspiration from the past and present to examine issues of identity, memory and existence. She experiments by mixing different paint types using spray and pouring paint techniques combined with drawing. Witkowska's works depict deformed organic structures that emerge from dark and vaporous landscapes, painted with a limited palette of green, grey, brown and gold. These forms, as in *Target* (2013) are almost overloaded with carefully painted detail; they are complicated structures that express the human preoccupation with existence and question the uncertainties of our future-world.

1 William Shakespeare, *King Lear* Act 4, Scene 1, 32–37

Anatomy of Destruction (2013)
Acrylic, spray paint, fabric marker on canvas
70 x 100cm

Chris Wright

Chris Wright's work creates a dialogue between space and place that explores the transience of in-between spaces and the idea of recontextualising territories. In her photographic series *Things Happen* (2009–2011) Wright has created hundreds of images documenting the interior of a phone box on one of Manchester's busiest highways, Oxford Road. Taken over a number of years, at different times of day and during different seasons these images investigate the status of the phone box as a public space that has changed exponentially in a relatively short period of fifteen years.

The ubiquitous red telephone box designed by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott in 1924 was once a mainstay in every village, town and city, populating public space and representing an icon of Britishness across the globe. Before the arrival of the mobile phone, its function was dependable, but the phone box has now become a redundant space, its obsolescence caused by the advancement of more and more sophisticated communications technology. The phone box in Wright's work is covered in graffiti, filled with detritus and used as a public toilet moving from functional and looked after property to abandonment. By entering this phone box time and time again, Wright's photographs illustrate the changes made to its interior. Her focus is on the interior rather than exterior, as she refers to the unknown and inherent absence within this space, rather than its familiar facade. Wright has taken these photographs on an ad hoc basis with a camera or camera phone; whatever is to hand. The randomness of her methodology echoes the process of making a phone call in a phone box – the jostling around for change, the need to make a call at that moment and the casualness of entering such a public (yet, also private) space, alone. Wright's work functions as a record of a space with which the public no longer interacts in a positive way. She anticipates its complete demise in her absence.

Things Happen (2009–11)
Postcard photographs series


TELEPHONE
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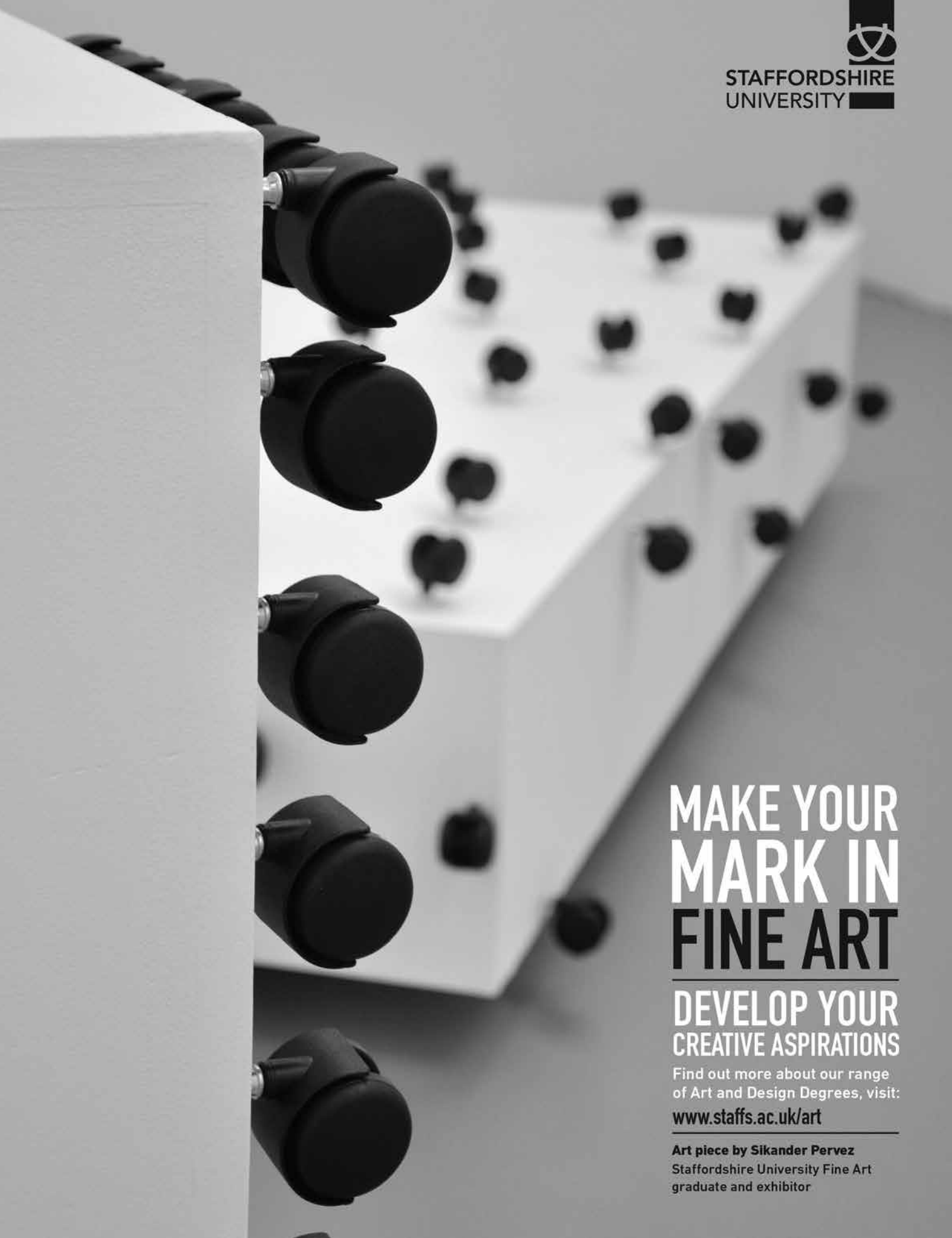
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New Art West Midlands 2014

'Notes on an Exhibition' edited by
Rachel Bradley
Artists texts by
Lisa Beauchamp, Rachel Bradley & Cheryl Jones

Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery
14 February to 18 May 2014

The Barber Institute of Fine Arts
14 February to 27 April 2014

Grand Union
14 February to 15 March 2014

Wolverhampton Art Gallery
15 February to 10 May 2014

Selectors
Mel Brimfield, artist
Paul Goodwin, independent curator, researcher and Professor, CCW Graduate School, University of the Arts, London
David Harding, artist and Founder and Head of Environmental Art Department, Glasgow School of Art (1985–2001)

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Lisa Beauchamp and Rachel Bradley for Birmingham Museums Trust
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Cheryl Jones at Grand Union
Jane Morrow and Marguerite Nugent at Wolverhampton Art Gallery

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