

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

# English Summer

July 9 – August 14, 2015

Nicolas Deshayes  
Gilbert & George  
Jack Lavender  
George Henry Longly  
Matthew Smith  
Stephen Willats

Elizabeth Dee is honored to present English Summer, a group exhibition featuring Nicolas Deshayes, Gilbert & George, Jack Lavender, George Henry Longly, Matthew Smith and Stephen Willats. English Summer presents an exciting new generation of British artists to New York, artists who are united through the impetus to resist, brand, occupy, embed and imply through the material process. Taking inspirational cues from visionary outliers, such as Gilbert & George and Stephen Willats, who act as cultural touchstones and guides throughout the exhibition, Deshayes, Longly, Smith and Lavender produce works that defy conventional definition by being neither painting nor sculpture. These talented artists join a heritage rich with conceptual and symbolic associations about place, the body, sex, architecture and networks. Autonomous in position, and polymorphous in outlook, these artists serve to both celebrate a spirit that embraces the present and only looks forward.

**Stephen Willats** has worked with the interactions between people and places for five decades, filtering archival data visually through invented diagrammatic languages. Using networked systems to explore “existing values and provide a vision for the future”, Willats has distinguished his work from his peers. The conceptual art movement of the late 1960s sought to classify and rationalize one’s subjective experiences in the public realm. Willats has engaged content that is inherently irrational and social in nature, embracing and exploring the participation of a larger public, often in unexpected and spirited ways, using humor and new media, to focus the connection between the viewer and the larger social ecosystem.

**Gilbert & George** like Willats, have been a major inspiration for artists working with identity, and the stylistic and conceptual themes around information. Their work spans a variety of media, yet they consider it all to be sculpture, with them as a central presence. Everything is potential subject matter for their depictions of modern urban space, and they have always sought to address fundamental issues of existence, social issues, taboos and artistic conventions.

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**Nicolas Deshayes** explores and challenges the social vernacular of the 21st-century industrial world, through mass-manufactured materials that maintain an organic quality belying the synthetic sources they are formed from. The artist eschews traditional classification, as witnessed through four archetypes presented in this exhibition. The main gallery houses his series *Molars*, which refers to the rear teeth in the mouth. Made from fired vitreous enamel, the same production methods used to create the distinctive London Underground signs, these two-dimensional works move us from the cinematic, to the surface, to a sense of public displacement or transportation. Similarly the tubular sculptures on the floor also find themselves in dialog with heat and extrusion, bringing together a larger notion of flow and cycle of material to Deshayes' practice. In *Cramps* the most overtly body-conscious of the works, expanded foam wall structures resemble intestinal systems at large, confronting us with our relationship between plastics, vacuform and petroleum's organic roots.

**Jack Lavender** appropriates a myriad of everyday industrial materials, advertising and pop references in work that embeds surface tension with its chosen mode of display. Referencing formats of sculpture, yet defying those methods, Lavender chooses to work compositionally with these footnotes, evolving dichotomies to examine topics of value and status of materials.

**George Henry Longly** undermines sculptural props, plinths, pedestals to welcome conversations around the potential of a composite form. Longly's practice (often referred to as *GHL*) further layers subtexts around branding, sexuality and symbolic language. The relationship to the body is never far, in this exhibition, a new media sculptural installation features the casting of the (male) body as a protagonist for material spinoffs, which are redeveloped into archetypes.

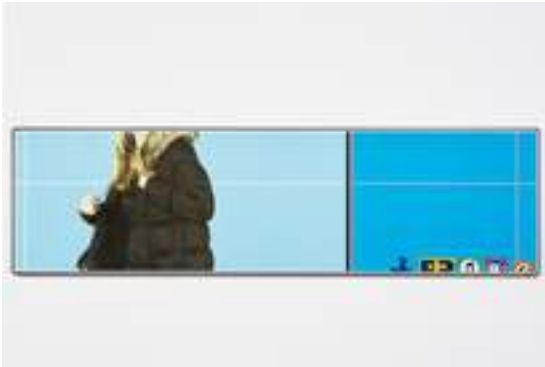
**Matthew Smith** flatly resists symbolic meaning, incorporating representations of everyday objects that slip between two dimensional, three-dimensional and the copy. Embracing the anonymity of surface and the emptiness of products as a valid resistance method, Smith's sculptural wall works are subtle and defiant, tough and direct.

For more information please contact Nicole Siegenthaler, [nicole@elizabethdee.com](mailto:nicole@elizabethdee.com).

***English Summer***

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*Clockwise, from left:*



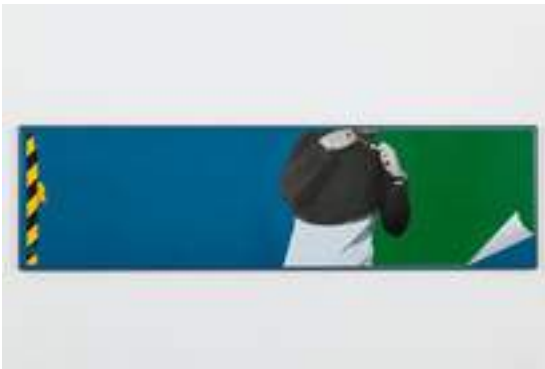
**Nicolas Deshayes**

*Molars, 2015*

Screenprinted and hand applied vitreous enamel on steel, aluminum frame

26 3/8 x 99 1/4 x 1 5/8 inches

67 x 252 x 4 cm



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**Nicolas Deshayes**  
*Becoming Soil*, 2015  
Welded steel, enamel  
Four parts: 63 x 12 inches overall (160 x 30 cm)



**Stephen Willats**  
*A Journey to be Continued Tomorrow*, 2008  
Photographic prints, photographic dye, acrylic paint, ink,  
Letraset text, ink on card, and film  
Each panel: 44 1/4 x 31 1/2 inches, 112.5 x 80 cm  
Overall: 127 1/8 inches, 112.5 x 323 cm



**Gilbert & George**  
*War*, 2011  
Mixed media  
59 1/2 x 50 inches  
151 x 127 cm



**George Henry Longly**

*CPU*, 2015

Metal media, metal framework, cast plaster.  
Video: Volume Excess, video with sound 4 min  
52 x 8 5/8 x 8 1/4 inches  
132 x 22 x 21 cm

*Back Gallery:*



**George Henry Longly**

*liliii I who have nothing*, 2015

Marble, polished aluminum and steel fittings  
31 1/2 x 21 5/8 x 4 inches  
80 x 55 x 10 cm



**George Henry Longly**

*OD*, 2015

Marble, whipped cream chargers, plaster and steel fixings  
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Mixed media

48 3/8 x 34 5/8 inches

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*Around the Network*, 2002  
Photographic print, photographic dye, acrylic paint,  
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36 1/4 x 46 1/2 inches  
92 x 118 cm

*Viewing Room:*



**Matthew Smith**  
*BE MYSTERIOUS*, 2015  
Digital print on laser cut acrylic, plumbing pipes, foam and cable ties  
42 x 36 inches  
106.7 x 91.4 cm



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*The look out*, 2015  
Collage  
9 1/4 x 7 1/8 inches  
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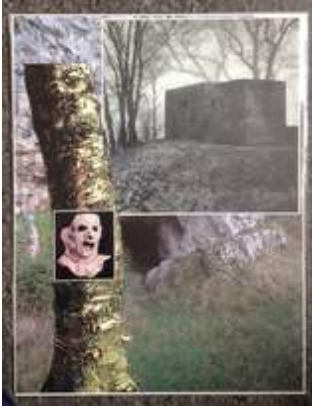


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94 1/2 x 43 1/4 x 2 3/8 inches  
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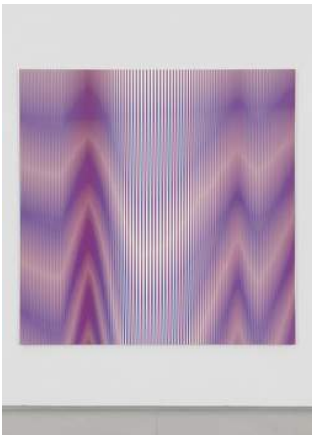
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*Untitled, 2014*  
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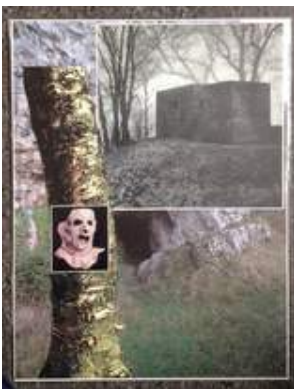
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# N I C O L A S   D E S H A Y E S

Born 1983, Nancy, FR

Lives and works in London, UK

## SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2015** *Solo Show*, Glasgow Sculpture Studios, Glasgow, UK  
*Becoming Soil*, Jonathan Viner Gallery, London, UK
- 2014** *Independent: Projects (with Jonathan Viner)*, New York, USA
- 2013** *Crude Oil*, S1 Artspace, Sheffield; *Snails*, Brand New Gallery, Milan, IT
- 2012** *Vanille* (with George Henry Longly), Galerie Chez Valentin, Paris, FR  
*Nicolas Deshayes @ Galleries Goldstein*, Hotel Palenque, London, UK  
*Slugs*, Jonathan Viner at Liste 17, Basel, CH  
*Browns in Full Colour*, Jonathan Viner, London, UK
- 2011** *PRECURSOR*, (curated by Shama Khanna), E:vent Gallery, London, UK  
*Autumn*, Clockworkgallery, Berlin, DE
- 2010** *A Killer Whale Breaching in Soft Focus* (with Ed Atkins), Transmission Gallery, Glasgow, UK  
*Cultural Wood, Concrete*, Hayward Gallery (curated by Tom Morton), London, UK  
*Stiff Peaks*, The Two Jonnys' Project Space, London, UK
- 2007** *Neo*, RUN Gallery, London, UK  
*The Travels*, 42 Contemporaneo, Modena, IT
- 2006** *Specimens*, UCA Project Space Canterbury, UK
- 2005** *Noble's Island*, MOOT, Nottingham, UK

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2015** *English Summer*, Elizabeth Dee, New York, US  
*Images Moving Out Onto Space*, Tate, St. Ives, UK  
*Inhuman*, Fridericianum, Kassel, CH  
Carl Kostyal, Stockholm, SE  
*Breaking up is Hard to Do*, NGCA Sunderland / KARST, Plymouth, UK  
*Tomorrow: London*, South London Gallery, London, UK  
*It Happens Without You*, Kendall Koppe, Glasgow, UK
- 2014** *On the Devolution of Culture*, Rob Tufnell, London, UK  
*Pool*, Kestnergesellschaft, Hannover, DE  
*Geographies of Contamination*, David Roberts Art Foundation, London, UK
- 2013** *The Time Machine (The Survivors)*, Cura.Basement At Frutta Gallery, Rome, IT  
*Notes (On Declassing)*, Galleri Opdahl, Stavanger,

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cura.

cura. is a quarterly magazine, a publishing house, an exhibition space and a platform for editorial and curatorial activities.

Fall 2013

No. 15

## Nicholas Deshayes. Vacuum-Shaped.

Isobel Harbison in conversation with Nicolas Deshayes

Isobel Harbison: Thinking about work for your new show *Crude Oil* in Sheffield, I am interested in the relationship between your work and those you selected by British sculptors Henry Moore, Jacob Epstein and Geoffrey Clarke. What drew you towards these sculptors/sculptures?

Nicholas Deshayes: The invitation was to engage in a period of research at the Henry Moore Institute Archive and to then select work from the Leeds Museums and Galleries sculpture collection to show in conversation with newly commissioned work of mine at S1 Artspace in Sheffield.

The surface quality of the work I make often implies a relationship with the 'bodily' although the body is rarely represented figuratively. I wanted the historical sculptures I choose to fill this gap, to become protagonists in the exhibition if you like. I chose a selection of predominantly modernist British sculpture to explore the threshold between industrial and organic matter and specifically how representations of 'oiliness' could bridge this gap and connect to the themes that I explore in my own work and the context of 21st century image production and its newly industrial dispersion.

I selected two sets of architectural maquettes by Geoffrey Clarke (b. 1924) and Henry Moore (1898-1986) for their direct exploration of architecture, industry and the ground, to provide a contextual backdrop for the show, whereas five other figurative sculptures were embedded into or displayed in close proximity to my own work as unlikely characters in the exhibition. What drew me to all these pieces was that they were all characterised by a physical sense of 'emergence'. Predominantly relief works, their backgrounds and foregrounds fused into single skins so that the body merged with the material it was carved or cast from. The physical attributes of the materials also spoke strongly of liquidity, either in the patinated bronze of Frank Dobson and Jacob Epstein busts that recalled seagulls coated in the trappings of an oil spill, or the anthropomorphic quality of Henry Moore's cast flint stones, or Hermon Cawthra's 1910 stone *Beach Scene* depicting a couple frolicking in the sea, their flowing hair merging with the same graphic pattern of the sea in the background.

(IH) You mentioned in a previously published conversation with artist Magali Reus, that your work is like the manifestation of "the moment before putrefaction" and I think this was particularly in reference to the material transitions evident or emphasised in your work, highlighting the points where natural material is synthesised or synthetic material appears natural. This is not process-based work, but rather process-focused. Are there artists who work in other disciplines outside sculpture with whom you associate or recognise this approach? What about music, film, literature?

(ND) I am interested in literature, film and architecture that explore and describe the tension in the malleability of forms as they morph incoherently from one state to another. For instance Marie Darrieussecq's novel *Pig Tales* (1996) describing a young woman's transformation into a sow, David Cronenberg's sci-fi body horror *Videodrome* (1983), where body and technology collide. Alain Resnais' documentary *Le chant du Styrène* (1958) (which also features in my show at S1) muses methodically on the trajectory of a disposable plastic object back to its origins in crude oil, or in architects Zaha Hadid and Patrik Schumacher's *Parametricism*, where a computer squiggle is generated into monumental architectural structures as intricate as cells under a microscope.

(IH) I watched *Videodrome* again recently. My favourite parts are where the television screen becomes this elasticised plastic surface, which has become flaccid and globby and through which characters can actually penetrate and pass through. It reminds me of Mark Leckey's term "plasmaticness", which he takes from the writings of Sergei Eisenstein. For Leckey, I think, it describes the feeling of confusion between that which is represented on the screen and that represented in 'real life'. As images become higher resolution and the screen's epidermis is increasingly difficult to distinguish, this "plasmaticness" brings us to this state of confusion but also one of a primal pleasure. This is something I feel looking at your work: it's very much exploring the physical threshold of the plasma screen and how this might manifest, should our imaginations run wild,

into hardened three dimensions. I assume you are interested in how technology messes with our physical perception, and how sculpture might really toy with those shapes and textures too?

(ND) This also links to something Leckey said about digital technology's dematerializing effect on real world objects – how it takes away their shadow. I think this analogy is a pertinent characteristic of how I toy with physical perception. It's worth noting that whilst I often use analogue or archaic sculptural techniques in the first stage of production (such as plaster casting or clay modelling), the stage that comes after through industrial processing (vacuum-forming, powder-coating, or anodising for instance) enables the forms I made in the studio to lose their base object-ness. What's left is a hyper-material version, something akin to an amniotic sac in high definition. The rectangular format I regularly employ (table tops, architectural panelling, etc.) references the plasma format we're well accustomed to but also harks back to more traditional modes of categorising and publishing, as generally I am interested in this idea of indexing, as if to offer things up for study – to link to a wider, perhaps naturalist tradition of exploring the base elements and substances that make up the world we live in and how we make sense of this information.

(IH) Which brings me to the question of whether you think we are going through a new formalism as a result of technological changes? Or how about Impressionism?

(ND) These new technologies are essentially linked to presentation and modes of display; they allow object/image to be light-boxed. This primal pleasure you mentioned is heightened and attention to detail is paramount. Formalism can be seen through the way objects and surfaces are accurately structured and composed, however the 'new' comes into play as shape and texture take into account social references, which is different to 20th century formalism I guess. Impressionism is interesting to think about in this context as its characteristics are very similar to today's proliferation of stock imagery: not only in the way they present realistic scenes of modern life but also in their retinal-confusing material make-up, impasto brushstrokes become DPI and everything is compellingly wet and glistening.

(IH) Can we talk about Crocs? These are horrible oversized plastic clown shoes that are apparently great for children and chefs because you can easily wash off various splashes and excess fluids. Why did you choose them for your new work? Is this the first time you have taken an everyday household item and then molded into work?

(ND) They belong to a very particular iconography. I have used yams in a similar way, because of their socio-cultural status and the way they can be read as part of a collective experience of the globalised cityscape. I was drawn to the fact that the Croc is used not only recreationally but also as a universal staple in professional cooking and medical sectors, practices both based on material fusion and fluidity. Invertebrate, ergonomic and prosthetic, they are made to accommodate the body but also exist as crude vestibules of it. I also wanted to draw comparison between the way they are manufactured and some of my own similar production techniques, as a way of providing a context for the source of my work as a whole.

(IH) This description of your work as "amniotic sac in high definition" is great – is that something you have thought about or phrased yourself before? So, what's the difference between this and a shadow? Is this coating what you're aiming for instead of shadow? Because of course when Leckey talks about the disappearance of shadow, he talks about it in relation to digitally modified objects on screen; whereas you are working – exceptionally well – with this deceit in three dimensions, in a sense trying to lose the shadow?

(ND) It's a description I just came up with now as a way of describing the translucency and elasticity of the vacuum-shaped forms I make. The gloss finish of the plastic attracts glare and does its best to expel shadows, I also have to smooth out corners to avoid the plastic from snagging as it is stamped out of the mould, which itself gives the finished works that sense of coating, as they approximate the original. They become intangible hollow shells of former 'real' and palpable forms. This dissociation from the real thus eliminates the shadow.

(IH) Do you see these new forms of industrial production opening up new interesting pathways for sculpture?

(ND) Certainly, specifically the digitalised control of machine tools that is standard nowadays. However I'm mostly excited about the ease of access that we have to industrial manufacture as artists, as it's possible to research, source and understand

how these processes are implemented with speed, thanks to the Internet. I must say I outsource the production of my work sparingly and so far have been lucky to be able to work alongside fabricators who have taught me their trade, as it's important for me to understand how the work is made in order to reap the benefits of technical snags and mistakes that arise in the production process as this is what sets it aside from the commercially produced category of objects there.

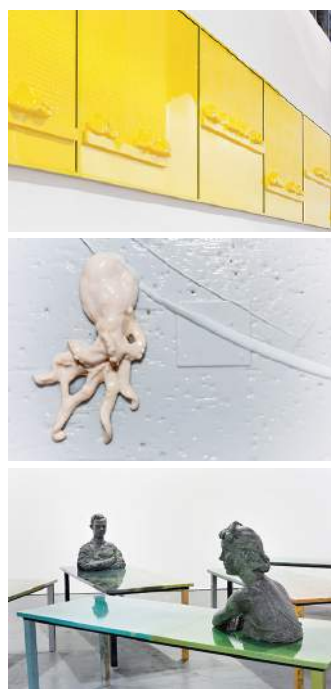
(IH) For me, your works seem to pose them in a very intuitive fashion – the surface of the plastic coalescing with the surface of the body, or organism. I was at a conference recently and heard a paper by academic and social-environmentalist Jennifer Gabrys, who writes about *The Material Politics of Plastic*, and she presented a fascinating and quite terrifying archaeology of plastic: how it is produced now in more volume than ever before, and with no plastic to have ever been successfully decomposed, that's a hell of a lot of plastic clogging up the earth surface. Do you ever think about environmental concerns? Do you think your work might alert us to them in a sensory or intuitive way? Is that art's job?

(ND) What interests me about plastic and polystyrene is the way that it is generally understood as a synthetic material, yet its origin lies in petroleum which itself is a compound made up of our own decomposing bodies. I'm interested in highlighting this paradox yet I don't take an aggressive stance on environmental issues, I prefer to toy with the sensorial push and pull between seduction and repulsion and the 'real' versus the 'constructed' that these materials conjure.

(IH) Finally, you work in sculpture and installation and often I feel myself quite conscious of my own body movements around and within it. Have you ever considered choreographing a piece within your work, or working with the movement of bodies as a part of a piece, whether through performance, film or dance?

(ND) I have thought about this but so far an opportunity hasn't presented itself. The work I make for exhibitions is often dictated by how I want viewers to navigate the space; I rely on them to activate it through their own intimate experience of it. I use certain standard sizes that relate to the human body, whether it is the circumference of poles that fit comfortably in the palm of a hand, or the door-size of panel works which frame it. I install work at heights that encourage this, at groin height or high up in the space, in order to explore the sheer scale of the outside world in relation to the space our own bodies occupy. I think a performance or choreography would have to retain this sense of intimacy whilst also creating a sense of material tension.

All images Courtesy Jonathan Viner, London/Margate



# MOUSSE

December 2012 / January 2013

Pages 224 - 229

## Distance and Desire

### A CONVERSATION BETWEEN MAGALI REUS AND NICOLAS DESHAYES



Nicolas Deshayes, *Salts*, 2012, installation view, Galerie Chez Valentin, Paris, 2012. Courtesy: the artist and Jonathan Viner, London. Photo: Pierre Antoine

In their work, Magali Reus and Nicolas Deshayes are both attracted to a state of liquidity that causes their works to waver between representation and abstraction, desire for contact and repulsion. The artists enter into conversation about the relationship with the body, which becomes a yardstick as much in absence as in the dimensional variability that transforms the organic into the monumental and architectural.

Magali Reus: Your recent solo show at Jonathan Viner was called *Browns in Full Color*. When I first heard the title, it made me think of a walk we took on holiday a few years ago. We came across a field of grazing cows, and I remember you admiring the cowpats. I was trying to get my head around what drew you to these splashy shapes, since they were pretty grotesque...

Nicolas Deshayes: I was intrigued by their repulsive semi-solidstate, and it got me thinking about how they might

sit alongside the ubiquitous representation of liquidity in the advertising stock-photography of beauty and food products. With almost scientific precision and a studio flash, these glossy images are usually designed to trigger desire by emphasizing a sense of the heightened “purity” of these substances, so I enjoyed imagining how the rawness of this cow manure might relate to this commercial world. Because of its coagulant nature, the cowpat is a clumsy approximation of images like the computer screensaver water ripple, or the pearlescent drop of moisturizer, or indeed the ancestor





Magali Reus, *Weekend*, installation view, Fons Welters, Amsterdam. Courtesy: The Approach, London; and Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam

of these images, Harold E. Edgerton's *Milk Drop Coronet* (1936), a photograph of a milk splash in the shape of a crown. Edgerton pioneered a photographic system for cataloguing aspects of nature previously unseen by the naked eye. What links these images is that they are frozen in time, and the state between liquid and solid interests me in this respect and is something I try to replicate in my work. *Browns in Full Color* played with the trickery of this frozen moment, and was an attempt at cataloguing a particular set of imagined transient surfaces and how they might speak of the human body in the built environment. It seems like the representation of liquidity is an aspect that you also play with in your work: why is this something you choose to explore?

mr: I think I became interested in the idea of liquidity through various production processes I worked with in the studio, and by observing manufacturing processes elsewhere. This idea that most objects we surround ourselves with have once existed in a liquid state intrigues me, as it makes me think of material being in constant flux, moving between liquid and solid, and that just before this transition there is a threshold or a liminal moment. I came to think about the threshold between liquid and solid as a possible space, a moment of deferral before completion or arrival, containing all this exciting potential. Initially I wanted to explore the idea not so much by using liquid representations in the work, as by drawing a parallel between the liquid-to-solid state and the moment of transition found in spaces that people and their belongings pass through, in scans of airport luggage

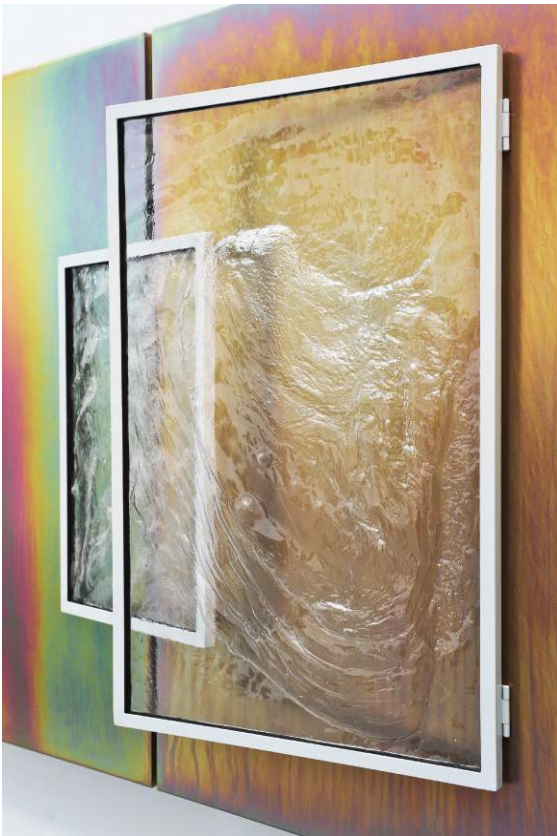
or industrial containers, etc. A similar moment of liquidity exists in these spaces, as you and your luggage are held (liquid) to be transported, eventually, to another place (solid). But I think the moment before completion is an important factor in your work too. I remember you talking about melted Starbucks coffee cups and Zaha Hadid's architectural models. There's this element of the model, or prototype in your work...

nd: In a sense my work sits at that point before completion, but also the moment before putrefaction. Zaha Hadid's architecture is as hard as it is soft, and I interpret its abstraction as originating from the curves of organic matter under a microscope. I enjoy this relationship between high technology and the body, and the potential for technology to enable various shifts in scale, like Henry Moore's enlarged anthropomorphic forms, originally inspired by pieces of flint. *Soho Fats* (2012) is a work that took its cue from the architectural space of the London sewer. It was made from five sheets of polystyrene installed on a display mechanism of vertical handrails. The polystyrene was hand-cut with a hot wire, to form an undulating surface of ridges and dips, like the 3D line drawing of computer modeling software employed by techno-driven architects like Hadid. It was a model and a synthetic substitute for the blocks of congealed fat lining sewer walls, displaced residues of the human bodies existing above ground.

I use a lot of materials and processes that exist in the manufacturing world for



Nicolas Deshayes, Back to the Drawing Board, 2009. Courtesy: the artist and Jonathan Viner, London



Nicolas Deshayes, Salts, 2012. Courtesy: the artist and Jonathan Viner, London. Photo: Pierre Antoine



Nicolas Deshayes, "Browns in Full Colour", installation view, Jonathan Viner, London, 2012. Courtesy: Jonathan Viner, London



Nicolas Deshayes, Slugs, 2012. Courtesy: Jonathan Viner, London

the purpose of prototyping or packaging. Liquid Styrene is refined from petrol, a fossil fuel, and is used to create the polystyrene and vacuum-formed plastic I frequently use. I am drawn to these materials because of their synthetic connotations, yet it is interesting that they come from the earth's core and thus from our own fossilized bodies. We both represent the body in our sculptural work without necessarily being directly figurative. There was also a strong sense of the body's absence in your last show ON at The Approach...

nr: Yes, there's a definite sense of absence of the body in the sculptural work in that show. Although the scale and placement of the sculptures relate to the viewer's body, the body never achieves an organic presence or representation other than almost template-like, flattened versions, like the grey jesmonite slab in *Back on the Level* (2011) and the silicone blue mats on *Circulation (Increase)* and *Circulation*



Magali Reus, *A Line Up (III)*, 2012. Courtesy: The Approach, London; and Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam



Magali Reus, *Phase Change*, 2012. Courtesy: The Approach, London; and Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam

(Decrease) (both 2011). This “rectangular body” with its measurements of 180 x 50 cm is based on the size and shape of a yoga or camping mat, designed to hold the average human body. It has been a recurring shape in my work over the last few years, it has manifested itself in various materials.

nd: My work often exists on two planes, the background and the foreground. The background is generally made from “splash-proof” sheet material that I use as a signifier for public space. Zinc-plated steel, the polyurethane board made for toilet cubicles, or anodized aluminum, have a chemical composition that withstands day-to-day erosion caused by human interaction. But in aesthetic terms their finish has an acidity that counteracts this idea of cleanliness. I am interested in making exhibitions that suggest an interactive relationship with the viewer's body. Not unlike what you say about your rectangular templates, the planes I use are a way of describing the space that a body occupies. Works are often installed at a height suggesting a functional purpose – the height of the groin, or face. This dynamic highlights the visceral quality of the surface of these works, and help to create an almost erotic tension. It seems like you tease and play with desire and masculinity in your references to manual labour...

nr: I have often found myself drawn to observing physical labour, be it construction workers, guys assembling scaffolding on the street, athletes. It's like pornography: the fluidity of physical movements and the exhaustion of the body border on the mechanical. I've been working with the male body in my videos, as I'm interested in its relationship to classical sculpture, in which it epitomizes physical strength. The contemporary equivalent, I think, is the buff body seen in commercial and fashion photography, which taps into a collective desire for perfect health and physique. I wanted to retain neutrality throughout the video and focus on the physical rather than a narrative, and in that sense these men seemed to be the right protagonists. Their generic looks makes us instantly read them as desirable, which keeps us at a distance and makes us read them as objects (or material) rather than enabling us to project any character or personality traits onto them. There's a sense of the body becoming a product or object in your work too, when you translate skin into sleek plastic sculptural material...

nd: I objectify the body by working with skins, surfaces and hollows as a way of exploring how desire is induced by manufactured imagery in a consumer society. The plastic vacuum-forming process is the ultimate mode of traditional mechanical reproduction—forms are endlessly reproducible from a single mould and are most commonly employed to manufacture objects that relate to the body, like bus seats or coffee cups. I like this sense of a generic collective corpore



ality; the forms I create, however, are the antithesis to these objects, they become liquefied skins, frozen moments of climax.

mr: It seems that this idea of the liquid to which we are both drawn might relate to a desire for the work not to be locked down; for it to continuously slosh between representation and abstraction, between the organic-accidental and the clinical-mechanical, between a desire for physical contact and the keeping of a cool distance...

# JACK LAVENDER

Born 1983, Canterbury, UK

Lives and works in London, UK

## EDUCATION

- 2010-2012** MA Sculpture, Royal College of Art, London, UK  
**2006-2009** BA (Honors) Fine Art, UCA Canterbury  
**2005-2006** BTEC Foundation Art & Design, UCCA Canterbury

## SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2015** BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, UK  
*A Hardcore Stomping Flashback*, The Approach, London, UK  
**2014** *Jack Lavender*, Mihai Nicodim, Los Angeles, US  
**2013** *Dreams Chunky*, The Approach, London, UK  
**2012** Solo Presentation, Independent, NY, US  
**2010** *Smok Gang*, And/Or Gallery, London, UK  
**2009** *Now 25*, NANS Gallery, Canterbury, UK  
**2008** *Weekend Work*, NANS Gallery, Minnis Bay, UK  
**2007** *Magic Sausage*, UCA Project Space Canterbury, UK

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2015** *English Summer*, Elizabeth Dee, New York, US  
*Guest starring...F.R.I.E.N.D.S.*, *Friends*, Evelyn Yard, London, UK  
Sies + Höke, Düsseldorf, DE  
*Episode 1*, Stems Gallery, Brussels, BE  
**2014** *Athletic Valentin*, Galerie Chez Valentin, Paris, FR  
*Pre-pop to Post-human: Collage in the Digital Age*, Hayward Touring exhibition, to be first presented at Hatton Gallery, Newcastle, UK  
*On the Devolution of Culture*, Rob Tufnell, London, UK  
*Teen Paranormal Romance*, The Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago, Chicago, US  
*The Unpainted Landscape*, Mihai Nicodim Gallery, Los Angeles, US  
**2013** *Cabinet of Threads*, Van Horn, Dusseldorf, DE  
*Paradise Garage*, Eight One, London, UK  
*The Unpainted Landscape*, Mihai Nicodim Gallery, Los Angeles, US

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May 7, 2015

## Jack Lavender: A Hardcore Stomping Flashback

This is one slick show – quite literally. The gallery floor is so slippery that you have to tread carefully to keep from falling over as you make your way across a surface densely strewn with thousands of glossy, loose sheets of paper. Every page is identically printed on both sides with a photograph of footprints in mud. It's a kind of conceptual joke by Jack Lavender. The young London artist is using images of real ground to create a wholly artificial surface. The shiny pages don't retain any footprints, of course, but the way they slide around mimics mud's slimy instability.

This sort of playing with reproductions and ersatz versions is everywhere in this exhibition. A solitary wall assemblage features plastic bones and glass bunches of grapes affixed to a rusting iron support, while at the other end of the room crumpled sheets of steel contain imitation wooden branches and metal casts of onion rings. Gradually, the feeling you get is of the natural world being incorporated and commodified – until any feeling of naturalness is lost, and all that's left is absurd, chintzy artifice.

Of course, it's hardly a revelatory idea that we're all becoming increasingly alienated from nature. But Lavender is good at alluding to the anxieties beneath the bright veneer of contemporary culture, at hinting at a sense of loss. Leaning against a wall are several tall glass panels featuring abstract swirls and tracks of paint, while around the edges are little cartoon feet, like the comic book motif of a figure exiting the frame. Jutting farcically out in all directions, the disappearing feet bring us back full circle, suggesting once again that we're in danger of losing our proper balance, or simply of falling away from reality altogether.

by GABRIEL COXHEAD



Jack Lavender: 'A Hardcore Stomping Flashback', © the artist, courtesy The Approach 1/6

# frieze

October 2012

Issue 150

## Jack Lavender, Oliver Osborne, Marco Palmieri

THE APPROACH, LONDON, UK

A welcome mat lay at the centre of The Approach's summer show of works by three young Londoners. In Jack Lavender's *Welcome* (all works 2012), the salutation is printed on material similar to a mouse pad, the muddy gold lettering overlaid on an image of craggy rock and tiled as a four-by-four grid. This cold and forbidding design is quite incompatible with its message. Any resulting discomfort was coyly accented by a plastic mummy's hand resting – fist upright – on its surface. Pattern-printed glass tumblers were also placed there, the kind of novelty kitchenware familiar from the early 1990s, yellow ivy running across some and the Pepsi logo printed on another. Above, a rectangular glass pane dangled from a rope, with short metal prongs somehow welded at the bottom, perforating a cast-metal doughnut. This arrangement was as curiously compelling as an awkward social gathering, all junk food and crass joviality.

Lavender had two wall-mounted hangings here too, where the rusty armatures were welded into large frames, each functioning like a web or net for the kind of cheap decorations you might find in a pound shop. In *Gold Balloon*, for instance, the eponymous object is cast so that it seems to float upwards from the frame. A shoelace hangs down from the top of the same armature and a clean glass plate is lodged at the bottom; a deflated ball, with a face printed on it, flops from the right. A century after Cubism ruptured pictorial space within painting, this work acknowledges that two-dimensional representation is a perforated sphere but continues on all the same. *Gold Balloon* is funny in a sad, self-effacing way, but the ensemble is again oddly transfixing. Oliver Osborne's *Rubber Plant* (*Empty Fridge*) hung on an adjoining wall. Its subject is painted in detail in oil on linen, delicately lit as if by the moon against a midnight blue background; the rubbery-ness seems tangible in the density of the leaf, against which the light shines evocatively. Osborne has paid painterly attention to this, which makes the addition of a small digital print – cut and pasted at the centre of the composition – so surprising. Why spoil your captivating *trompe l'oeil* effect, Osborne, with this hasty intervention? The offending print shows two bewildered men staring into an empty fridge. It's sketched in a loose, cartoon style but there are no accompanying captions. Everyone's perplexed. A clue hung opposite, in another painting by Osborne. A similar print is pasted at the central point at which its six composite panels converge. It shows a rug with a bump in the centre and a tail hanging out, like some brattish cat, but there's a caption this time (also the work's title), 'Jetzt ist Otto unter dem Teppich' (Now Otto is under the rug), revealing the drawing to be an illustration from some anonymous grammar textbook and presumably the same source as Osborne's previous print. Beneath, the six panels are covered in a mottled painting effect of a sky colour that might line a rococo ceiling or appear in a Romantic painting. John Constable once called his clouds 'the chief organ of sentiment' and so it seems that Osborne's combinations are a ploy: pitch one didactic pictorial device against another and see what rebounds. As cloud effect or rubbery leaf are combined with fairly humourless educational illustrations, they demand fresh attention. What do we see when we're not looking, *Jetzt ist Otto unter dem Teppich* might ask – a question that gives these paintings critical purchase.

The two oil on canvas works in Marco Palmieri's diptych, *Twins*, comprise identical sketchy outlines of an upturned Roman head printed on two different backgrounds. One is on watery grey, the other on a horizontal yellow dissolving into blue like a nod towards the hues of Mark Rothko. Their sombre background fuzz is familiar from works by this iconic artist, but also oddly from the basic blurring effects of digital imaging. The icon of a Roman head is over-familiar too, so that its outline seeps in subtly rather than appearing in bold. One assumes Palmieri is attempting to combine his sources in a new kind of painterly abstraction, treating the familiar fog of pictorial colour fades and infinitely reproducible forms with the fluid qualities of paint. The exhibition was untitled, filed instead after the three artists' names. And while it was a valuable and enjoyable display for all parties, the works slightly suffered from such close proximity to one another. They might all be considered as pictorial assemblages coming after Modernist painting when appropriation strategies abound. However, these categories are loose and rife and provide an insufficient framework for works of particular and sometimes exceptional sensibility.

Isobel Harbison

# GEORGE HENRY LONGLY

Born 1978, London, UK

Lives and works in London, UK

## EDUCATION

**2005** MA Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, London, UK

## SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

**2014** *Hair Care*, Jonathan Viner, London, UK

**2013** *George Henry Longly & Matthew Smith*, ANDOR, London, UK  
*GHL* (performance), Park Nights / Serpentine Gallery, London, UK  
*Hanway Place*, Laure Genillard Art Space, London, UK

**2012** *Pushy Klsser*, Lüttgenmeijer, Berlin, DE  
*Vanille* (with Nicolas Deshayes), Valentin, Paris, FR

**2011** *Decades*, Vidal Cuglietta, Brussels, BE  
*Rick Owens: New Work and George Henry Longly: Mirrors*, Brooks Mews, London, UK

**2009** *CHIP FOAM*, Valentin, Paris, FR  
*Mass Damper pt 4*, Generator Projects, Dundee, Scotland, UK  
*Non-Building Structure*, Lüttgenmeijer, Berlin, DE

**2008** *Mass Damper pt 3*, Hatton Gallery, Newcastle, UK  
*It must be a garbled version of another explanation*, Dicksmith, London, UK  
*Mass Damper pt 2*, IPS, Birmingham, UK

**2007** *Screening*, The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, US  
*Undercover*, Kunstraum Walchetrum, Zurich, CH  
*And on to the Discotheque Comrade?*, Fri-art, Fribourg, CH

**2006** *Floor Games*, Dicksmith, London, UK  
The title taken from reading that book (with Ryan Gander), Elisabeth Kaufmann Gallery, Zurich, CH

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

**2015** *English Summer*, Elizabeth Dee, New York, US  
*The Crack-Up*, Room East, New York, US

**2013** *A Journey Through London Subculture*, ICA (off-site), London, UK  
*The Writing is on the Wall*, Jonathan Viner, Margate, UK  
*Reading the Surface*, David Zwirner, London, UK  
*Abstract Cabinet*, David Roberts Art Foundation, London, UK  
*Prodigal in Blue*, Laura Bartlett, London, UK

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2015

Spotlight

No. 16

**George  
Henry  
Longly**

**Self-image  
and the  
Museum**

IN CONVERSATION WITH NICOLETTA LAMBERTUCCI



This dialogue is the result of a day trip which happened on 25 January 2014. GHL and I decided to go to Oxford to visit the Pitt Rivers Museum. We left London Paddington at 12am.

**PART 1 — The elements: garment, helmets, hair spray, the geckos**

**(NL)** Which are the elements that define your current works? I have the feeling you surround yourself with specific things that you often use to create a narrative, a situation.

**(GHL)** Some Issey Miyake garments, replica helmets, hair spray and a gecko.

**(NL)** What are you doing with the Issey Miyake?

**(GHL)** I'm using a piece of 'Pleats Please' by Issey Miyake called Madam T. It's basically a huge square of fabric with a hole in and thousands of tiny pleats. I'm thinking of it as a sort of uniform, a clichéd symbol of power and intellect in the creative industries. Zaha Hadid wears 'Pleats Please.' It's a shortcut. I make jokes with my friends about this: one day we will all be powerful women wearing head to toe 'Pleats Please.' But structurally it's really interesting – it falls and creates form without doing anything – and there is an instruction manual on the many ways that you can wear it. It's totally personal and subjective. They even say in the brochure that the options are "limited only by your imagination."

**(NL)** This garment is very sculptural, very sensual. There is something about how it touches your body and how it moves according to your moves. Everything that you are saying to me is not just linked with power but also with sensuality.

**(GHL)** Yes, totally. Power, sensuality, branding. The next show I am working on at Jonathan Viner in London, presents a certain character. I am not trying to depict David Beckham through wax. I am trying to facsimile a vague idea that connects these elements altogether. It uses the language of the museum and the notion of 'collection' – to covet something and to keep it for posterity.

**(NL)** And on this occasion you will use helmets, which are a facsimile too. You are using replica helmets from different eras in history. Why replicas? Is it because you could not have the originals?

**(GHL)** Well, I couldn't get originals pieces, but it doesn't really matter. A fabrication is enough – and a fabrication combined with original pieces and original artifacts makes this project more interesting.

**(NL)** The process of making replicas sounds really linked to the process of casting that you have been engaged with in the last couple of years.

**(GHL)** Yes. Through the casts I was trying to objectify the body. Again that's about power and, as you said, sensuality. These elements are all tied together by a sense of vagueness. To be vague and to be oblique. To be vague is a resistance to categorisation. It says: "I'm neither this and I'm neither that. I'm a grey area in between. I'm beyond your taxonomy and I am hopefully

beyond the mechanics of your language.” You can spot the lack of conviction. A similar logic is applied to hairspray and how I have used it in the past.

(NL) In which way?

(GHL) Hairspray gives a form on your head. When you spray your hair you create form. It’s a sculpture in your head. You fix something in quite a temporary way and then it becomes part of your self-image, of how you see yourself. It becomes a self-image, but it is flimsy, doesn’t stand up, it doesn’t last forever. It’s just a tool to create a sort of feeling inside you. The same thing happens when you do a show. You try to make work, and the premises to making an artwork are very flimsy. You cannot be binary with your work. I’m not interested in saying “look: this is a very clear metaphor about that, a depiction of that which means this.” I’m not interested in a mechanical art like that. I guess I am dealing with what it means to make art, what is the process of making art and what does it mean to be an artist. And that’s why I touch on selfimage because what I put out there affects how I feel about myself.

(NL) And how you want your self-image to relate to the world. What’s the project for the exhibition at Jonathan Viner?

(GHL) It’s a show made up of a trinity of artworks: three vitrines – two floor works and one wall work. In a glass floor-standing vitrine you have a sculpture made in steel from an image taken of a Roman Hermaphrodite sculpture at the Centrale Montemartini Museum in Rome. The sculpture is dressed in ‘Pleats Please.’ Another is a floor-based vitrine, made of wood with a glass top that you can sit on. The inside of the vitrine is clad with different types of marble and resembles a tomb, it houses a number of body casts of Chris Miller – someone who I have cast three times now and has an amazing body. To me, he represents the sexy gay male and by casting him I play around with the power relations between artist and model, literally objectifying him. The last vitrine will be floating on the wall and has a collection of replica helmets from different eras of history, a meteorite and a colony of geckos.

(NL) Tell me more about the geckos. Why geckos?

(GHL) I want you to look at something that is not static. And geckos are these really beautiful allegorical devices. Also, I love reptiles.

(NL) For the project you did at the Serpentine Pavilion you made a wonderful video with various snakes moving through one of your marble works.

(GHL) Reptiles are mysterious, cold and it’s hard to relate to them. The reason I used the snakes for that project is because of the primordial fear we have about them, and the different symbolisms that they have taken on throughout history.

(NL) In the book of Genesis the snake is the Devil.

(GHL) Exactly. I was watching videos of snakes eating entire animals, alive, and that was incredible.





*Take it, it's yours*, 2014, wood, glass, aluminum & copper plated armour, heating lamp, plastic foliage, water bottles, gekkos foliage, water bottles, gekkos  
 previous page: *Madame T*, 2014, glass, steel, YSL Touche Eclat, plastic foliage Courtesy Jonathan Viner, London



*I hate what you have done to my hair*, 2014, marble, YSL Touche Eclat, whipped cream chargers, steel fixings Courtesy Jonathan Viner, London

(NL) They are not that brutal. They do not open or take parts of other animals.

(GHL) That's more terrifying. To be consumed alive... One form taking over another form. It's really a sculptural gesture. This form becoming another form, ingesting it. There is an emotional response, I mean either you are dead in the eyes or you're shocked.

(NL) It always impressed me that in religious iconography the depicted Virgin Mary or Saint had to kill the snake by stamping on its head. To kill the devil/snake means to stamp on the head... It's so rational and figurative at the same time.

(GHL) That's great. Also, I was holding them during the shooting of the video. It's amazing the way they can manipulate their way through space. But geckos are different... The Mourning geckos are all parthenogenic – they grow and develop their embryos without fertilization. They don't need the male – in fact there are no known males. But they also have very specific attributes on their feet. They can walk on anything. They have these hairs on their feet that are microscopically fine. They connect to the surface of another object with a sort of electrostatic interaction... They almost become part of the object. They can get very close to another object. They can touch something in a very different way from us. So I had this idea that if they are on top of a meteorite, they can connect with that object – and meteorites are billions of years old and come from space.

(NL) If you can connect so closely with an object you can connect with its history. You know, when I was little my parents used to bring me to historical ruins, and I remember that I was going around looking for holes and hidden bits of these marbles or stones, and trying to touch them. I thought that if no one before me ever had touched that bit, then I would have been able to travel in time, and go and visit that old epoch...

(GHL) I love that idea! I had the same thought; I know exactly what you mean.

## PART 2 — Self-image

(NL) Since I have known you, your work has changed a lot. I see the same references and interests, but the actual forms that your work takes varies a lot.

(GHL) My work always changes. What I am doing now is the product of what I've made so far. Self-image is such a flexible and delicate thing to build. The garment, the hairspray, the cast of a specific body, they all define the way you want to see yourself.

(NL) Most of the materials you use, the references you do, are all very close to you, they're part of your everyday life.

(GHL) I want all my work to be about now. All the marble works have the date on, they have things that my friends were saying, slogans that come out of my life, through conversations and chatting... Things that seem trivial but actually over several months they become profound to you. I think it's really simple: you cannot control experience, and you cannot control moods and sentiments. You cannot be a control-freak about what you do. This is always in my mind when I

work. Maybe that's why I use mirrors all the time. Art is not an instruction; it's everything other than that.

### PART 3 — On Museology

(GHL) Look how close these things are together. Fiction is out of control here... It's so intense!

(NL) The Pitt Rivers's collection is arranged thematically, according to how the objects were used, rather than their age or origin. This museum reminds me of Jung's concept of the 'collective unconscious'. The collective unconscious is a container of aboriginal, innate, and inherited shapes of the human mind. It consists of pre-existent forms, the archetypes, which can only become conscious secondarily. And here, it's like a museum of the communal unconscious, of those archetypes that we all share, expressed through objects. You see similar ideas and processes in all culture, everywhere, in every epoch.

(GHL) There is so much information. It's like the history of everything. It's a museum of "contexts for looking." It's basically the Enlightenment. A sort of "let's go off and collect everything."

(NL) This place makes you think about the idea of collecting, while I follow the idea of repetition of certain motifs throughout history. This kind of categorization and display shows how history is not linear, but it has a central point that radiates.

(GHL) Yes, and I see it as this one figure, the collector. I think about the 'culture of collecting' and the 'colonial approach' in presenting these objects. They look so incongruous; the way the objects are displayed is not only by associative connections. It becomes decoration.

(NL) How do you think your eyes work out all this?

(GHL) Personally, I cannot really look at the single objects. I don't come here to be analytical. I come here to experience the whole, but within that some things do catch my eyes. The rule of classification here is an aesthetic rule, which comes through pattern and decoration. That is why exhibition design is so important to me: everything that holds the artifact, the mechanics of display, whatever the role is, it changes the object and the understanding that we have of it.

(NL) In contemporary museum display, one rule is to give space and focus to each single object. Here it's the opposite.

(GHL) Yeah, that's a consequence of Minimalism. Taking things away in order to reveal or produce visual language.

(NL) All these huge weapons... And then today fighting is not physical anymore. It's the fear of what you cannot see. Look at these helmets, they were meant to scare the enemy just by the shape of them. Now you don't have this confrontational way of fighting.



*Untitled*, 2014, marble, Touché Éclat YSL, steel fixings. Courtesy the artist, Galerie Valentin, Paris, Jonathan Viner, London (GHL) Indeed. That's how I envision the idea of battle. You know how earlier I was talking about vagueness and openness when making works: it's a fight that has an action that develops through rhetoric and by having an agenda. It's a strategy.  
(NL) American Minimalism and architecture were

Performance view, *Park Nights: George Henry Longly*, Serpentine Gallery, London (20 September 2013)  
Photo Yousef Eldin Courtesy the artist, Galerie Valentin, Paris

(GHL) Indeed. That's how I envision the idea of battle. You know how earlier I was talking about vagueness and openness when making works: it's a fight that has an action that develops through rhetoric and by having an agenda. It's a strategy.

(NL) American Minimalism and architecture were the starting point of your early works. Now you are bringing battles into these.

(GHL) I've always made my own opinion of what Minimalism means. Not what the artist or the critic meant. I referenced it because I wanted to strip back noise and deal with a reduced form of visual language. That's why I was preoccupied with American Minimalism for a long time. I'm not interested in creating something new, but something that is new to my eyes, to my physical experience of that object because we look with our eyes and I think that my greater sense is by being in the presence of things and moving around them. Churches, museums, galleries: the materials of these buildings, they are the things that I pick up on and when I go around the museums. I want to have a feeling of these frequencies of information. Strangely I'm not so interested in the individual object – and yet I make objects.

(NL) You take information through your eyes but rework them out through a sense of touch. You did that with the furniture, the marble works, the casts. The kind of proximity that your work presents speaks through a sense of touch. Another example is the stickers you made...

(GHL) Yes that's true. Last year I thought a lot about self-image in relation to branding. You know, everyone called me GHL so I did a show called GHL, it's tacky but it was great I think.

(NL) Mixing Minimalism with tackiness. There is one more thing that I want to understand. How does the display which you create function in relation to the works?

(GHL) I used the model of the museum to understand a way of making artwork. I did that when I was at College. I used the Natural History Museum and its modes of display to figure out how to present information in a certain way. The Natural History Museum works on a scientific level, it's not the type of understanding that you can apply to art. It was fascinating for me to see how those outmoded forms of museum display were used to construct a scientific message. I did that by going back again and again to see how an exhibition display built in the 1970's was being taken down and removed: first the carpet was gone, and then other things. Literally by looking at the physical construct of the theatre of the museum I found a way of producing my work. It's the presentation of visual information and how that relates to what interests you.



# GILBERT AND GEORGE

Born Gilbert: 1943, San Martin de Tor, Italy  
George: 1942, Plymouth, United Kingdom  
Lives and works in London, United Kingdom

## EDUCATION

Gilbert: Wolkenstein School of Art, Hallein School of Art, Munich Academy of Art, Munich, DE,  
and St Martin's School of Art, London, UK

George: Dartington Adult Education Centre, Dartington Hall College of Art, Oxford Art School, and  
St Martin's School of Art, London, UK

## SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2015** *Gilbert & George: The Early Years*, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA  
*Utopian Pictures*, Arndt Singapore, SG
- 2014** *Gilbert & George: Films and Video Sculptures, 1970-1981*, Lehmann Maupin, New York, USA  
*Scapegoating Pictures*, White Cube Bermondsey, London, UK  
*Scapegoating Pictures*, Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris, FR  
Villa Paloma, Nouveau Musée National de Monaco, MC  
*Gilbert & George: Artist Rooms*, Royal Albert Memorial Museum & Art Gallery Exeter, Devon, UK
- 2013** *London Pictures*, Casal Solleric Fundacio Palma Espai d'Art, Palma de Mallorca, ES  
*London Pictures*, Museum Kuppersmuhle, Duisburg, DE  
Málaga, ES

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2015** *English Summer*, Elizabeth Dee, New York, US  
*Future Seasons Past*, Lehmann Maupin, New York, NY
- 2014** *Look at Me: Portraiture from Manet to the Present*, Leila Heller Gallery, New York, NY  
*Lens-Based Sculpture: The Transformation of Sculpture through Photography*,  
Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, LI  
*Tea with Nefertiti*, Staatliches Museum Ägyptischer Kunst, Munich, DE  
*Somewhat Abstract: Selection from the Arts Council Collection*, Nottingham  
Contemporary, Nottingham, UK  
69/96, Alte Fabrik, Rapperswil-Jona, Switzerland, CH
- 2013** *Art at the Core: The Intersection of Visual Art, Performance and Technology*, Hudson  
Valley Center for Contemporary Art, Peekskill, NY  
*A Journey Through London Subculture: 1980s to Now*, ICA London, UK  
(con)TEXT, Sharon Art Center, Peterborough, New Hampshire, US **Gilbert & George**

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**PUBLIC COLLECTIONS**

Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia  
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia  
Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL  
Berardo Museum, Lisbon, Portugal  
Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY  
CAPC Musée d'Art Contemporain de Bordeaux, Bordeaux, France  
Castello di Rivoli Museum of Contemporary Art, Torino, Italy  
Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH  
Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, Bilbao, Spain  
Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, Ireland  
Magasin 3, Stockholm, Sweden Malmö Art Museum, Malmö, Sweden  
MAXXI, Rome, Italy  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY  
Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Fort Worth, TX  
Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Germany  
Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL  
Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA  
Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia  
Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe, NM  
Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY  
National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh, Scotland  
National Museums, Liverpool, United Kingdom  
National Museums, Holywood, Northern Ireland  
North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, NC  
Nouveau Musée National de Monaco, Monaco  
Palmer Museum of Art, Penn State University, University Park, PA  
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA  
Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia  
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA  
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY  
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands  
Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (S.M.A.K.), Ghent, Belgium  
Tate Gallery, London, United Kingdom

# ARTFORUM

August 1, 2014

## 500 Words: Gilbert and George

“Art Exhibition” comprises forty works by British artists Gilbert & George at the Villa Paloma of the Nouveau Musée National de Monaco. The show closely traces the history of the duo’s artistic creation, including rare, early prints and drawings. Here, the artists talk about some of the pieces included in this exhibition, which is on view through November 2, 2014.

WHEN WE STARTED as artists in 1968 and ’69, we didn’t want to run out of art school and buy a lot of canvases and oil paint, or a bag of plaster of paris, particularly since we didn’t want to go for traditional forms. When you take a photograph, you press the button on the camera, and technically you take a negative; we trusted that. We have thousands of images, all organized in subjects, so we don’t have to sit down in front of an empty white rectangle and think what to do. We don’t have to invent; we only have to choose to make the picture feel how we were that day, that month, that year. How we were in the 1970s, that’s how the pictures are that we made in the 1970s. The same goes for the ’80s. They’re printed out from inside ourselves. It’s a little bit automatic, but we make each from the beginning to the end—a total artwork. Installation, invitation card, poster, everything is ours. Very handmade, very primitive, very direct.

Abstraction began with religion, with theosophy. We have a copy of the first book of abstract art, *Thought Forms* by Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeater, which was published in 1901. To them, forms were thoughts, much like with Malevich or Mondrian. But as we say, form is very important, but only as the servant of meaning. We remember that in the 1970s, color was something that was on a lower-class greeting card, not in a modern gallery. You couldn’t talk about sex or love or emotions; these were totally taboo in art, and probably still are. But we always believed that we understood the viewer; most of our contemporaries, we felt, had a very patronizing idea that art belonged to a very particular circle of friends roughly in London, Paris, New York, and to a particular class and a particular financial sector. They used terms like “the general public” in a very negative way. We knew that we could create an art that would speak across those barriers, against the grain. We always tell a story that shows how elitist the art world was in the ’70s. We did a wonderful small exhibition in the small gallery of Konrad Fischer in Düsseldorf with the nature pictures, two of which are included in this exhibition, *Nature Photo Piece No. 7* and *The Shrubberies, No. 2*. The evening was an extraordinary success, and we had dinner and were drunk, and I think we even sold one picture, which was very rare at that time. We went to the gallery the next morning, and there was the director of the gallery looking very miserable. We asked, “Oh, hangover?” He said, “No,” yet he looked very grumpy and ill tempered. We managed to persuade him to tell us why he was unhappy. “The cleaning woman, she likes your exhibition.” That’s the 1970s for you.

We also started to think about religion, and we designed two amazing prints. One is *Decriminalize Sex*, because as we speak, there are people suffering, being imprisoned and executed for being completely normal human beings. In Brunei today, they are stoning queers and it has all to do with religion. We also did the print *Ban Religion* in 2007. It consists of just two big, black words. Of course nobody buys it, but it’s an exciting print to do. One day there was a knock at the door, and it was an elderly priest, very polite, who asked, “Sorry to trouble you, but are you the artists?” He then said, “I’ve just seen the print *Ban Religion*. It’s a wonderful thing. If I could afford it, I would buy it and put it in my church. And I’ll tell you why.” He continued, “Because all of the people of my congregation are very religious, but I don’t want them to be religious. I want them to be good.” Isn’t that a wonderful statement from a priest? Very moving, we thought.

As told to Mary Rinebold





# The Telegraph

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July 7, 2014

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## Gilbert and George: 'Everyone Said We Wouldn't Last'

They're polite and clean; their work is anything but. Nearly 50 years after their 'living sculptures' debut, Gilbert and George are as shocking – and charming – as ever.

The first thing you notice about Gilbert and George's studio in Spitalfields is how clean it is. From the outside, it looks just like one of the other carefully restored 18th-century houses in the east London street – they live in the house next door. Once inside, though, you might be in a nuclear bunker. There are no windows; gleaming white cupboards stretch off into the distance; and the only noise is a low hum from the air conditioning.

Inside the cupboards are rows and rows of files containing pictures of every artwork Gilbert and George have ever produced, along with invitations from every party they've ever been invited to. Until 10 years ago, they also used to photograph every visitor who came to the house.

Everything is immaculate; everything perfectly ordered. And then there are Gilbert and George themselves. They're very clean and tidy, too. They first made their name back in the Sixties as "living sculptures" and there is still something eerily robotic about them.

Both are wearing – as they always do – tweed suits. Gilbert, who comes from Italy and speaks with a thickly impasted accent (his full name is Gilbert Proesch), is the smaller of the two and has his hair brushed forward in a Napoleonic sort of style. Today, he is wearing a green suit with a pen in the top pocket. George (Passmore), who grew up in Totnes, is taller and more acerbic, with horn-rimmed specs. He is wearing a brown suit and also has a pen in his top pocket, along with a red flower in his buttonhole.

George has a clipped way of talking that sounds remarkably like Prince Charles's. He has ruddy cheeks and, when he smiles, he reminds me of someone, but at the time I can't think who. Only later do I realise it's Thomas the Tank Engine.

Although Gilbert and George may be very clean, their art is not clean at all. Over the years they have made pictures featuring sperm; urine; penises – their own; faeces – again, their own; and pubic lice. It's odd to think of their collectors – who often pay in excess of £1 million for one of their pictures – sitting in some chichi Manhattan apartment with one of their enormous turd pictures on the wall.

Not that Gilbert and George have anything to do with their collectors, or not if they can help it. George shudders and says, "We never want to know where our pieces go because many times we've been disappointed by what's next to it. Or the furniture," he adds darkly.

Many of their latest pictures include mysterious cylinders that look a little like bombs. In fact, they're nitrous oxide capsules, which they picked up off the street around where they live. Nitrous oxide, once called "laughing gas" and used by dentists to put their patients in a state of supine bliss, is now known as "hippie crack". Have you ever taken any, I ask. "Certainly not," says George brusquely. "And, if we had, we wouldn't tell you."

Gilbert and George – "two people, one artist," as they are fond of saying – are both in their early seventies. But age has not dimmed their energy, nor their appetite for shocking people, nor their contempt for much of the art world.

When they first moved to Spitalfields in 1967, everyone thought they were mad to live in such a dangerous area. Now people wonder how they can stand to be anywhere so achingly trendy. There are so many artists living there that they must practically trip over them whenever they emerge from their front door. Not that Gilbert and George have anything to do with them, either.

“We just say good morning, and move on,” says George, lifting his hand in a regal wave. “Actually, since we had our retrospective at the Tate Modern, we have a different wave,” and he turns it into a V-sign. It seems a rather apt image, somehow: brittle gentility on the surface; something much sharper going on just beneath. But then that’s always been their way. Gilbert and George have been together now, personally and professionally, for more than 50 years – ever since they met at St Martin’s School of Art in 1967.

Coincidentally, this was the year that homosexuality was decriminalised. In theory, this might have made them feel less isolated. But throughout their joint career the two of them have relished being outsiders – so much so that it’s almost as if they’ve needed official disapproval to function creatively. “I think all sorts of discrimination and all sorts of opposition fired us,” George says. “Criticism is a great aid to character building.”

When I ask if there was an immediate physical attraction between them, George says, “No, no,” while Gilbert says nothing. But it was clear straight away that they had one big thing in common – a ravenous appetite for success. And together, they were twice as strong against the world.

“It’s extraordinary,” says Gilbert – this is a favourite word of his and he says it with a long flourish: “extra-or-dinary!” “Most artists complain about being alone, but we’ve never been alone. Together we had a sense of amazing power and no self-doubt, or any of the things that artists normally have.”

“Everyone in the Seventies used to say it wouldn’t last,” says George of their relationship. “And now they’ve all been divorced 17 times,” he adds with satisfaction.

They also knew they had something different to say, and were looking for a different way of saying it. Shortly after leaving St Martin’s, they were turned down by an international art show with the unimprovably dull title of When Attitude Becomes Form at the ICA in London.

Cast into deep gloom, they decided to get their own back in characteristic fashion. They turned up to the opening dressed as living sculptures wearing multicoloured metallic heads, and stood in the middle of the gallery amid all the chattering guests. The biggest avant-garde art dealer in the world took one look and signed them up for an exhibition at his gallery in Düsseldorf.

One of the pieces they showed there was a large charcoal drawing. The dealer asked them how much they wanted for it. “We had no idea,” says George. “So we just named what back in 1971 was this ludicrously high figure – £1,000. And he sold it the next day. We were totally amazed.”

“It was extra-or-dinary!” says Gilbert.

Not altogether surprisingly, George had an isolated childhood in Totnes where his single mother worked as a waitress – he has an older brother who is now a priest in something called the Prophetic Witness Movement. George never knew his father as a child and met him only once, years later, when he was 21. How did it go? I ask.

“It was... fine,” he says.

Far from wanting her children to fit in, George’s mother encouraged her children to stay aloof. “My mother didn’t want us having anything to do with other children. She wanted us to be better than them.” She thought they would bring you down? “Well, they would have done.”

“White socks,” says Gilbert knowingly.

When he was about 12, George bought a copy of van Gogh’s letters in a second-hand bookshop. It proved a key moment. “I realised that van Gogh had done everything wrong throughout his life – he’d gone to the wrong academy, had the wrong jobs, painted the wrong pictures, and he still won through. That made a big impression on me.”

Gilbert grew up in a little village in the Dolomites where his father was a shoemaker and where everyone spoke an ancient language called Ladino. “I never wanted to be anything but an artist, ever since I was about seven years old.”

You don't have to spend long in Gilbert and George's company before you find yourself looking for little cracks between them. Little fault-lines in their relationship. Except there aren't any – not really. They finish each other's sentences and seem – publicly, at least – in agreement about everything. Gilbert says in an unguarded moment that he didn't think he could have made it on his own, but George immediately says, "I'm sure that's not true."

They've never split up. And, while the revelation a few years ago that George had once been married – to a woman – and has a grown-up child gave an intriguing glimpse of a more turbulent private life, he's never spoken about it.

Is one of you more emotional than the other?

Gilbert: "George is."

George: "We would say that of each other."

Gilbert: "Not me – he's more emotional."

George: "I think the opposite."

In part, they don't want to let too much air into their relationship because the way they work together is as much a mystery to them as it is to anyone else. "The secret is the secret," says George. "When we come down in the morning and see what we did yesterday, we're always amazed because we can't quite say how we arrived at that."

They don't have any friends, they say. Nor do they go to art exhibitions – or very seldom. "We go to one opening a year at our gallery, the White Cube, just to be polite," says George. "The last one we went to, we had a glass of wine and I said to the artist, 'Congratulations; this is a wonderful exhibition and you're a brilliant artist.' He looked at me and said, 'Honestly?'" George makes a face. "I thought, 'What, you want the truth as well?'"

From the beginning, routine was hugely important in their lives. They eat breakfast at the same café each morning, watch television for an hour at six o'clock every evening – usually repeats of *Midsomer Murders* or *Heartbeat*: "something soothing" – and then walk for an hour to the Kurdish restaurant in Dalston they've been going to for 20 years.

"We used to go to a restaurant that burnt down," says George. "And then we saw a new one that had opened that had pale-blue tablecloths. No one went there because they thought that a Turkish restaurant shouldn't be like that. Then we saw that it had testicles on the menu and we thought, 'Tablecloths and testicles – let's go for it!'"

The routine serves an important purpose. "It's important for us to keep a free mind," says George. It's the same with the tidiness.

"We couldn't have this craziness in our pictures if we had a mess around us."

"Everything has to be in its place," says Gilbert. "That way we don't have to think."

Their work has always been closely connected with where they live. "Whatever happens here is happening everywhere else five years later," says Gilbert. "We feel right in the centre of everything." This is especially true of Muslim fundamentalism, the subject of many of their new works.

"We say that politicians are dealing with this nightmare," says George. "So are hospitals and churches and mosques and the press. Maybe we can bring something different to the subject as artists. Something a bit more gentle."

On their nightly walks to Dalston, they're often stopped by tourists who want to be photographed with them. "From all over the world," says Gilbert in astonishment. "Girls from Venezuela; boys from Madrid. It's extra-or-dinary!"

They've always been very popular with young people, something that clearly means a lot. "When we're at an opening with all our pictures hanging on the walls and we're surrounded by teenagers licking us, that does feel very good," says George.

The art establishment has always been much less smitten – which, you suspect, is just how they like it. This has a lot to do with their political views – they’ve always been staunchly Conservative, an unforgivable heresy in the art world. “It’s crazy,” says George. “We always say we’re in the creative world where originality is the key, so why does everyone have the same political views?” They’re old-fashioned, too; at least in some things. “Oh, we’re very keen on family values,” says George.

Then there is what they call the “anti-gay thing”, something they believe is as prevalent in the art world as everywhere else. They talk about how the art critic Waldemar Januszczak once referred to them as “fruity gays in suits”. “Mind you, he’s Polish,” says Gilbert. “And they’re all anti-gay.” But recently attitudes towards them have changed – again prompted by their retrospective at the Tate in 2007. “All these people were there going, ‘Oh, marvellous,’” George recalls. “And I said, ‘But don’t you remember you said this work was hopelessly childish 20 years ago?’ They went, ‘Oh no, I’ve always loved it!’ It’s what we’ve always said: art stays the same, but the world around it changes.”

Once, they were reputed to be big boozers. Not anymore, though, they insist.

“We don’t drink here, ever,” says George.

“No, we only drink with friends,” says Gilbert.

But I thought you said you didn’t have any friends?

“We do have a small circle of friends,” Gilbert concedes. “But not in the arts.”

During one of the few lulls in our conversation, George says, “Shall we go to lunch?” I look at my watch. “But it’s only 11 o’clock!”

“We always eat early – come on.” A few minutes later five of us, including their Chinese assistant and someone who’s doing some work on the house, walk across Commercial Street to a trendy café in Spitalfields Market. They’re plainly honoured guests there.

The waiters and waitresses all line up to greet them – Gilbert and George know all their names - and to show us to a table.

They both order the same thing – haddock fish cakes and a cup of tea – and talk about how they’re off to a reception at the House of Lords that evening. Once, of course, this would have been unthinkable, but now you can imagine them fitting in rather well.

Afterwards, we say goodbye. Watching them walk away, I’m struck by how they look like two elderly Edwardian gentlemen, hopeless anachronisms among all the other T-shirted pedestrians. Except they’re perfectly in step and everyone stands aside when they see them coming.

Gilbert and George’s ‘SCAPEGOATING PICTURES for London’ is at White Cube Bermondsey from July 18; [whitecube.com](http://whitecube.com)

by JAMES PRESTON



# MATTHEW SMITH

Born 1976, Burton-on-Trent, UK

Lives and works in London, UK

## EDUCATION

- 2004-2005** Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, London, UK – MA Fine Art (Distinction)
- 2000-2003** Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield UK – BA (Honors) Fine Art, Painting, Printmaking
- 1995-1998** The University of Sheffield – BA (Honors) Sociology

## SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2013** *Megahits*, AND/OR, London, UK (w/ George Henry Longly)
- 2012** *Plumbing*, Lüttgenmeijer, Berlin, DE  
*OFF*, Limoncello, London, UK
- 2010** *No Means No*, Limoncello, London, UK  
*Matthew Smith & Yonatan Vinitzky*, SALTS, Birsfelden, CH
- 2009** *As Grey as Those Bends*, Lüttgenmeijer, Berlin, DE  
The Corridor, BolteLang (project space) Zürich, CH
- 2008** *Mary Mary*, Glassgow, UK  
*Typical Works*, Rivington Arms, New York, US  
White Columns (White Room), New York, US
- 2007** *Things Are Thin*, STORE, London, UK
- 2006** Associates Gallery, London, UK

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2015** *English Summer*, Elizabeth Dee, New York, US
- 2012** *Used Photocopier*, Hotel, London, UK  
*We Love You*, Limoncello, London, UK
- 2011** *Young London*, V22, London, UK  
*Glaze*, Bischoff/Weiss, London UK  
*Personal Use*, CGP, London, UK  
*Limoncello Yellow*, The Bakery, Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam, Netherlands
- 2010** *Exhibition, Exhibition*, Castello di Rivoli, Turin, Italy  
*You Don't Need Eyes to See*, Galerie Chez Valentin, Paris, France  
*Diamonds on the Soles of Her Shoes*, Bischoff/Weiss, London, UK  
*Woodman, Woodman, Spare That Tree*, Lüttgenmeijer, Berlin, DE

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# Flash Art

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May-June 2010

Issue 272

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## Matthew Smith: Brand New

SARAH MCCRORY: How did you prepare your show at Limoncello?

Matthew Smith: I've hit a point where things need to be refreshed. One of the obvious changes is that I'm using images in the work, which is something I've never really done before. The way I work is that I'm always looking for some kind of methodology. Ultimately, I always want the work to be completely open, and not fraught by connections that could mislead the viewer.

SMC: Are you trying not to let the works allude to anything directly?

MS: Well, for example, the table works — Semi-Comfortable (2008), 6 wooden tables with fitted gray cotton cloth covers — I always found it really difficult that they seemed to be staged, to appear to be in use.

SMC: There seemed to be a narrative...

MS: Yes. And I didn't want them to work like that. I don't want there to be a story — they need to be viewed at face value, in the here and now. More and more I think that the idea of 'face value' could be particularly pertinent to sculpture.

SMC: There's a kind of vicious circle there, the more open the work is and the less you give away, the more open to interpretation it actually is.

MS: Maybe the changes are that I'm learning to counter these issues. I recently read a text by Shahin Afrassiabi who talks about the work in some way "undoing the symbolic structure of reality," and I'm interested in that idea, that the aim of the work is to define a kind of resistant space.

SMC: So, how will you address this in the new work?

MS: Trying to avoid the kind of idealism that I felt had begun to seep into the work. One of the new works stems from a collection of images. I've been photographing mud, the ground, all around London and other places.

SMC: Would you say that there's a moment of slippage between having an idea of what it'll look like and the realization that it isn't what you've imagined — is that part of what interests you?

MS: I've always been interested in the idea that mental images don't really exist. The world always seems to look very different to how I thought, and this is something I feel I'm constantly having to learn over and over. Collecting these images is interesting to me as I am forcing myself to record only what's there, to let go of any preconceptions I might have had.

SMC: Many of your works are constructed from apparently very simple components but, ultimately, they are inherently much more complex...

MS: In this work I'm allowing the images to not have a greater meaning. It's not about a story, it's about what exists in the moment you look at them and how the work plays out over the series of different images. I've been to Epping Forest, to Hampstead Heath, and to various places in Somerset. I was initially taking the images close up, perhaps looking for a sense of composition, but realized I needed to contextualize them by panning out, including some of the surroundings.



SMC: Are you opening it up further?

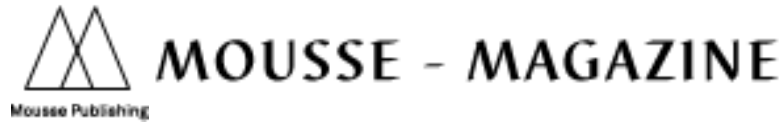
MS: Yes, I want them to have an uncertainty. This show will be a departure — I'm trying to feel for the boundaries.

Matthew Smith was born in 1976 in Burton-on-Trent (UK). He lives and works in London. Selected solo shows: 2010: Limoncello, London. 2009: Lüttgenmeijer, Berlin; BolteLang, Zurich. 2008: Mary Mary, Glasgow; Rivington Arms, New York; White Columns, New York. 2007: Store, London. 2006: Associates, London. Sarah McCrory is curator of Frieze Art Fair Projects and curator at large at Studio Voltaire, London.

by Sarah McCrory



From left: Personal Mud, 2009. Mug trees, rope, chrome door stop, 42 x 34 cm. Untitled, 2009. Digital image part of the "Mud Images" archive. Courtesy the artist and Limoncello, London.




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 February 2009
 

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## THE FLESH OF THINGS

Matthew Smith puts artwork and the way it is experienced on a false track. Leaving behind its capacity for signification, the work becomes an anonymous, unrecognizable thing that dazzles and disorients the viewer. The thing presents a bottomless form, its “flesh”, the object/work’s struggle with the impossibility of revelation. Pushed out beyond its limits, at the far edge of a question to which there is no answer, the work thus finds it is doomed to infinite interrogation...

“Things are Thin” was the name of a 2007 solo show at London’s Store Gallery by English artist Matthew Smith. Perhaps no title could better exemplify the ambiguous, paradoxical relationship, in all of Smith’s work, that links and separates the object/piece and its rendering as a “thing”, the object/piece and its permeability. To trace a driving theme that could help penetrate the impermeability of these objects that have the appearance of “things”, I think Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “flesh” might be useful. “Flesh” is taken to mean the unshakeable relationship of inherency involving everything which presents such a stratified layering of co-implication that any hypothetical classification becomes impossible. “Flesh” implies an anonymous matrix that holds together, in a completely heterogeneous state, everything that is frozen in an image, everything that runs counter to appearances. Moving from the object as appearance to the thing as apparition: could this be the system of virtuality that operates in Smith’s work? The object unwittingly slips between different levels of its impossible demarcation. All that is left is the retreat into thingness, meaning everything that prevents the object from standing out. The object’s surrender to flesh, manifested in the movement that burrows into it, digs it out as a thing, releasing it from its spirals of reference. All of Smith’s work is pervaded by this metamorphic tyranny, this parasitic despotism that assails the object at its root, immediately dispossessing it of its hermetic seal of circumstantial evidence. What we call “evidence” could be, to borrow a topos from Hitchcock, a “MacGuffin”. This is the term used by the English director for an object that is an integral part of the narrative, yet reveals itself to be a misleading device that focuses attention on something which has nothing to do with the film’s “real” intentions. The viewer realizes he has followed a trail that has turned out to be a red herring, a false plot that has diverted impetus away from that ungraspable something which constitutes this director’s most “strategically ambiguous” leitmotiv. Ambiguous because the “MacGuffin” exists, despite everything, as a scandalous inexplicability, as an indefinable obscenity, something that blocks, in and of itself, every dialectical plausibility.

This strategy can be found in the artist’s work as a whole, both in individual pieces, such as *Leather Jacket* (2007), *Pyjama*, *Bleached* (2007), *Second Design for a Window* (2008) or *Semi-Comfortable* (2008), and in the effect of his installations. It can also be grasped from the two solo shows that the artist held in 2008 at Rivington Arms in New York and at the Mary Mary Gallery in Glasgow. The snare of Smith’s installation approach adopts an organic form of labour, so to speak, compressing objects into a paradoxically mute eloquence. They become charged with a centripetal force that takes them back to almost a fetal state – not in the sense of a return to the source, but in the sense of an anachronistic rhythm, with no origin or destination, that throws these “living fossils” into an utterly unimaginable choreography of themselves. A process is triggered – observable in pieces like *Duvet with Stand* (2008), *Black Cigar* (2008) or even *Some Afternoons* (2008) – in which the object becomes the asymptomatic carrier of the amorphous mass of the thing that takes on its semblances, literally becoming its stand-in. A thing that increasingly resembles itself, and that therefore resembles nothing: an aspect that can be found in all of the artist’s work, in the entire detour of dissimilarity that creeps into every circuit of meaning. In Smith’s work we witness a sort of metastasis of mimesis. The thing hurls the object into its own mimetic stuttering, in an orphaned repetition that shadows only itself and that it is impossible to break away from, as in *Bin Bag Screen* (2008). What attacks the object is a sort of nomadic epidermis that wraps it up in its own “involuntary memory”, to borrow Marcel Proust’s phrase. The involuntary memory of flesh, an anonymous patina, “hidden on the surface”, which envelops the object in its unrecognizability. An object razed to the ground by the thing, which injects it with the “antibodies” of impossible reminiscence, as in *Build Slight* (2007) or *Cover* (2007). The thing is a dumbfounded memory of the object, which sinks into the ground zero of its form: the echo of an infinite adjustment. A hallucinatory state that informs and deforms the object in the very moment that it sidesteps its representation. This constant “advancing retreat” is precisely what makes it dwell where it never existed. The object, now a thing, hampers its formation through a proliferation that in Smith’s work becomes a true articulation of involution. Involution is what thrusts

the object back into the undertow of its improbable referential correspondence. A reference that thus represents nothing, just always re-presenting the gap that distances the object from itself. The thing/flesh takes the object hostage, turning it into the symptom that simultaneously inscribes and defuses, through this syndrome of incompleteness, all appearance. A sort of parade of vanities that reflects the infinite metabolizations of the thing the object corresponds to, no matter what it lets us see. And so, in conclusion: "Things Are Thin", things become thin, things are only the twitching of a neutral self-stylization that carries its action through to the very end, in view of an image/flesh that ultimately manifests, to quote Maurice Blanchot, "the revelation of what all revelation destroys".

by ALESSANDRO SARRI



Matthew Smith, Flag / Rope, 2006  
STORE, London



Matthew Smith, Duvet with Stand, 2007  
STORE, London

## **S T E P H E N W I L L A T S**

Born 1943, London, UK

Lives and works in London, UK

### **SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS**

- 2015** *Stephen Willats: Man from the 21st Century*, Museo Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City, MX
- 2014** *Strange Attractor Series No 28*, Corner Space, Galerie Thomas Schulte, Berlin, DE  
*Stephen Willats: Berlin Local*, MD72, Berlin, DE  
*Stephen Willats: How Tomorrow Looks From Here*, DAAD Galerie, Berlin, DE  
*Stephen Willats: Attracting the Attractor*, Anne Mosseri-Marlio Galerie, Basel, CH  
*Concrete Block: Drawings & Works on Paper, 1978 - 2005*, MOT International, Brussels, BE  
*Concerning our Present Way of Living*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, UK  
*Representing the Possible*, Victoria Miro, London, UK  
*Control: Work 1962-69*, Raven Row, London, UK
- 2013** *Living for Tomorrow*, Galerie Balice Hertling, Paris, FR  
*World Without Objects*, Annie Gentils Gallery, Antwerp, BE  
*World of Objects*, Galerie Reinhard Hauff, Stuttgart, DE  
*Conscious – Unconscious, In and Out the Reality Check*, Modern Art Oxford, Oxford, UK
- 2012** *Secret Language The Code Breakers*, Galerie Thomas Schulte, Berlin, DE  
*How the Future Looks from Here*, Lumen Travo Gallery, Amsterdam, NL

### **SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS**

- 2015** *English Summer*, Elizabeth Dee, New York, US
- 2014** *Teach Us To Grow Our Madness*, Galerie Thomas Schulte, Berlin, DE  
*West: Berlin*, Ephraim-Palais, Stiftung Stadtmuseum Berlin, Berlin, DE  
*Social Factory*, Shanghai Biennale, Power Station of Art, Shanghai, CN  
*Sleeping Producers- part of curated by\_vienna*, Galerie Charim, Vienna, AT  
*Traucum*, Parc Saint Léger, Pougues-Les-Eaux, FR  
*The Promise*, Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol, UK  
*Was Modelle Können (What models can do)*, Museum für Gegenwart Kunst, Siegen, DE  
*Nouvelle Generation (New Generation)*, Frac Nord – Pas de Calais, FR  
*Warm Math – Part 2*, Gallery Balice Hertling, New York, New York, US

**WORKS IN PUBLIC COLLECTIONS**

Documentation on the West London Social Resource Project commissioned by the Arts Council of Great Britain housed at Osterley Library.

Southampton City Art Gallery & Museum

Kunstmuseum Zurich, Switzerland

Haags Gemeentemuseum, Den Haag, Holland

The Mappin Art Gallery, Sheffield

Rochdale Art Gallery, Rochdale, Greater Manchester

The Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh

The Tate Gallery, London

De Beyerd Centrum voor Actuelle Kunst, Breda, Holland

Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, Holland

Contemporary Art Society, London

The Arts Council of Great Britain

Gimpel Fils Galery, London

Victoria & Albert Museum, Drawing Dept., London

Victoria & Albert Museum, Clothing and Dress Dept., London

The British Museum, Prints & Drawings Dept., London

National Gallery, Gdansk, Poland

Wadsworth Athenaeum, Conneticut, USA

Leeds City Art Gallery, Leeds

Stadtische Galerie, Stuttgart, Germany

Museum of Contemporary Art, Utrecht, Holland

The Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle

Helsingen Kaupungin Taidemuseo, Helsinki, Finland

Stichting Volkshuisversting in de Kunst, Ben Haag, Holland

Victoria & Albert Museum (Artist's Book Collection, archive of writings and publications)

Hounslow Borough Council, London

Museum de Beaux Arts, Le Havre, France

Frac Course Centre of Centemporary Art, Corsica, France

Cleveland Gallery, Cleveland

Frac Limousin, France

Rhone Alpes Frac, France

Caise de depots et Cousiguations, Paris

Porin Taidemuseo, Pori, Finland

Frac Haute-Normandie, France

Middlesborough Art Gallery

South London Art Gallery

Frac Poitou Charentes, France

Sud West Landesbank, Stuttgart, Germany

Frac Languedoc-Roussillon, France

Art Gallery of New South Wales. Sydney. Australia.

Amsterdams Historisch Museum



# art agenda

September 26, 2014

## Stephen Willats's "Attracting the Attractor"

ANNE MOSSERI-MARLIO GALERIE, Basel  
September 5–November 1, 2014

It's tempting to throw Londoner Stephen Willats in with the crop of neglected artists born in the first half of the last century currently being "unearthed" by the voracious contemporary market machine. Willats, born in 1943, may fit the generation, but to suggest that he required rediscovery would be misleading. Nonetheless, despite solo shows in the UK alone in the last two years at the South London Gallery, Raven Row, Modern Art Oxford, and Victoria Miro—a gallery with whom he has a longstanding collaboration—his work still feels anachronistic. The earliest piece in this exhibition of drawings at Anne Mosseri-Marlio Galerie is from 2008, yet Willats' practice retains the positivism of the mid-1960s, when he first started working.

"Attracting the Attractor" is a cabinet-style presentation of 17 drawings and 2 digitized Super-8 films. The visitor first encounters *Making a Rich Connection* (2008), a drawing topped with a frieze of figures photographed in the street; lines pointing to some of these people identify them in various relationships from "stranger," to "accomplice," or "soulmate." Below the frieze these identities are associated with squares that interact in different manners, as defined by the lines between and around them. These interactions and connections become progressively denser as the relationships indicated become more intimate. "As communication increases so a greater number of variables are available in the concept frame," the legend along the base tells us. Willats' working method is akin to an engineer's, generating a design blueprint mapping out actions that can be adjusted and shared amongst users, demonstrating his logic-based thinking. Willats has used such drawings throughout his career to develop concepts about society, our living environments and everyday interactions. His drawings here appear on approximately A0 or A1 white paper, geometric forms in strong pencil line are colored in bright gouache or acrylic washes, and sometimes captions in Letraset text or collaged photographic elements are added. Throughout these diagrams, squares feature frequently as a unit form subjected to forces indicated by simple arrows that catalyze effects, effects sometimes specified and sometimes not, creating open schemes onto which the viewer can project their own possibilities.

There is tension between the import of the subject matter—social relations, people and their environments, for a start—and the spareness of Willats' drawings. The artist applies "black box" systems whose internal workings are not evident, but which are known to have a given effect on what enters and exits them. This particular group of works and diagrams from the series "The Strange Attractor" (the pieces included in the exhibition are from 2008–14) is inspired by cyberneticist Heinz von Foerster's mathematical use of the term, as a means of framing what is knowable in any given system. Willats applies the concept—his interpretation is "that 'things' are pulled toward something, but you can't see and do not need to see the whole picture, but you can possess that part of the process which you witness,"—to life in our time, specifically how we relate to the other human subjects we encounter around us, and our presumptions about them.(1)

The filmmaker John Smith, more-or-less Willats' contemporary and another Londoner, also made the activity of watching passers-by central in works, particularly in *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976), in which Smith's voiceover appears to direct the actions of figures filmed in the street, though they are, in fact, unaware of being observed. Smith and Willats thus both focussed their attention on an activity regarded as idle or inconsequential, but while the immediate result of Smith's film is comedy, Willats seriously considers the complexity or simplicity of the multitude of perspectives coexisting at any given time. As much as I make assumptions about the person I encounter walking towards me on a pavement, he suggests, I am the object of their assumptions, too. Every interaction contains the potential of a profound—or more superficial—engagement, whether between people, or things. Willats' two short films from 2014, presented on monitors, reduce this premise. In *Attracting the Attractor*, he picks out couples walking in the street and adds a layer of speculative commentary with overlaid captions such as "THE STRANGE ATTRACTOR" and "CHASING THE ATTRACTOR," while in *Still Life with Text* pairs of vases are given similar treatment, this time with such descriptions as "HYPNOTISED" and "ENTRANCED."



In the 1970s, Willats moved his practice out of the studio and into real life, looking—as he says in a 2008 film about his career—“for polemical issues to embody the works.”(2) In the following decades he initiated and engaged with collaborative, community projects, frequently based around housing developments or tower blocks. One of the first, for example, was the “The West London Social Resource Project” (1972-3), which involved canvassing large numbers of participants about how they lived and their desired environments, and then displaying and publishing the results. Many more would follow.(3) His unspectacular actions directly queried art’s role and usefulness in society—Willats possesses a fundamental faith that art does have a meaningful function to carry out. So if the language to be found in his drawings and films seems at times outmoded, its wordy formality and tones of science fiction hark back to an era of optimism, when ambitious claims and solemnity were declarations of intent and preludes to action. While the drawings undoubtedly have something to offer as purely formal objects, Willats’ texts always indicate the lacunae—the context the viewer has to contribute to make sense of these systems. An act that means abandoning our contemporary habit of relativism, which so often stymies any judgement, for an old fashioned affirmative relativism that embraces the complexity of life.

(1) From the booklet “Attracting the Attractor” by Stephen Willats, published by Anne Mosseri-Marlio Galerie on the occasion of this exhibition.

(2) A State of Agreement, 2008, UK. 34:00 minutes. Directed by Charlotte Ginsborg.

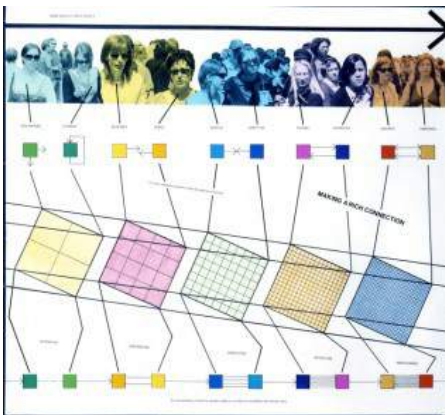
Produced by Stephanie Willats. The film can be viewed at <http://www.controlmagazine.org/stateofagreement.php>.

(3) Documentation from several of these projects was on show in the archive exhibition “Stephen Willats: Concerning Our Present Way of Living,” at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, until September 14, 2014.

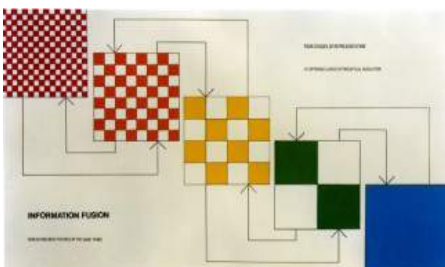
by AOIFE ROSENMEYER



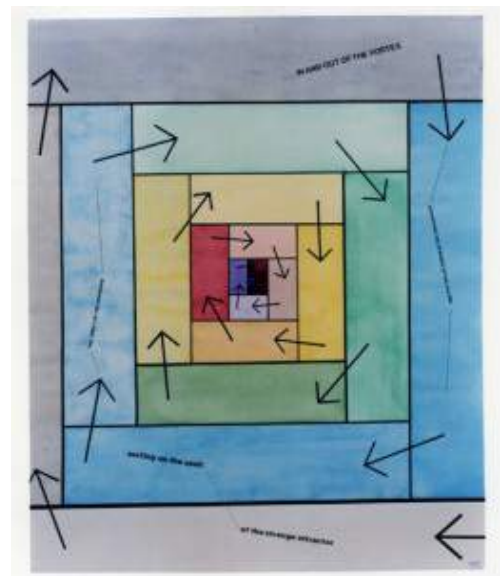
View of Stephen Willats’ “Attracting the Attractor,” Anne Mosseri-Marlio Galerie, Basel, 2014.



Stephen Willats, Making a Rich Connection, 2008.



Stephen Willats, Information Fusion, 2013.



Stephen Willats, Surfing with the Strange Attractor – In And Out Of The Vortex, 2011.

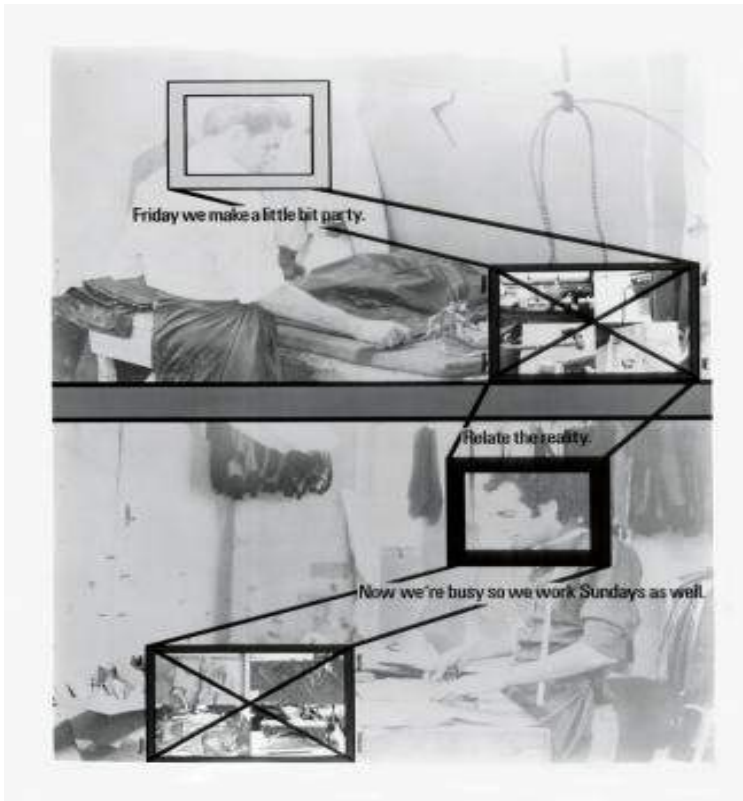
# Art in America

9/2/2014

MAGAZINE

## HOW WE LIVED THEN

by Ajay Hothi



Stephen Willats: *The Place of Work*, 1979, photographic prints, photographic dye, gouache, ink and Letraset text on card, two panels, 30 by 40½ inches each. Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art.



Images this article courtesy  
Whitechapel Gallery, London.



The first months of 1979 are remembered in Britain as the “Winter of Discontent.” The coldest weather in nearly two decades coincided with a string of economic crises that tested the Labour government and exacerbated the social unrest that had plagued the UK throughout the ‘70s. Industrial actions by sanitation workers, truck drivers, gravediggers and many public sector employees strained an economy already beset by double-digit inflation and high unemployment. The government had swung between the two major political parties on a regular basis for the previous two decades. But the watershed 1979 vote that brought Margaret Thatcher to the country’s leadership ushered in 18 years of Conservative rule. Armed with a mandate to reverse the UK’s economic decline, Thatcher launched an ambitious effort to undercut trade unionism and dismantle broad swaths of the welfare state—an effort that many critics decried as a fundamental revision of Britain’s 20th-century social contract.

The relationship between the individual and society had been a central interest of Stephen Willats, one of the UK’s leading Conceptual artists. It was therefore timely that Willats’s solo exhibition, “Concerning Our Present Way of Living,” opened at London’s Whitechapel Gallery in January 1979, a bleak month on the cusp of the Thatcher era. The show presented Willats’s research into the lives of working families in the neighborhood surrounding the museum. Hanging on paperboard panels throughout were captioned photographs of the individuals whose everyday routines Willats had studied, overlaid with schematic diagrams labeled as representing different levels of “social reality.” Much of the work resembled the imagery one might encounter in a sociology textbook, and the installation itself looked more like a science museum display than a conventional art exhibition. Presented in a season of national despair, Willats’s probing of working class individuals’ attitudes toward their government, their employers and their neighbors had inherently political overtones. Yet the installation’s cool aesthetic seemed a world away from the hot tempers that prevailed on the picket lines and in tabloid op-ed pages.

Now, 35 years later, Whitechapel has re-created “Concerning Our Present Way of Living” and supplemented it with archival material related to the show’s reception and its place in Willats’s career. Revisiting the exhibition today is a timely endeavor in its own right. The updated show occasions a consideration of East London’s rapid gentrification, the changing role of Whitechapel within its neighborhood and the limits of socially engaged artwork in general.

Like many artists of his generation, Willats turned away from traditional studio practices in the early 1960s, in part as a reaction against the romantic individualism that went hand-in-hand with much abstract painting. “By 1964 it became apparent to me that the modus operandi the artist had inherited from the 1950s was not adequately able to express what was happening in society,” he wrote recently.<sup>1</sup> Willats identified himself instead as a “Conceptual Designer.” Adopting the Productivist rhetoric reminiscent of Soviet avant-garde manifestos, he sought to integrate his work with “what people would consider useful and familiar.” His quasi-sculptural projects of the early 1960s were based on simple designs for clothing and furniture. The Optical Shift Dress (1965), for example, is a garment made from a kit of interchangeable PVC panels. Wearers could assemble their own simple tunics out of the boldly colored plastic squares, a process that, for Willats, not only yielded a somewhat stylish outfit but also manifested the routines of self-fashioning that individuals undertake to establish their identities in the public sphere.

By the 1970s, photography, texts and diagrammatic drawings had become Willats’s primary mediums. Then-fashionable theories of cybernetics and social systems began to transform his notion of Conceptual Design. In works like Perceptions of a Married Couple (1975) he attempted to convey the complexity of interpersonal relationships. Its flowchart-like drawings link images of domestic tranquility, malaise and conflict. Incorporated captions and labels identify shifting roles played by the husband and wife—companion, guide, idealist, confidant—in response to various everyday situations. Willats’s self-described aim was to prompt viewers to project their own experiences of married life onto the generic situations he deconstructed in the work.



Willats followed a similar formula for the Whitechapel exhibition, which comprised three works, each focused on a different social type. The artist followed a group of dockworkers on the River Thames for *Working Within a Defined Context* (1978); he documented the lives of residents of a social housing block for *Sorting Out Other People's Lives* (1978); and he interviewed local leather smiths for *The Place of Work* (1979). Willats presented participants with a questionnaire asking about their finances, social aspirations and cultural interests. The responses were then distilled into photo-and-text collages overlaid with descriptions of individual relationships and institutional power dynamics. Records of Willats's own working process, including the original questionnaires, were also displayed in surrounding vitrines.

Exemplary of the entire exhibition is *Sorting Out Other People's Lives*, which centers on a woman, designated "the subject" by Willats, living with her husband and six children in Ocean Estate, a large, prewar block of terraced apartments just off East London's main arterial road. Writing in November 1978, Willats said that the housing project, "resembles a large transit camp. . . . It is now one of the biggest estates of its kind anywhere but its expansion has been matched by shrinking opportunities for employment. With the local docks and warehouses closing, the main source of jobs . . . has gone, leaving the employment level at around 25 percent."<sup>2</sup> *Sorting Out Other People's Lives* was created through tape recordings and visual documentation of the subject and her husband, as well as written responses registering her attitudes toward "four areas of reality: environmental, educational, economic and social." Each panel pairs images of the woman's home with scenes from her interactions with four public organizations of which she was a member: the Tenants Association, the Claimants Union, the Furniture Workshop and the Citizens Advice Bureau.

Aphorisms lifted from the subject's responses are embossed in Letraset texts across some of the photographs. "You just got to cope with the meansthat you get from the benefit" reads one text, printed over a picture of a kitchen table. The scene is juxtaposed with a shot of the woman standing outside her home overlaid with the phrase, "Provide them with a chance to get up off the floor." The responses suggest the woman's overall self-assurance and determination in the face of government institutions that could be a source of immense frustration, even as they offered a lifeline to her community amid unforgiving economic conditions.

In addition to the panels on display in the gallery, the original exhibition also included a selection of similar works on view at the nearby Ocean Estate. This connection between the art gallery and the actual everyday environments depicted in the work was a key part of Willats's conception of the exhibition. Those individuals who cooperated with Willats's research were both subjects of the work and integral to the presumed audience for it. Indeed, while studying contemporary social patterns within an artistic context—already an unconventional task for any artist—Willats also aimed to define the position of the art gallery in its community.

Until very recently, Whitechapel Gallery was East London's only publicly funded visual arts organization mandated to provide gallery-based education initiatives. In a symbolic coincidence, the art center's building faces East London, turning its back to the banks and grand institutions of the affluent West End. Whitechapel and its immediate surroundings—Brick Lane, Spitalfields, Mile End—were the sites of England's first ghettos. These neighborhoods have been a stopover for immigrants since the 18th century. Waves of Irish settled there, followed by Huguenot refugees, then Jews escaping the Eastern European pogroms. More recently, an influx of immigrants from Bangladesh gave rise to the borough's nickname, "Banglatown."

"Concerning Our Present Way of Living" was one of the first initiatives organized by Martin Rewcastle, who was appointed Whitechapel's inaugural education officer in 1977. At the time, such a position, which linked exhibition-making directly with interpretative programming, was nearly unprecedented in public UK art institutions. Nicholas Serota, Whitechapel's then-director, created the job as a means of fostering a spirit of inclusivity. Pedagogy was seen by Serota and Rewcastle as a primary means of making the art gallery accessible—and useful—to the Whitechapel community. Still, Willats's exhibition opened at a moment when the meanings of "accessibility" and "inclusivity" were being contested.

By the mid-1960s in the UK, those terms had largely become synonymous with the Community Art Movement, which had gained significant traction among cultural leaders and liberal left-wing politicians. Led by the Association of Community Artists (ACA), the movement realized participatory creative projects such as murals and public sculptures. During a period of decolonization, the ACA's agenda included explicit support for immigrant rights through collective action. Works such as *The Floyd Road Mural*, a painting on the gable wall of the end of a Victorian terrace in South East London not far from Whitechapel, was created in 1976 by the Greenwich Mural Workshop as a local landmark to halt the proposed demolition of the buildings. The colorful image, which depicts members of an ethnically diverse community working together to renovate neighborhood structures, received commercial sponsorship from a national paint company and public funding from various local and national arts councils.

However, as the 1970s progressed, the idealism embodied in the Community Art Movement, with its wholesome imagery and unrelentingly positive message, came under fire from a new generation of left-wing academics, who saw the project as aesthetically and politically compromising. The underlying spirit of "We're All in It Together"—a Labour Party adage in the '70s—was seen as masking the true reality of haves and have-nots, whose positions in society were cemented in part by the state bureaucracy. With Rewcastle's appointment, the Whitechapel Gallery signaled that its mission to create exhibitions would be paired with ample resources for pedagogy. Yet the figure of an educator-curator also implied that exhibitions designed to engage the wider community would, in contrast to the immediately accessible murals, require intensive, guided interpretation, even when the exhibition's subject was ostensibly the everyday lives of the people in the surrounding area.

The gray photographs and detached tone of "Concerning Our Present Way of Living" emerged out of this context. In Willats's work, collective action is represented as a daily grind that stretches from the jobsite to the public sphere to the home. Still, for Willats, the unsentimental study of social structures could produce real knowledge and understanding, enough to spark substantial change. As he said in a recent interview, "The world doesn't have to be the way it is, it could be different and one of the ways we can make it different is [by] changing our behaviors." So we strip bare the structures that govern routines in order to explore our roles within them, and through that investigation we find the means to alter the larger, impersonal systems of oppression.<sup>3</sup>

Or at least that's the theory. When one views the exhibition today, in the wake of the worst economic crisis in the UK since the 1970s, Willats's rhetoric feels less like an effective call to arms than an echo of the naive-sounding idealism of the Community Art Movement. Over the past decade, East London has become one of the most prohibitively expensive areas in which to live in the entire country. When Willats undertook the project, he also assumed a privileged position; he was the agent called to represent the growing impoverished in what was then a tight and active community and what is now a transient area for short-term, high-income renters. The working families Willats encountered 35 years ago have largely been displaced, and the social pressures his subjects coped with can appear quaint to contemporary viewers who have lived with the fallout of Thatcher's reforms. Rather than a spur to action in the present, the exhibition may constitute only a detailed reflection on a less complex time.

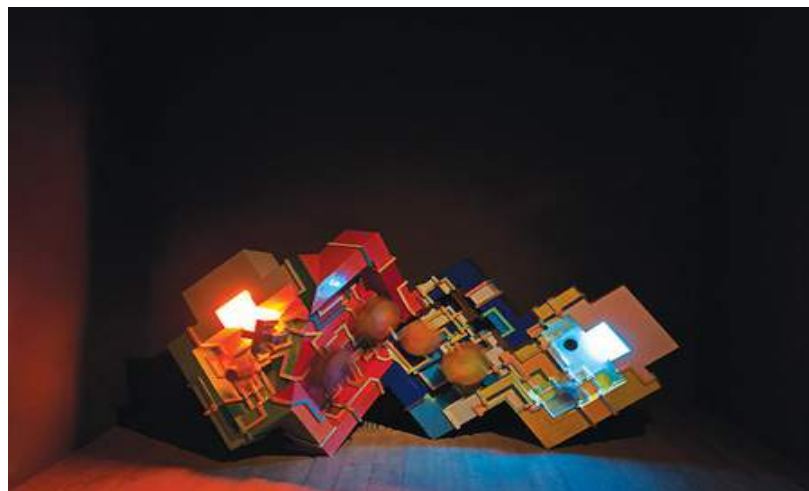
# frieze

June-August 2014

ISSUE 164

Stephen Willats

RAVEN ROW, LONDON, UK



Stephen Willats, Visual Transmitter No. 2, 1968, Perspex, wood, resin, electrical components, 150 × 305 × 92 cm

In 1959, the British scientist and novelist C.P. Snow issued a famous plea to form bridges between the so-called ‘two-cultures’: the natural and technical sciences on one hand; the humanities, arts and literature on the other. His statement chimed with an interdisciplinary spirit that was already evident in postwar British visual art. Encouraged by the pedagogy of Richard Hamilton, the Independent Group, which met at London’s Institute of Contemporary Arts, had, by the early 1950s, embraced various open, analytic and networked approaches to artistic practice. Ten years later, in collaboration with the artist Roy Ascott (who had been a student of Hamilton’s) and having studied on Ealing Art College’s experimental ‘Groundcourse’, a young Stephen Willats began his own explorations into cross-cultural production.

Willats’s attempt to establish a ‘total system’, synthesizing the otherwise distinct realms of scientific research and artistic creation – a journey that would see him draw from a skein of theories in the air at the time – was, in many ways, the dominant theme of ‘Control. Stephen Willats. Work 1962–69’, a recent survey of the artist’s early career curated by Alex Sainsbury at Raven Row.

Containing diagrams, sculpture, archive documentation and ‘conceptual design’, this compendious exhibition stood as a welcome corrective for those familiar only with the cool analytic poise of Willats’s later work (for example, the community observation project Concerning Our Present Way of Living, 1979, subject of an archive display at Whitechapel Gallery that ran almost concurrently to the Raven Row show). Against this – perhaps even contra the titular idea of ‘control’ itself – here was an opportunity to witness some unbridled experimentation from an artist otherwise appreciated for his formulaic consistency.

Numerous hand-drawn diagrams and sculptural experiments show that, from the early 1960s, Willats was keen to explore constructivist ideas regarding audience participation and interaction. Seeking what he described as a new ‘functionality for art’, early projects such as Organic Exercise No. 1, Series 2 (1962/2013) – which, re-created here, offered gallery-goers the opportunity to rearrange a set of plaster tablets sitting on



the gridded surface of a low plinth – corresponded to Willats's hope, put to curator Emily Pethick in a recent interview, that with such work 'any engagement by one person was as meaningful as any other. It was about what it meant for them – nothing was predetermined'.

Aware of certain limitations that producing 'art' proper implied for reaching larger audiences, and foreshadowing the decisive shift from the gallery to 'society' he would make in the early 1970s, in the mid-1960s Willats underwent a self-rebranding exercise. Abandoning the title 'artist' he became what he called a 'conceptual designer'. His output from this period ranges from the seminal (the eponymous *Control* magazine – a publication-cum-art work first published in 1965; the anthological site of his own projects and those of others dealing with what he saw as 'a new attitude in visual communication') to the somewhat questionable (the galactic 'Helmets', 1965, wearable headgear complete with exchangeable coloured visors to augment the wearer's visual experience). In addition, Willats fabricated 'Corree Design' (1965), a prototype line of modular furniture and a fashion range that included Variable Sheets (1965), a period mini-dress fronted by vinyl pockets into which the wearer could slide text panels featuring simple words such as 'easy', 'bold' and 'pure'.

With the exception of *Control* – which is still being published – Willats's other projects from this period were soon abandoned. He returned to art production with a significant body of kinetic sculptures, created for the solo show, 'Stephen Willats. Visual Automatics and Visual Transmitters', at the Museum of Modern Art Oxford in 1968. Raven Row faithfully restaged the exhibition in a darkened environment that dominated the lower-ground-floor gallery, providing the show with its most immediate and spectacular component. In response to research into the variability of brainwaves by American-born British neurophysiologist and cybernetician William Grey Walter, the 'Visual Automatic' works emit light sequences at a frequency known as the 'alpha-rhythm'. An oscillation of approximately ten cycles per second, the alpha-rhythm mimics the wave patterns of a relaxed human brain (incidentally also the frequency accessed by the stroboscopic 'dream-machine' developed by Brion Gysin, William S. Burroughs and the computer programmer Ian Sommerville in 1961). In the same dimly-lit space were a series of floor-based 'Visual Transmitters'. Begun in 1965, these works continued Willats's interest in the alpha-rhythm – albeit on a larger scale. One such machine on display, the astonishing Visual Transmitter No. 2 (1968), was a near-impossible Heath Robinson-esque contraption of fidgeting, spinning components, clustered geometries and lucent emissions. A truly remarkable thing, this work encapsulated just how gloriously immoderate Willats's output had become by the late '60s.

With science and information technology increasingly shaping some of contemporary art's most pressing questions, and the ticklish subject of 'participation' refusing to go away, 'Control' appeared as a timely act of historical curating. As the exhibition makes clear, between 1962 and 1969 Willats worked with a very specific ambition in mind. He wanted to involve audiences directly, to merge theoretical models such as communications theory, behaviourism and cybernetics with notions drawn from the artistic avant-garde in order to create feedback loops between viewer and artwork with the ultimate aim of 'remodelling' consciousness, as he described it.

Whether, and according to what criteria, it is possible to determine if these art works were successful in doing so remains highly doubtful. What is plain to see is that the brilliant yet odd intensity of Willats's art has derived from its sustained relationship to ideas, rather than its capacity to yield objective results and firm analytic understandings. A little bit of fabulation in the face of science, then: perhaps the real value of integrating art into 'total systems' thinking.

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