

Millennium Gallery
MuseumSheffield

**Every
— thing**

Flows

Paul Barlow
Rose Butler
Joseph Cutts
Natalie Finnemore
Ruth Levene
Victoria Lucas
Peter Martin
Ryan Mosley
Ian Nesbitt

A Day Spent Building Dams Oliver Basciano

Ian Nesbitt and I hesitate for a moment outside Victoria Lucas' studio. A sign is hung up asking not to be disturbed—meeting in progress—until we realise that the notice was displayed pre-empting my visit. We walk in; Nesbitt introduces us, Lucas' dog bounds over. Nesbitt leaves. Just a glass of water, thank you. We begin to chat.

Over the course of a day in Sheffield these small interactions reoccur, as each artist in *Everything Flows* takes me on to the next. Tea is offered. Sometimes drunk. I move from space to space, from practice to practice, from conversation to conversation. Just before dusk, Joseph Cutts takes me to the station. I get a train back to London. 125 mph down the Midland Main Line. Home. A week later I meet Ruth Levene in a pub back at St Pancras Station—she couldn't be in Sheffield the day of my visit. In the meantime, Jeanine Griffin, the exhibition's curator, has emailed a quote by Gilles Deleuze. A data packet that made its way through various routers and switches, fibre optic cables, satellite connections, to my IP address. A collection of bytes that meandered through sky and earth to assemble back on a screen, at my desk.

Levene has her suitcase with her. The train departs platform 4. It flows up the tracks northbound, the artist on board. Home. We had talked about her residency embedded within the University of Sheffield's Faculty of Engineering. How she had spoken with a great number of the researchers from the Pennine Water Group and slowly developed a multifaceted picture of the water system: technical, but also social, political and cultural. We talked about the privatisation of the pipes, the system's antiquity and how flooding and drought were the two sides of a coin flipped by man-made environmental damage. In *Everything Flows* Levene shows *Hidden Waters* (2015), a video in which the artist traces the movements of tomato seeds through the Sheffield wastewater system. The seeds are excreted from our bodies, undigested. From salad on the table, through gut, to municipal pipes. Along the way, the seeds are prone to germinate: tomato plants have become a common sight in treatment plants or sprouting in the topsoil compost the water companies sell to farmers. Alongside the video Levene exhibits two giclée prints, shown as a diptych, in which the artist has mapped Yorkshire Water's outflow pipes within the S postcode and the accompanying clean inflow system. Black on white, like a network of capillaries, without annotation these abstract images are devoid of context. This serves only to reinforce, on finding out the source of the markings from the titles—*Clean Water Pipes: YW Area Postcode S* and *Waste Water Pipes: YW Area Postcode S*—the invisibility of this hidden infrastructure so vital to collective living.

Paul Barlow is also at pains to expose water flow and structural apparatus, though his practice operates with a purely formalist, painterly, agenda. The artist dilutes his paint so that on application to stretched canvas it proves hard to control and is prone to soak through. As it dries the artist will restretch the material, exposing demarcated lines running along the points where the points where the frame had previously given structure. The artist may repeat this process several times in a single work until a murky, inexact geometric abstraction appears. Barlow favours blue as a colour, a palette he relates to for its semiotic connotations of freshness and health (in cleaning and sanitary products, and bottled water for instance). In several of the works on show Barlow has also added fluorescent elements however, made using industrial

paint that is more commonly sold to mark out warning signs in the public realm. These unbalance and disorientate the work. They remind us that the water which aqua blue is symbolic of is not aesthetic, but a vital ingredient. Water flows through the blood, it carries oxygen and nutrients to cells and flushes toxins from the body. It cushions our joints and soft tissue. Without water we cannot digest or absorb food. I laughed with Levene at my ignorance as to how the stuff that runs from my taps gets there—despite it being vital to my survival. Without it, we have about three days left to live.

Nesbitt knows a thing or two about what we need to survive too. And how we best survive in groups. Many of the people who attend the Open Kitchen Social Club do so because they are without food. Some are asylum seekers or refugees. Others have fallen on hard times, or had hard times inflicted on them. The club, which Nesbitt established in 2014, provides a meal. Specifically, it provides a meal together. Or a game of dominoes. Some chat. Cook your own dinner, cook for a friend. For an event coinciding with *Everything Flows* Nesbitt combines his work with the club, collaborating with some of its ad-hoc members, with Annexinema, another project the artist initiated. This is a peripatetic screening programme which Nesbitt has been co-coordinating since 2007. Its purpose is to give an airing for experimental artist film: but it's not just about that. Were we to borrow the term from the anarchist writer and poet Hakim Bey, both Open Kitchen Social Club and Annexinema might be thought of as Temporary Autonomous Zones (which is often linked to the pre-1994 Criminal Justice Act rave scene, a movement Nesbitt was party to). Both the events offer spaces in which interaction occurs beyond capital. The food is free, as is the sharing of ideas. A temporary liberation from 'normal' social structures. Things are allowed to happen that can't elsewhere. One can think of them as both blockages in the normal flow of neoliberalism and generators to a different sort of flow, in which friendship and ideas are exchanged instead.

Lucas' *Remedy* (2012)—twelve photographs each depicting giant freestanding concrete structures that the artist encountered in succession while driving the main road from Athens airport into the city, presents a similar rupture. These edifices are advertising hoardings, which, during a period after Greece's economic crash, were devoid of takers and left empty. Lucas first presented the images as a concertinaed booklet, a format decision made which nods to Ed Ruscha's *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966). Yet while adverts, logos and googie architecture fill the West Coast American artist's publication; in Lucas' update the marketing spaces are nothing but grey voids. If Ruscha's work is a chronicle of capitalism entering its advanced stages, then *Remedy* can be regarded as cataloguing its moment of failure. Like Nesbitt's carved out spaces can be thought of as Temporary Autonomous Zones we can think of these grim memorials to lost capital as operating rather like Deleuzian 'desiring machines'—breaks in the flow of the previously established order. In this show Lucas also presents the images on a small advertising lightbox outside the gallery. In doing so she too engineers a new circuit, as the images enter the normal flow of saturated marketing that the modern city is all but constructed of. 'A sequence of desire is extended by a social series' Deleuze wrote. 'Or a social machine contains desiring machine-parts within its workings'. With every break in flow, human presence cannot fail to engineer a new stream. The discombobulation experienced on viewing Ryan Mosley's paintings can be thought to enact a similar such rewiring. Odd figures, often distorted in physique, wearing strange garb, do strange things in strange

places. At times they are carnivalesque or mystical, recalling Goya or Philip Guston, both acknowledged influences, while others hark to the social documentation of Renoir or Cézanne. Mosley often shares the former's habit of making the background of his paintings semi abstract too, or at least warping and meddling with the perspective to further disorientate his viewer. We may assume the scenes portrayed within the artist's work as variously allegorical, symbolic, or expressions of the subconscious, but ultimately all meaning is withheld. Instead Mosley carves out a space on canvas in which we are ourselves given control of the narrative. Through his removal of authorial didacticism we are invited to catalyse our own imaginative thinking. This mode of activation, in which the presence of the human 'desiring machine' catalyses a process of causality, can be seen too in Rose Butler's two-screen video installation *Come and Go* (2016) and Joseph Cutts' looped video installation *Trigger Happy Discipline* (2015). The former features 20-second choreographies (by Alexander Whitley) viewed from above which play backwards and forwards on each screen. The dancer is interacting with a large white sheet of textile which appears like a Mobius strip. The movement has been slowed down considerably, enabling us to appreciate every ripple of the material. Yet as we move closer to the screen—perhaps to soak up the gorgeous detailing—it becomes apparent that the playback is being speeded up. Step back—to get a wider view of the dancer's sensual movement—and it slows back down. In installing sensors, which control the pace of the work, Butler is asking us to consider our own physicality and our own bodily motion. The overhead shot is reminiscent of drone or satellite imagery, and much of Butler's work deals with surveillance culture, historic and modern. Butler is questioning the supremacy of the human as a desiring machine, questioning whether we can still confidently assert that we are masters of cause and controllers of the consequences, and positing that perhaps a time will come—or has already come—when technology outpaces us and we become mere nodes in the techno-flow. The central motif of work is a dance too. Yet here human presence has been totally erased and instead the viewer witness a choreography involving several industrial drill bits as they slowly turn against a matt colour background (a different tone for each type of bit). There's an undeniable eroticism to the work, but it stems not so much from the phallic symbolism of the drill motif, but the pristine and gleaming nature of the products that slowly, fetishistically, revolve before us. The sensual speed of the drill is achieved through steady control of the machine—the 'performance' plays out in real time with no editing—and it is this questionable sense of sentient supremacy versus technological that charges the work.

Both Peter Martin and Natalie Finnemore engineer glitches in the neoliberal matrix too. Yet both artists, in their very different practices, demonstrate an acute awareness that we can but poke and, however much we try, capitalist realism prevails. In Martin's *We See Ourselves, We See Eachother* (2015/17) a series of archive images—analogue family photographs depicting holidays, weddings and other such get-togethers—are presented as a video slideshow. Alongside a soundtrack of one-note keyboard tones, a man in the clear style of a television announcer—American accent—provides commentary 'She worked for many years', 'Anything is better than this'. Very discreetly we also hear background interference, as if the video has picked up a radio signal. The artist's point is that we are inextricably intertwined with the systems of capital that play on our collective and individual aspirations and fears. A new work for *Everything Flows* involves a PA system—one of the early

methods of retail marketing—that is co-opted by local young people. How much their commentary will escape these mechanisms of capital remains to be seen however. Finnemore's furniture-like sculptural constructions also mimic the aesthetics of retail. *Untitled* (2016) appears to be a bench, in form rather like the solid block public ones found in pedestrianised (though often privatised) shopping precincts. Yet this object amalgamates other allusions to the consumer products too: it is made of MDF not concrete, the former the favourite material of cheap flat pack material and positioned seemingly randomly along the side are a series of hand holes similar to those one might find punctured into a cardboard box. Finnemore's work invites the idea that these are objects with a use-value—products for mass production and sale—yet ultimately, they refuse this initial invitation. *Untitled* is too fragile to be sat on, an artwork after all.

Everything Flows? Every idea contaminates another, every experience mixes and re-emerges anew. Here artworks—diverse in medium, subject and aim—purpose themselves as diversions, rocks in a stream, moving the normal course of things just a little. This is the purpose of all artwork—or should be at least—but this exhibition reminds us that calm, methodological operations are not always to be desired: to agitate the smooth running of life, of politics, of our own headspace, is desirable too.

Oliver Basciano is Editor (International) across *ArtReview* and *ArtReview Asia* magazines. His writing has appeared in various other media, most recently *The Guardian* and *Spike Art Quarterly*, and he occasionally appears on TV and radio and often takes part in public panel discussions or one-to-one conversations with artists and thinkers. He has authored numerous exhibition catalogues and artists monographs, sits on the board of trustees at the Elephant Trust and was chair of the jury for the 2017 *Artes Mundi* prize. He is a juror for the 2018 *Turner Prize*.

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