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Contemporary Art from Aberdeen

Jessica  
Barrie

Paula  
Buškevica

Donald  
Butler

Mary  
Gordon

Alexandra  
McGregor

Svetlana  
Panova

*Positive*  
Geographies  
8-18 June



Contemporary Art from Aberdeen

Jessica  
Barrie

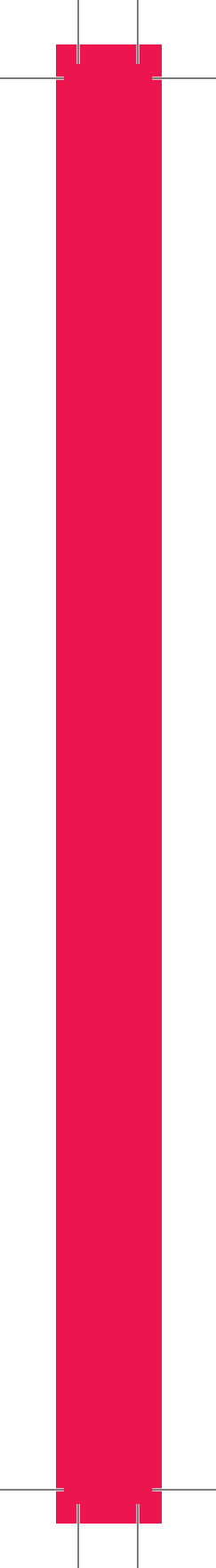
Paula  
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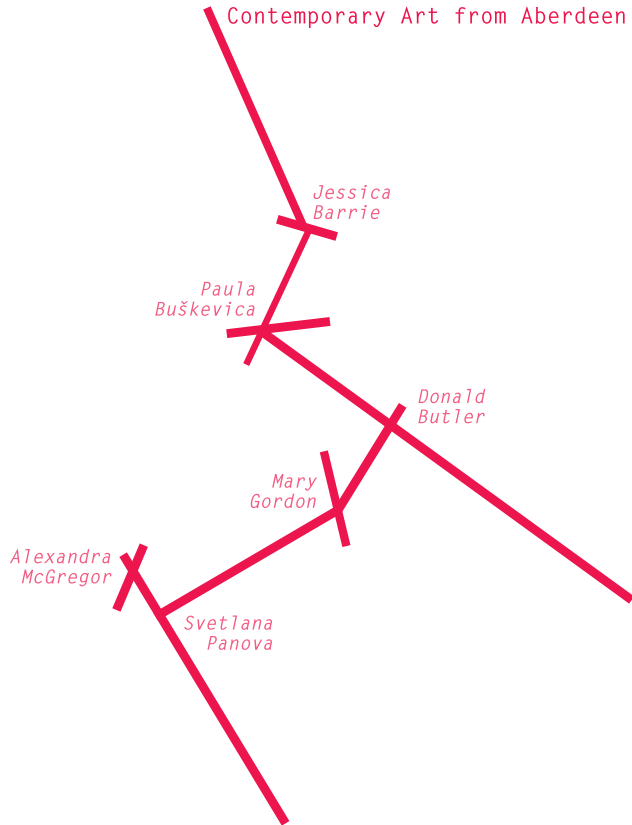
Alexandra  
McGregor

Svetlana  
Panova



**LAT**  
LOOKING AT  
TEMPORARY

32 ST. ANDREW STREET  
ABERDEEN



# *Positive* Geographies

8-18 June



# CONTENTS

Foreword	4
Hilary Nicoll Associate Director:Look Again	
Positive Geographies	8
Jon Blackwood-Curator	
Jessica Barrie	24
Paula Buškevica	24
Donald Butler	28
Mary Gordon	32
Alexandra McGregor	36
Svetlana Panova	40
Earlier Geographies	46
Seán Elder	




# FOREWORD

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Now entering its fourth year, Look Again Visual Art and Design Festival is a relatively new fixture in the cultural calendar in Aberdeen, but one that is making an increasingly critical impact on supporting and retaining creative talent in the region.

Inviting the public to 'see the city through fresh eyes', Look Again commissions prominent artists and designers from the north east and further afield to respond to the city, animating civic space and highlighting the exceptional cultural and creative assets we have on our doorstep.

As an initiative of Robert Gordon University, Look Again is deeply embedded in the city, and, along with other partners, is working to cultivate a new and thriving creative scene. This requires joined-up thinking, mentoring, collective working and connectivity, new narratives and outward-looking perspectives. All of this becomes ever more essential in the current landscape, where we find our larger cultural experiences are increasingly 'bought-in' from elsewhere.



Working within the Scottish Government ‘Years of..’ framework, Look Again 2018 sees a special focus on Young People, with several projects involving groups of emerging artists, designers and performers producing and presenting new work, supported by established practitioners.

We are therefore delighted that Jon Blackwood is curating this important exhibition of new work by six exceptional recent graduates of Contemporary Art Practice at Gray’s School of Art. This is a key exhibition for Look Again. It represents diverse, experimental and ambitious contemporary practices that speak about location, materiality and human connections in a digital world. It also benchmarks a new sense of resolve in the cultural life of the city, as these young artists look to stay here, actively producing, exhibiting, curating, developing; inspiring us by being positive about their geography.

**Hilary Nicoll**

Associate Director: Look Again







*Look Again Mirrored Pavilion*  
co-commissioned with Aberdeen Society of Architects

# POSITIVE


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## GEOGRAPHIES

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To an outsider, art in Aberdeen can be hard to access. A first time visitor will find the Art Gallery and Museum closed, with its re-opening deferred and uncertain, in an age of austerity; Peacock Visual Arts new WorM space on the Castlegate, to mention nothing of the Anatomy Rooms or more butterfly-life temporary spaces, will be tough to find without significant prior research. Aberdeen's art school, Gray's, which provides so much of the momentum behind contemporary creativity in the city, is in a suburb on the fringes of the city centre and hence more difficult for the casually interested to access, than its city centre equivalents in Dundee, Edinburgh and Glasgow.

Spaces are one thing, but the shifting cartographies of contemporary art can be even more elusive, layered and hard to grasp. Aberdeen, as a city, does not have a unified art scene, but small pockets of activity, and groupings of friends, all staking a claim to ownership, of parts of the development of contemporary art in the city, on and offline. The personnel driving visual culture; makers and thinkers, tend to operate in generations; those who were making and showing art in the city long before this contemporary generation are still making, even if their profiles, and the discourses that shape their output, are different to the concerns and motivations of the selection of young artists in this exhibition.



This is before we come to the histories of art and art production in this city, which remain largely unwritten, appearing only as minor tributaries in much broader narratives of Scottish cultural history. Moments when Aberdeen found itself unwittingly at the centre of debate in contemporary Scottish art—such as the furore surrounding JB Soutar’s painting *The Breakdown* of 1926, or the radical political origins of Peacock Visual Arts in the 1970s, remain under-researched. If it is the job of the contemporary artist to respond creatively to the space they find themselves in, so too it is the job of the cultural worker and historian to populate that space with deep, critical writing on what has gone before. If Aberdeen seems scarcely visible in Scottish art now, then a lack of understanding, and basic historical writing, on the city’s visual history, accounts at least in part for this low profile.

How, also, to define the space that we are all trying to make sense of, visually? Is Aberdeen still an industrial city, or is it now in a post-industrial phase? Fossil fuel capitalism may be coming to an end, very slowly, but it would be naïve to expect that companies, which have underpinned its development in our city, for nearly fifty years, will simply fade away. As long as so much of the city’s economy is dependent on fossil fuel extraction and associated industries, as well as a growing renewable energy sector, it seems an idle suggestion to claim that the city is entering a “post-industrial” phase, before we even consider the older mechanised occupations of farming and fishing. Rather, a hybrid of the persistence of the industrial economy, merged with an awareness of the post-industrial, leisure and tourism focused models of other cities, seems more likely.

It is a commonplace to observe that contemporary artists are the grease in the machine of post-industrial capitalism; taking on former industrial districts and premises, raising their profile and property value through a process of middle-class gentrification, then being pushed aside for tenants and buyers of greater means, and moving on. However, the hard-to-grasp position of Aberdeen on the industrial /post-industrial axis means that artists choosing to live and work here will have to be more inventive and to imagine other models to develop and sustain creative practices. With Aberdeen still in the grip of the post-2014 oil downturn, and currently the second most affordable city for students to live in, in the UK, this perhaps is no bad thing.

One such alternative to the post-industrial script written for young artists has been the rolling out, by the city council and other bodies with money to spend- on festivals. Aberdeen, as a city, can be said to be in the grip of a contagious festival-itis. The city spends a six-figure sum annually putting on festivals such as SPECTRA in February, and NuArt in April. Whilst of course any cultural spend by the city authorities is welcome, the longer-term strategy behind these investments is not altogether clear. Younger creatives, faced with a lack of affordable space and precarious working conditions, may have cause to chafe that so much of the city's cultural budgets are effectively being franchised out to external consultants, in lieu of a longer-term strategy to encourage the growth and development of creative careers in the city, envisioned as part of its future offer.

The trouble with franchising the city's cultural life to external consultants not based in, or committed to, the city, should be very obvious. Here-today-gone-tomorrow "festival" events not only reveal a profound lack of confidence in the talent already extant in Aberdeen, it is also a fairly certain way of demoralising and eventually retarding the growth of such a scene, into something of future national and maybe, international significance. Yet in a city used to transient oil-related populations for nearly four decades now, an ingrained short-termism in culture as well as in all other sectors of the economy should come as no surprise.









Aberdeen Wall  
Thomson & Craighead

At present, cultural life in Aberdeen feels very much at a crossroads. Either the city will continue down the path of uncritical point-and-click festival events, or it will reject banal spectacle in favour of an altogether more nuanced and critical understanding of the city and the role that contemporary art is playing in shaping its present.





It has been quite some time since it has been possible to speak of “contemporary art” and “Aberdeen” in the same sentence. The city is simply not spoken of in Glasgow, Edinburgh or Dundee as a serious location in the geography of contemporary visual culture in Scotland. Creative Scotland has identified problems finding enough projects of sufficient quality both in Aberdeen and the Shire, to fund, and as a result there has been a consistent underspend in the area. Furthermore, the city council’s funding awards for visual arts attracts little interest and the budget, much like Creative Scotland’s, is routinely underspent owing to lack of applications, or takes a much longer than expected time to disburse.



It is easy to present contemporary art, and the practice of contemporary artists, as being on the cultural margins of a provincial city that can, in bleaker moments, seem almost perversely determined to ignore anything that creative people may do. However, rather than lament this state of affairs, it is the task of artists and cultural workers to face these perceived challenges unapologetically and without compromise. Attempts to impose one-sided dialogues on a mute audience or, worse still, to interpret their silence as approval, are by their nature destined to fail.

In Aberdeen we have thinkers who make art rarely, and makers who rarely think, but to find a creative who does both to an equal standard in our city, is to find a very rare commodity indeed. It may also explain why, uniquely amongst Scotland’s major cities at present, Aberdeen has no internationally-recognised artists who base their practice in the city.

Contemporary art has no right to an audience. Part of any “problem” for contemporary artists in Aberdeen is a lack of audience beyond the obvious subsets of Gray’s School of Art students, tutors and recent graduates. If contemporary art is to gain traction in the city in the years ahead, growing this audience, and sustaining it, beyond its natural core, is the first and most critical task of those involved in making and consuming art.

This general introductory sketch may seem very unpromising, but those active in contemporary art in Aberdeen have been telling one another for a while now that “something is happening” in the city. At institution-

al level, new directors have appeared at Peacock Visual Arts, and City Moves, in the last two years, and both have made an immediate impact.

Whilst Nuno Sacramento has re-imagined Peacock Visual Arts, partly by design and partly by necessity, in the new WorM space in the Castlegate, Steve Slater of City Moves contributed the memorable strapline “Art is the new Oil”, which caused much debate for and against in the city in October 2017. This crafty provocation pressed heavily on a sensitive point for many citizens, still recovering from the oil industry recession. It invited those used to ignoring contemporary culture to think about the role it could play in the post-oil Aberdeen of the future, even if it took the form of scepticism and anger towards the mischievous thought, that art may become as prominent in the future, as oil is in our present.

In this sense, “something’s happening” is no longer interesting or good enough for a city contemplating a future as a serious cultural player, in an era where “something’s happening” in towns of all sizes, and where yesterday’s philistine desert can become tomorrow’s culture-drenched oasis with sustained investment, according to a commonly agreed vision. The spectacular success of Hull as UK City of Culture in 2017, is an excellent example of such a strategy in action, to everyone’s benefit.

Faced with the circumstances outlined above, how and in what way have the young artists selected for Positive Geographies sought to respond to and engage with the circumstances in which they find themselves?









*The Doric Boule*  
Nick Ross

The first thing to be clear about, is that whilst this is a show made in Aberdeen, and shaped in part by the material and economic circumstances that people find themselves in in our city, it is not a show about Aberdeen. Rather, it is a show that foregrounds contemporary debates and issues that resonate far beyond the North East of Scotland.



If contemporary artists are anything, they are nomads; maybe having a home address in one location but willing to travel and engage with creative meetings and opportunities wherever they may present themselves. The contemporary artist will take income and boosts in profile wherever it can be found. Just as the notion of the risk-taking “entrepreneur” in business is coming into question, in preparations for moving away from a fossil fuel based economy, ideas of “entrepreneurship” are taking a long time to fade away in the creative industries. Evidence of the nomadic entrepreneur can be found in all of these varied practices; the links to Berlin, Plovdiv and Riga; all chipping away at the comforting old parochial notions. The connections of these artists across Europe and their urgent development of an agenda seeking new experiences, expanding networks and growth in future opportunities is a microcosm of what Aberdeen as a nascent creative city, needs to do as a whole.

This show, furthermore, does not seek to present a linear narrative or unifying theme. Visual art scenes that are emerging are at their most exciting, lacking in final definition. The variegated practices here acknowledge all the problems of a cultural scene in the making, whose potential is only just beginning to be realised, with all its dissonances, disagreements and mistakes, rather than seeking to imagine these emerging perspectives as somehow unified and complete.

The issues treated by the chosen artists are diverse. Donald Butler’s work in video treats sensitively the subjects of the spaces of gay interaction, loneliness, and empty relationships in an era where social media and dating app platforms dictate the nature of our interactions with others. His work is a poignant tracing of a fingertip on a screen; of a yearning for deeper contact in a world of seemingly limitless social possibilities.





Jessica Barrie and Paula Buškevica's collaboration focuses on play, materiality and the performative. Theirs is an occasional collaboration, which takes place in parallel to robust individual practices. This is a wide-ranging documentation of months of dialogue and discussion between Barrie in Aberdeen, and Buškevica, who returned to her native Latvia after graduating from Gray's School of Art. The focus of the discussion has covered issues such as distance, belonging, and diaspora, and filtered through an unapologetically joyful engagement with materials and the potential of the performative both to provoke and to entertain.



Mary Gordon and Svetlana Panova take the notion of instability in different directions. Although both work in the medium of installation, their response to the idea is fundamentally different. Whilst Gordon uses the elements present in her work to develop witty metaphors for the idea of instability, and the desire to make the viewer uncomfortable viewing everyday objects in familiar surroundings, Panova develops the idea of instability as endemic to our times; a constant precarious helter-skelter between differing locations, jobs, networks and responsibilities. As a result, her work reflects on the unsettling truth that we have internalised and normalised systemic instability, rather than seeing it as a problem to be addressed and solved; perhaps because there is no solution on an individual basis.

Alexandra McGregor's performance piece Cailleach is the latest in a developing trajectory of critical performances focusing on the role of women in the economy, and womens' labour. In this piece, uniquely of all the exhibitors, she looks backwards



into history to examples of women working in armaments factories, and further backwards to Scottish folklore and story-telling. As such it is a practice embracing both deep critical research into womens' and working class history, but also a creative, imaginative response to the liminal state of the oral tradition, suspended between fact and fiction.





When this exhibition started and the selection of artists finalised, all artists, through discussion, were asked to make completely new work that had not been shown before. The broad parameters of collective discussion between myself as curator, and the artists, reveal themselves subtly in the concluded pieces that you can see in the exhibition; issues on identity, loneliness, instability, long distance friendship, research, performance and the slow creative revelation of half forgotten pasts. From the outset, we were unafraid to acknowledge differences of emphasis and medium, preferring to present this as a strength rather than as a weakness.

So, why Positive Geographies?



This exhibition is one of many in the Look Again weekender, that shows the potential role that contemporary art can play as Aberdeen cautiously moves towards redefinition in the next decade. For all the difficulties that we began this essay by outlining, it is perhaps the most exciting time to be creatively active in Aberdeen since the 1970s. It is perhaps easier for those involved in visual art to contemplate moving to another location with a more developed infrastructure and capacity for contemporary art, but to take such a choice is to pass up the opportunity of shaping a future for art in a city that is just about waking up to its possibilities. To be active in something very new, with its own set of discursive and intellectual priorities not yet fixed, is perhaps more exciting than the process of adapting to creative priorities and visualities set by others many years ago, in other locations.




Contemporary artists have the responsibility to help grow both the infrastructure and logistics to support their work in the context of Aberdeen. Critical to this is the development of new audiences for contemporary art. However, it seems ludicrous to expect young undergraduates



and recent graduates of the city's art school to try and complete this work, largely unremunerated, by themselves, in their spare time, and expect it to endure for the longer term.



This model of young artists building a career for themselves through their own self-organised initiatives, such as Transmission in Glasgow, or Generator Projects in Dundee, is much harder to start from scratch for today's graduate cohorts, who no longer have the luxury of a welfare state to support their efforts, and even (in Transmission's case) are faced with a loss of support from Creative Scotland. Too many insurmountable barriers- of cultural capital, access to public money, social class- now face young artists hoping to emulate the successes developed in the profoundly different cultural economy of the 1980s and 1990s. Aberdeen is well placed to be part of the conversation surrounding alternative models to the "Glasgow miracle" template, that reflect contemporary conditions of precarity, post-digital and post-object art practices.

For such work to be anything other than short term or to have meaning beyond the cohort producing it, it must be backed by an informed vision and at least notional investment from the city's political leadership. But artists simply standing there with a hand out asking for support isn't good enough. Thought has to be given to who such art would be made for, how this new audience would interact with it, and how it can develop and strengthen the name of Aberdeen as a city where art can not only be made, but displayed, discussed, bought and sold. In short, what would a contemporary art scene bring to the city and how would its citizens be able to mould and shape some of these emerging concerns? The role



of space in this discussion is absolutely vital. Sadly, at present, Aberdeen is full of empty commercial properties, yet accessing them, even on a temporary basis, for creative purposes, seems a near impossible task. Even if no money were invested, the making available of empty space to artists in a city chronically short of affordable making spaces, would be an enormous step forward.

Young people will continue to make events happen with enthusiasm and initiative. The broader structural question- as to whether the city is much interested in their efforts and prepared to back them- will be answered decisively as the city awaits the post-Brexit, late oil future with a little trepidation. Only time will tell whether these young artists will continue to push hard to grow national and international profiles from Aberdeen, or whether- as so many before them- their time here will be a short preface to a mature body of work developed elsewhere.



As this exhibition demonstrates, the conditions are here in this unique city to do something creatively and critically specific to Aberdeen that will resonate far beyond our urban boundaries, and to integrate these efforts fully into international networks of contemporary art. That's our Positive Geographies; each of us, in our own way, making our location and our circumstances work both for us and for one another.

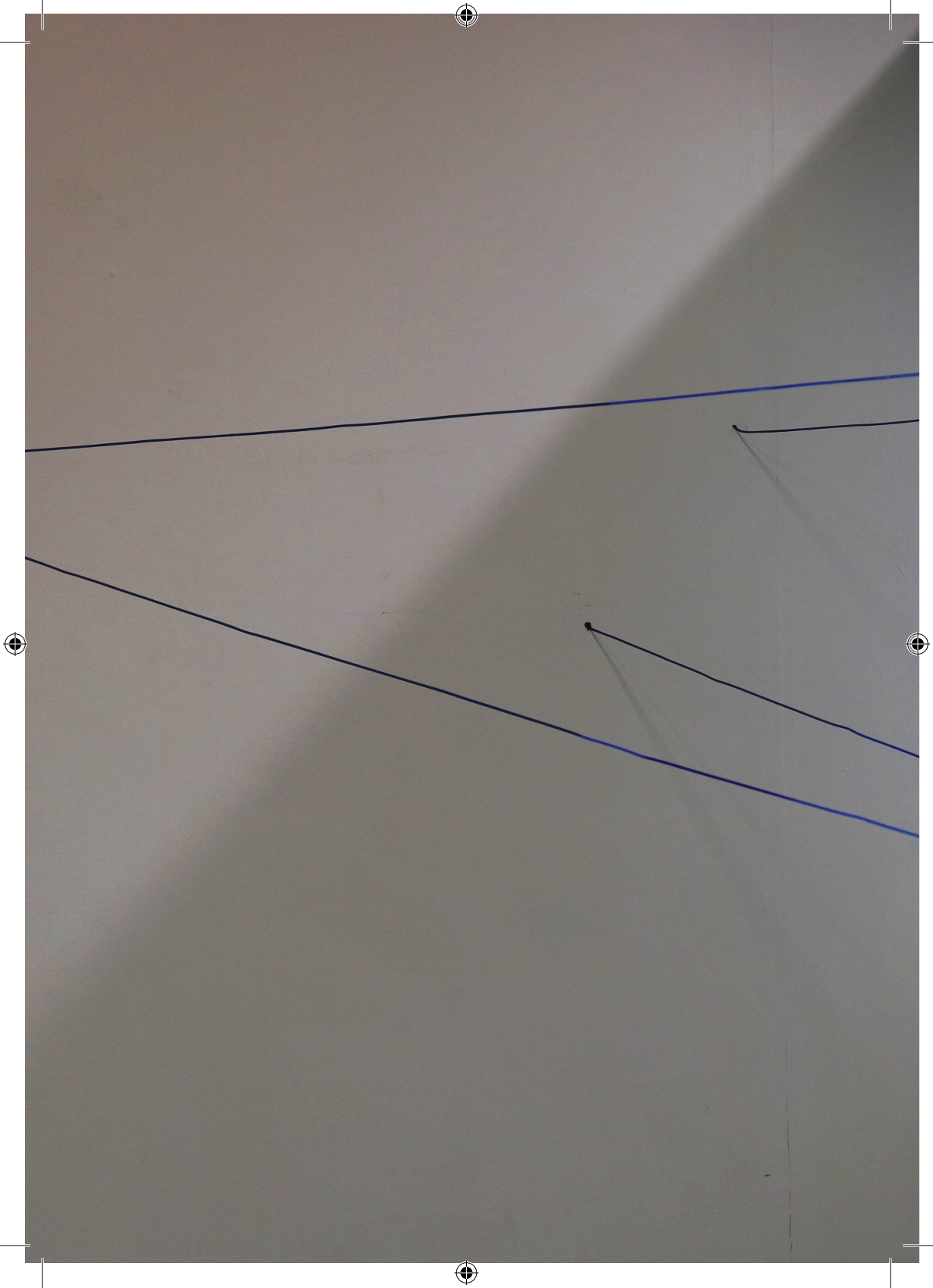
## Jon Blackwood

Curator

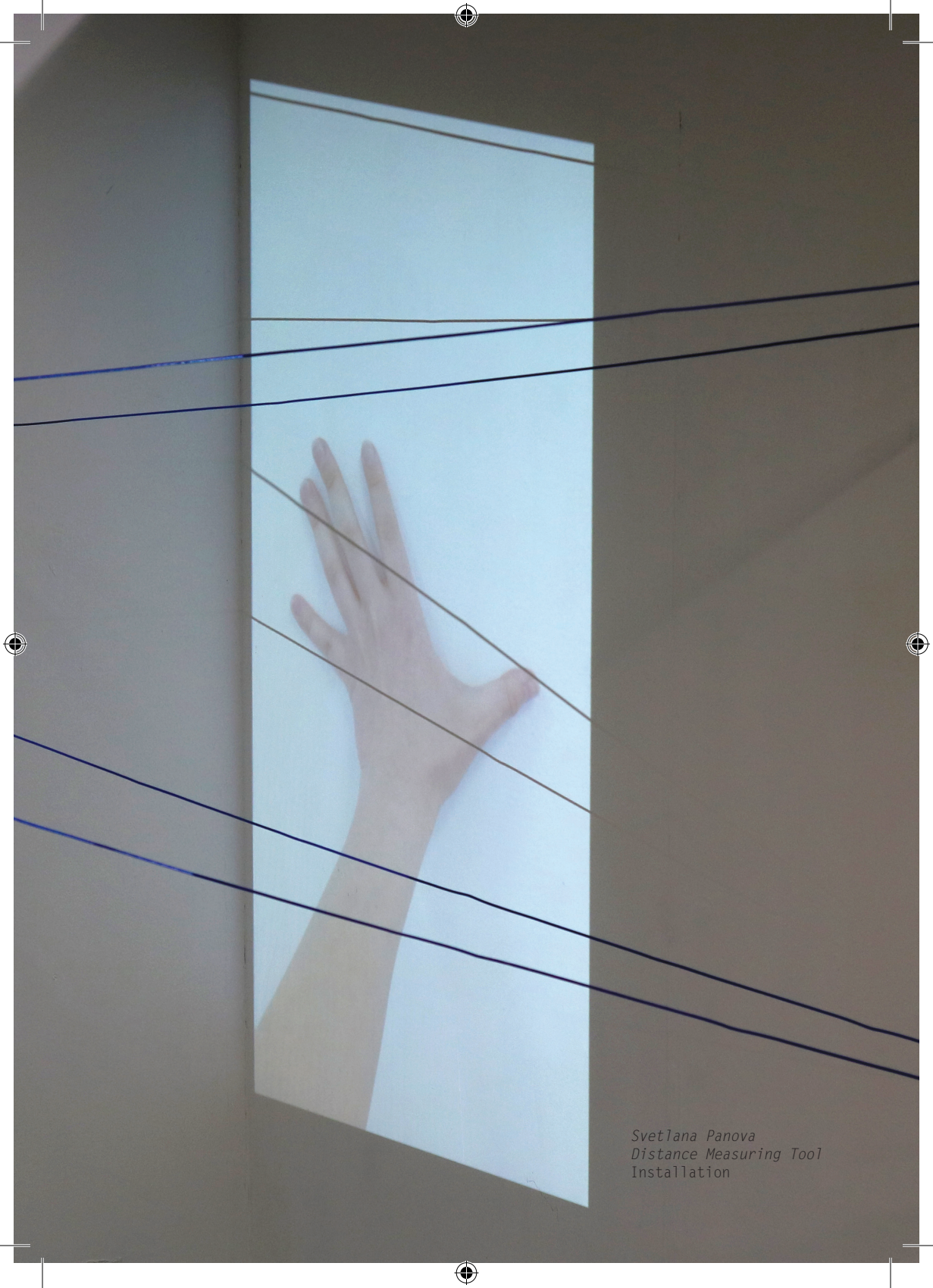
Jon Blackwood lectures at Gray's School of Art in Aberdeen, and is a freelance curator and writer. Jon is a member of the IKT (International Association of Curators of Contemporary Art). Recently he has curated exhibitions of contemporary Scottish, and Macedonian art, at Summerhall in Edinburgh, in addition to a show at the WorM in Aberdeen. He divides his time between Aberdeen and Skopje, Macedonia.











Svetlana Panova  
*Distance Measuring Tool*  
Installation

JESSICA BARRIE

PAULA BUŠKEVICA

*Good Feelings Only* was born as a cultivation of positive stimuli, and to serve as an exploration and critique of an unresolved allocation of newly found motivations. Through a vast quantity of resources we look for a moment to heal, to allow two raggedy bits of skin to join together. The back and forth movement allows for a passing of knowledge and experience, from me to you, allowing a gathering and accumulating of these feelings, of good feelings, to a point where the stage becomes an arranged delusion of a place without negativity. NO FEAR presents itself - a command to be braver.

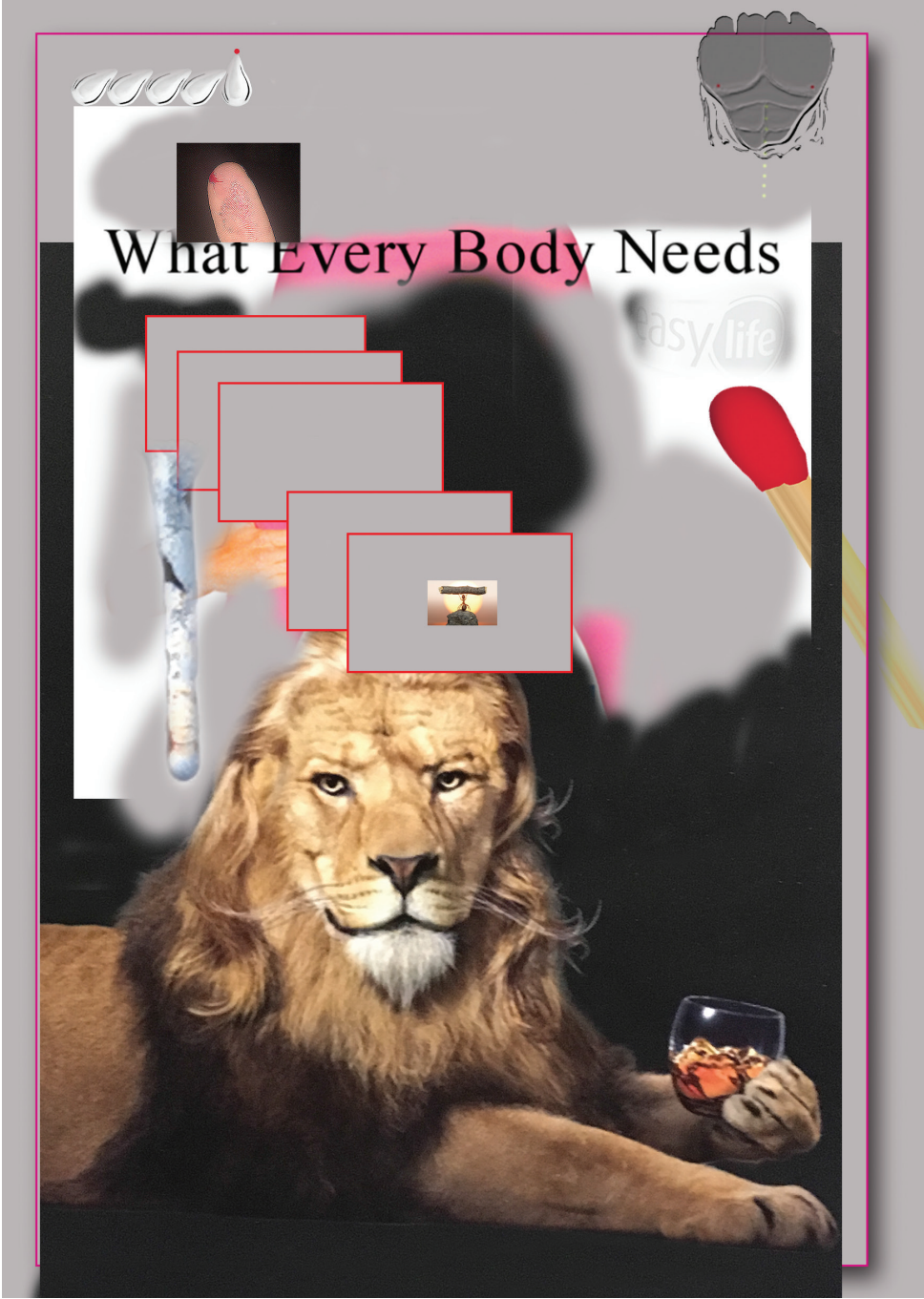
The sharing process creates a preset notion of excitement, starting off on a good foot. The foot is wearing a kitten heel, a strange choice, since kitten heels are pretty pointless. Not as comfortable as a flat and not with the benefits of a heel. So why then, are these misused forces used again and again? Surely that is a bad allocation of forces, a misuse of the motivations that encourage us through growth. Back again then to these outside sources of energy, completely unaware of their impact. Through the good feelings provided by specific stimuli, we use them to their second best potential to reach a place of productivity and creative strength.



*Good*  
Digital collage  
2018

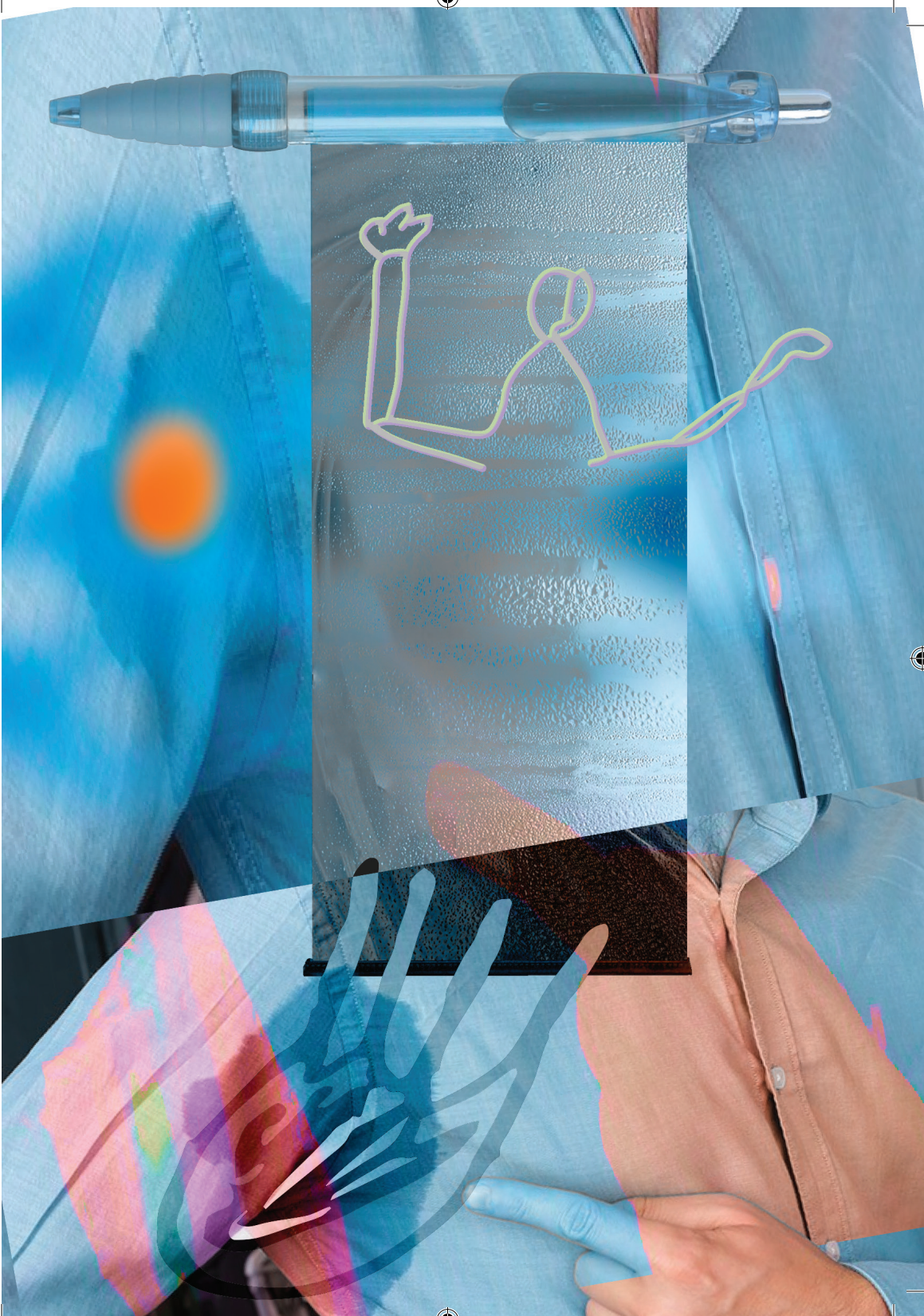
Paula Buškevica and Jessica Barrie exist as a collaborative duo based in Aberdeen and occasionally Latvia. Working across a vast variety of media focusing mainly on sculpture and video with elements of performance, they explore what it means to make two forces work together. It started in Tallinn as a study of opposing viewpoints, trying to understand what the before is and what comes after. Their aim is to ask questions and use objects to guide and seek further information, ultimately ending in a combination of imagery that tries to harmonise the situations they find themselves in.





26 ABOVE: *Feelings*  
Digital collage, 2018

RIGHT: *Only*  
Digital collage, 2018





# DONALD BUTLER

The work presented in this show stems from a series of concerns I've been developing and researching since the summer of 2016, after a trip I undertook to Berlin. Arriving in the midst of a heatwave, I spent that trip walking around in an ill-packed pair of black jeans, sweating profusely and occasionally going to a gallery here or there.

I also spent a great deal of time on that trip checking Grindr, far more than I'm willing to disclose in this text. For the first time, I remember noticing that my use of a technology was somehow acting as an interface between my experience of an environment. In Berlin it permeated a sexual charge; it held in the sun baked concrete masses, in the heavily scented shade of park foliage. Admittedly a profound sense of disappointment also lingered throughout most of that trip as I was confronted with the fact that I was somehow using this technology "wrong". I didn't understand the codes and conducts of the users, the language, how to become what I've since referred to as being engage-able within a platform.

A sense of desperation to experience this techno-sexual energy brought me to the bathhouse I explore the context of in Lavender Heated to 60°C. After leaving that sleek subterranean space, I couldn't stop thinking that sex had somehow changed. What I later concluded wasn't that sex had changed, but that the way in which we access and experience desire has changed. Since that trip this noticing of interfaces has become the backbone from which my practice now spreads from; noticing, rupturing and discussing interfaces and how they influence our experience of inter-personal relationships, communities and places.

[www.donaldbutler.co.uk](http://www.donaldbutler.co.uk)



German - detected ▾



English ▾



Nachtschwärmer

night owls

○○○○○ Reviewed 10 July 2017  
Der Boiler is for the brave

THURSDAY  
6:00 PM to 10:00 PM Wellness Evening  
with hourly special infused aromatic waters, used  
on the oven in the Finnish Sauna, served with fresh  
fruit and delicious juices.

#### TECHNOLOGY



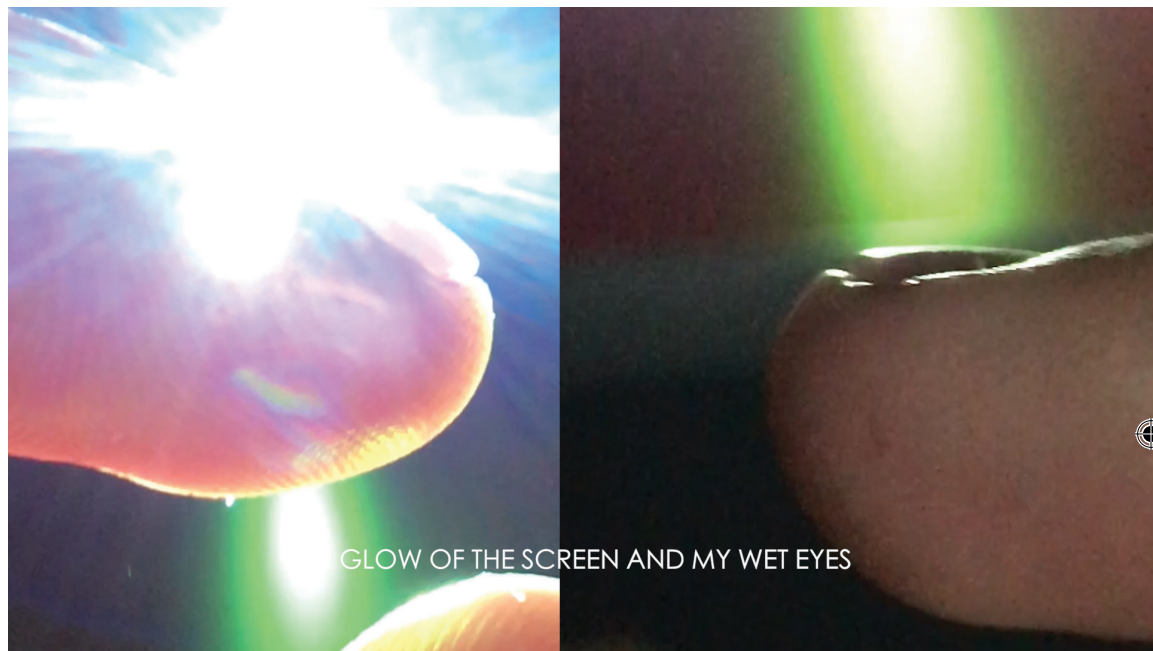
CHP

A bath and sauna system like the "Boiler Berlin" is from technical reasons a very energy intensive operation. Large amounts of air and water need to be heated continuously. Both heaters, steam generators and the in-house laundry consume much power. Increasing energy costs do makes it not easier and has a direct effect to the admission prices. We don't want to sit idly by and have decided to counteract with intelligent technology. Since the late summer 2013 we have taken our combined heat and power (CHP) plants in operation. According to the principle of combined heat and power the system generates both electricity and heat energy. The Natural gas what we are using as fuel, has the lowest emissions of all primary energy sources. Because of the enormous efficiency of the system with nearly 90 %, the CO<sub>2</sub>-balance is very low. Efficiently heated, saved money and conserve the Environment. The result was a sponsorship through the European Union.









GLOW OF THE SCREEN AND MY WET EYES

# MARY GORDON

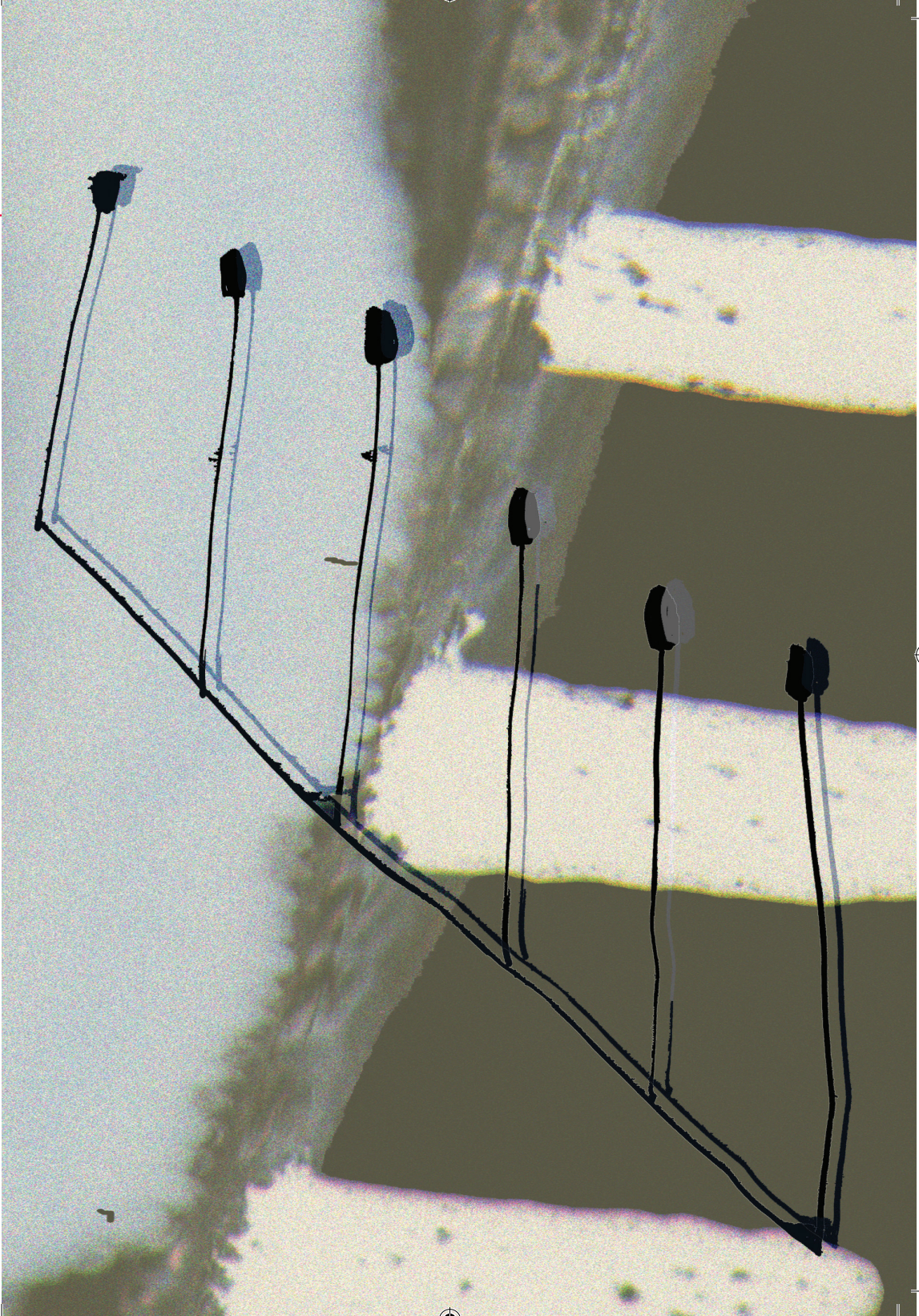
The work is in response to possibility and rethinking of the city; the unconsidered possibility of the considered and the rethinking of the well-thought. The work's aim is to activate and disrupt the stagnant and to reflect on change not as a state of between but as a resource. At present, Aberdeen's future is uncertain and the work adopts the unpredictable as desirable, taking shape as a series of actions and consequences. This approach allows the components to find their authentic self within the hold of known action and unknown reaction. Apprehension and superstition are presented as both a force and obstacle of which the aspects of the work must navigate. Exploring the balance of stability and flux, the work references superstitious related objects, in particular the object's role in the collapse of certainty of the future and the arise of consequential trepidation. Through the use of these objects, the work strives to offer an approach to an unexplainable capacity - held within these objects and held within the city.

Included in the installation is electrical fans, metal stands, marbles, wood, ceramics, fabric cuttings, seven chillies and a lemon, and water, taking form as a structure of the weighted and unweighted anticipating disruption.

Mary Gordon is an artist based in Aberdeen and co-founder and committee member of artist-run initiative, Tendency Towards.

[www.maryanngordon.co.uk](http://www.maryanngordon.co.uk)













# ALEXANDRA MCGREGOR

*Cailleach* -A white interval space ready for a new setting. The landscape alchemist begins by conceiving powder mountains through her lace creel. Malleable mounds are formed, creating a fragile landscape that has the potential of change. Vibrations of her body disrupt the structures, close to becoming a natural disaster capable of destruction. The body both a nurturing and hostile site. She reacts in this new environment, sweeping and gathering powdered peaks towards and over her body, partially buried she has created an environment both womb and tomb like.

*The Veiled One* -Her netted headpiece acts as a filter both containing and releasing. This garment appears like a bridal veil but also hints towards an astronaut's helmet. Her garment physically constricts identity and action. A threshold object moving powder in a specific trajectory, permeating through holes, like flour through a sieve. The relics of something solid trying to become solid again. An element often produced through feminine labour, grinding and mashing. Through reusing these relics, she becomes a site of transformation.

[www.cargocollective.com/alexandramcgregor](http://www.cargocollective.com/alexandramcgregor)

Feminine rituals are reinvented in this contemporary setting, reshaping traditions that reflect on past, reshaping the present and future. Objects are both historic and contemporary artefacts, also objects of providence. Repetitive rites are performed, unearthing questions on pre and post female, reactivating certain feminine elements often overlooked.

Earthly and unearthly terrains are revealed; this new landscape could be a future or terrestrial scene. Bringing together histories, folklore and environments. Feminine traditions are explored, raising ideas on the female role. With the move to Mars looming for humankind we should question what traditions will remain? Will women still sweep, spin and sew on Mars?

Alexandra McGregor is an emerging visual/ performance artist living and working in the city of Aberdeen. Currently working as Graduate in Residence at Gray's School of Art.



*Cult-ivate, 2018*





*Cailleach*, 2018





*Implicare, 2018*

# SVETLANA PANOVA

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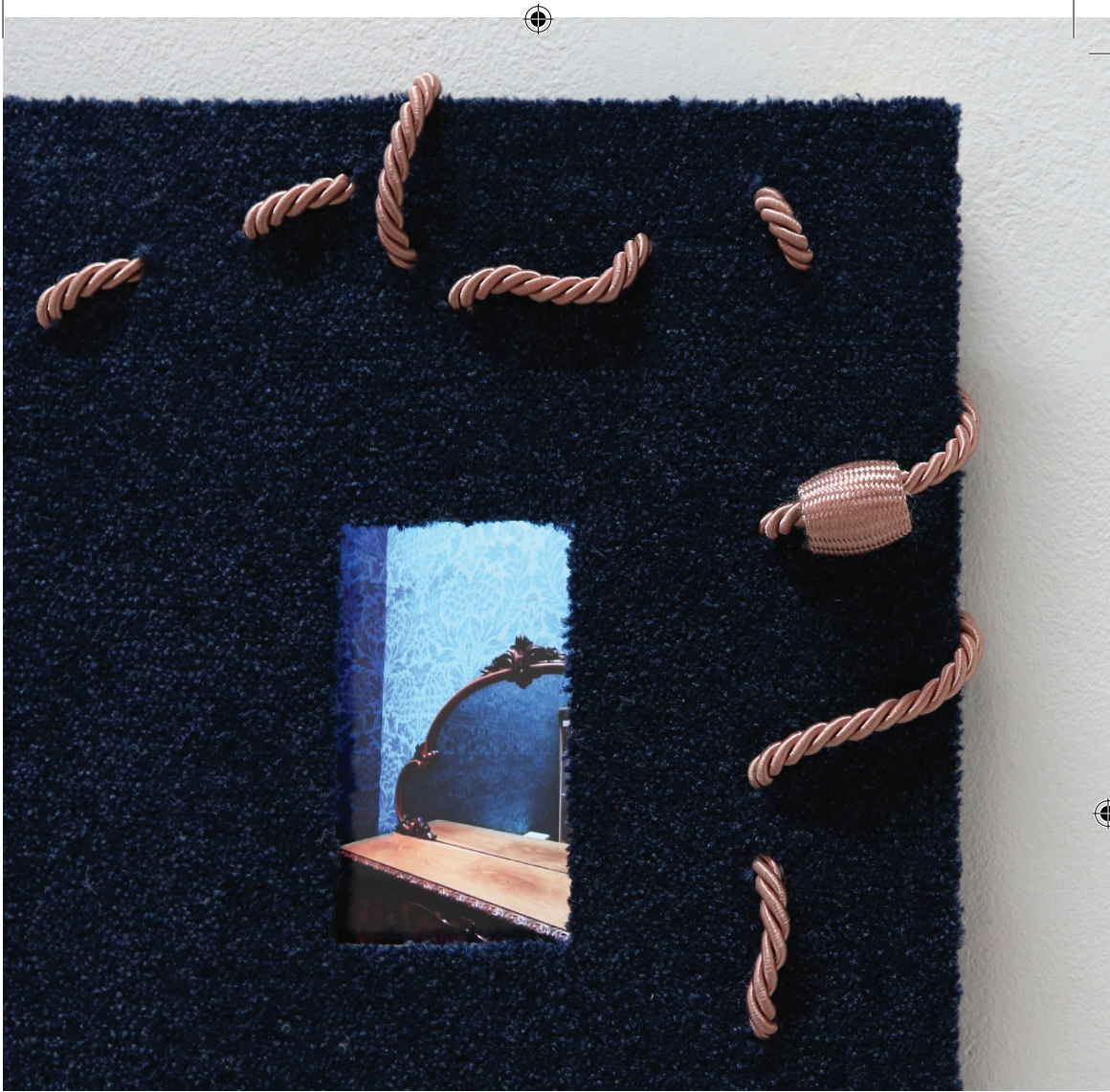
Let's talk about instability.

Systems, regardless of their nature and complexity, are inherently based on the idea of balance. An exchange of force, energy or physical matter in the right amounts so that every element performs its role, no more and no less than initially prescribed. But what happens when one or more parts change their orbits slightly - insufficiently for the collapse of the whole but significantly enough to introduce the tension of uncertainty into the mix? A shift - from predictability towards precarity.

Living between geographical locations, between projects, between physical and mental landscapes, each with their own cultural idiosyncrasies. A form of displacement, which has become a necessity to meet the demands of short-term workload and an increasing need of flexibility. Many things are 'set in stone' but very few of them provide an actual sense of security. The rest is a liquid pool of facts, tasks and deadlines which runs all around filling any leftover gaps in an already overflowing schedule of commitment.

Instability has developed into the norm. And we have developed with it. We are starting to become aware of the temporary networks we inhabit and to teach ourselves strategies to respond to liminality with an in-between state of mind. We are seeking support in the physical environment and amongst one another. We are trying to defy logic and find a sense of balance within the unstable social and political structures that build up our everyday. Uncertainty is the starting point, the medium and the end result.

[www.svetlanapanova.xyz](http://www.svetlanapanova.xyz)

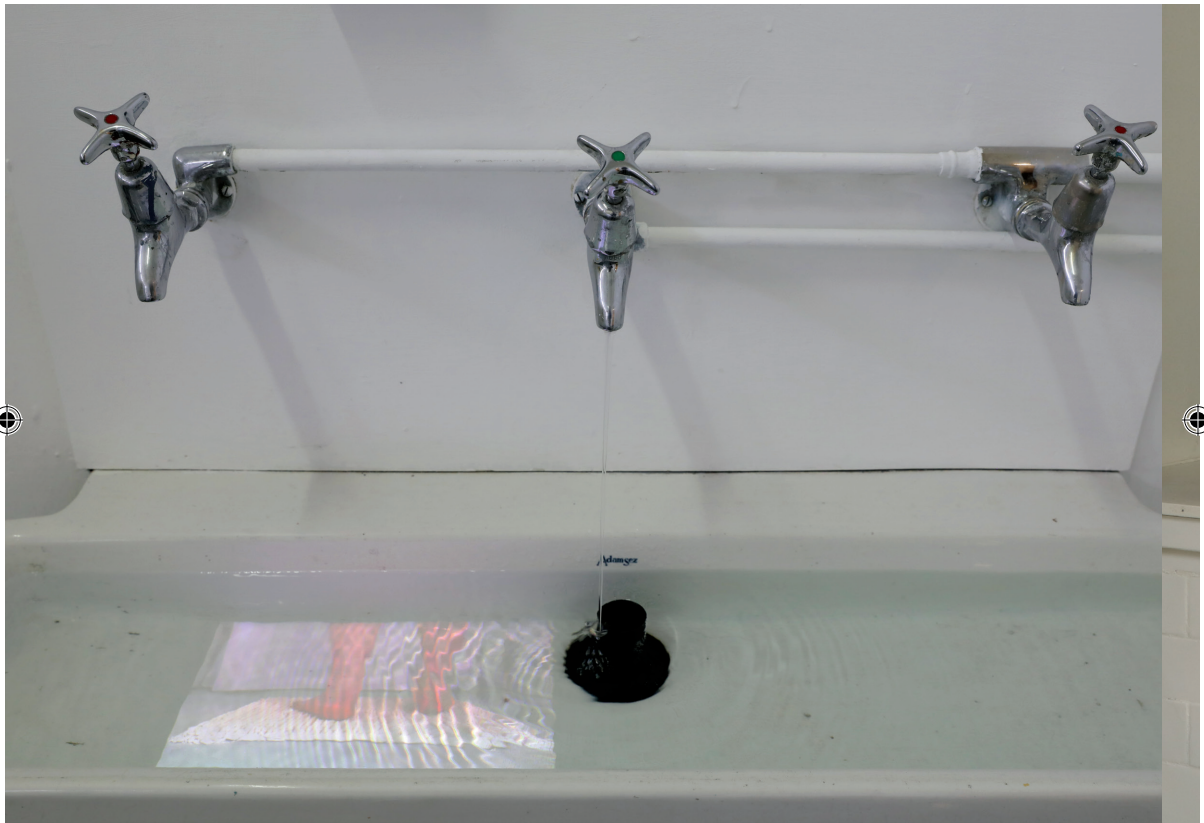


*Thinking About II*, Sculpture and Video Still

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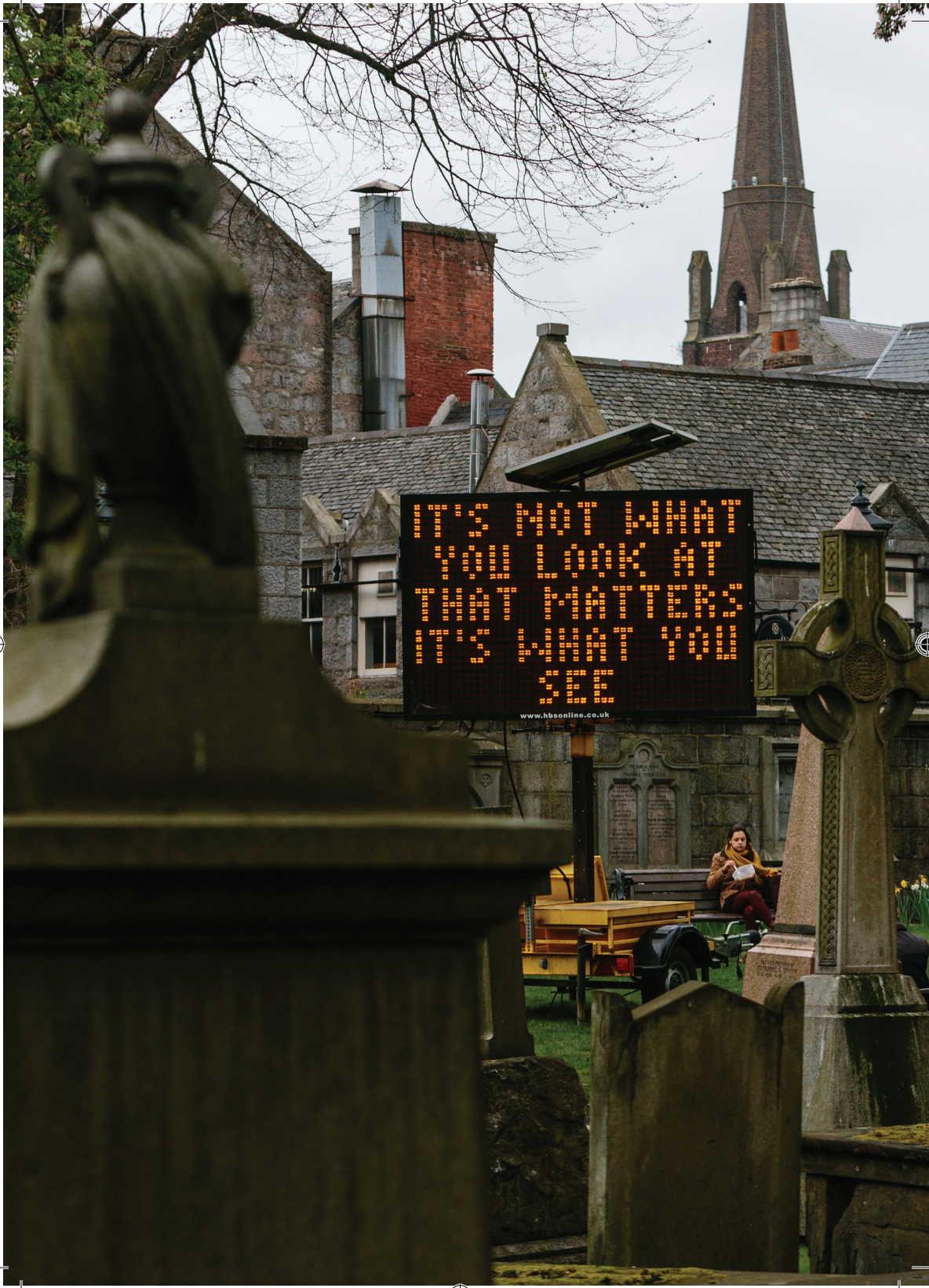


*Every Morning's Routine, Video*



Film Still (The Men's Room) / in collaboration with Kirsty Russell  
Video and Sculpture





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ALSO  
HANNAH ISABELLA  
YOUNGEST DAUGHTER OF  
PETER MACLEOD  
AND  
EMMA ELIZABETH CRAN  
WHO DIED 3<sup>rd</sup> JUNE 1923.  
AGED 78 YEARS.  
ALSO HER SISTER  
EMMA ELIZABETH CRAN  
WHO DIED 2<sup>nd</sup> OCTOBER 1924  
AGED 50 YEARS.  
THE LAST OF THE FAMILY OF  
P. M. CRAN.

*Seeing is Believing*  
Allan Watson

# EARLIER

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## GEOGRAPHIES

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Intimacy, conviviality and informality have long been forms that have found their way to, and been identified as, important parts of working with artists or working as an artist. Céline Condorelli's well-trodden series of essays on the subject has provided a number of young artists, curators, writers and critics with ways of understanding their own blurred boundaries between professional and personal relationships, as well as presenting us as its readers with a variety of understandings of friendship's role in developing our intellect, critical faculties, and at its most aspirational; simply ourselves.

Condorelli's essays situate themselves as the first – or one of, at least – considering friendships both between, and born of women, and also following in a long line of musings on relational support structures that includes Aristotle, Plato, de Montaigne and others. Whilst her writing considers the psychological space of friendship and the opportunities and difficulties such a space presents to people involved in such relations, I intend here to move away from a quite theoretical musing of friendship, and instead turn to remembering my time in Aberdeen, the Granite City in Scotland's North East, and consider the roles that friendship and informality played, and could continue to play in an engagement with an artist-run ecology within the city.

## PAST

Aberdeen is a small city. In Scotland, it is the third-largest, but in a country of just over 5 million, this doesn't equate to particularly large numbers. In addition to this, the city finds itself in the North East, in relative remoteness to the Central Belt. As a result there has formed a psychology that is very much independent from the exchanges that occur so often between Edinburgh, Glasgow and to a lesser extent, Dundee.

As a student at the city's art school, I found myself amongst a small group of individuals very much aware of the network of spaces with roots around our small country, and the potential to make our own more ephemeral points of organising, in the midst of what seemed a lack, in Aberdeen. Since I left in 2015, the city's anonymity has begun a point of conversation many times, with those living and working in Glasgow and Edinburgh and further afield, who were unaware of the city's infrastructure or recent developments.

That Aberdeen's art scene has previously relied too much on its art school is no exaggeration - festivals and organisations in the city have long leaned heavily on both current students and recent graduates in the city as a source of cheap, or free labour, and to support a small network of spaces that are perhaps a little too self-contained. Furthermore, labour was sought from these young people to bulk up the audience for contemporary art. In larger cities, an audience may be apart or separate from those undertaking production, but in Aberdeen the lines were often blurred and so participation, audience



and making exchanges were so interwoven there was little chance of extrapolating one from the other.

This reliance on small and close-knit networks, where labour and enthusiasm is so often reciprocated, in part contributed to the rapid development of events and projects while I was living within the city.



In our short time organising events, the group of friends I was amongst punctuated activity within and between club nights and distribution of zines, talks and performances, drawing our own lines between clubbing venues such as Cellar 35 and The Tunnels, existing highlights in Aberdeen's nightlife, and artists, writers and performers in the city. This activity took place under the moniker "CC" (An acronym never having been established as standing for anything in particular) and within this collective group we first hosted a zine launch at Contour Café, an independent coffee shop on The Green in Aberdeen's city centre. Following from this we developed a series of showcases and events, taking place in miniscule underground clubs, connecting with the city, and making use of the city's small size to knit together communities from both arts, academic and musical spheres.

This activity followed through in events at The Tunnels, Peacock Visual Arts and lastly at Aberdeen Art Gallery's closing event. Set amongst an empty museum ready for gutting and regeneration, we used this event as an opportunity to set a critical discussion point, a sort of speakers' corner, furnished with manifestos and writing we had collectively found useful in group working sessions. A microphone, boards recycled from a pop up exhibition Lily and Mim, curated by artist John Walter in the city, and a small stage was erected in the gallery. We invited members of the public to discuss to an audience what they hoped for in 2.5 years' time when the gallery re-opened. As a group of students about to graduate and considering our role in the future being shaped in Aberdeen it became a point of divergence for many. Following this event CC's activity slowly began to cease and my own, established network of conversation, dialogue and critique faded when I left the city.





Two of the graduating members, Tako Taal and Caitlyn Main remained in Aberdeen as Graduates-in-Residence of the Printmaking department. The first scheme of its kind in Scotland has done a great service to Aberdeen's cultural offer, and yet I remember having conversations with Tako about what we would do, staying in Aberdeen, what we would set up more permanently and often think with regret of what did not happen because of my own decisions bound up in post-graduate study that at that point meant a move to Glasgow, Manchester, London or somewhere beyond, not-yet confirmed.



The decision I made to leave Aberdeen felt practical at the time. But looking now at the opportunity coming to surface in the city through a burst of artist-run activity, I cannot help but wonder what could have come to be if I had stayed a little longer.

The support that CC had as a group of young creatives hosting events and exhibitions that were certainly not polished or looking to promote ourselves beyond our own critical networks, was all thanks to the small size of Aberdeen. This sense of community support has presented itself in much of the activity undertaken in the city in recent years across several happenings.

This notion of hospitality and accommodation was one perhaps more alien when several years ago artists Kirsty Russell and Amber Robertson, the two founding members of the Temporary Studio project, bought themselves day tickets on a city bus service.



*Here*  
Thomson & Craighead


Temporary Studio was an activity that stemmed from Russell's activity in CC, and partially as a protest to the lack of studio and cultural provision in the city. Both artists set themselves in a four-seater section of one of Aberdeen's bendy buses, armed with sketchbooks, cameras and equipment to hold and record conversations and Q+As with local residents who were both curious about the activity and willing to comment on cultural provision in the city.

Following this protest-of-sorts, Temporary Studio were given almost full access to a local community centre which provided a social space for almost a year in a part of the city almost exactly halfway between Gray's School of Art and the city centre.






'The time at Ruthrieston was really a pilot period... we really were free to do as we wished. It was most important for us to get people in and using the studio as a resource so the programme was open to all art-forms and areas - artists, DJs, collectives, zines. It was definitely a unique place in Aberdeen offering people opportunities to screen films, lead workshops, exhibit and receive feedback from peers and visitors.'



One aspect of the studio I noticed was the polarity in attendance different projects could receive – some were full of faces old and new, strangers interested in what was going on, encouraging to see the populace of Aberdeen come out to support creative happenings. And yet other times, it was simply a group of friends, enjoying an evening together, seeing what would become of discussions they had in this unusual space. Though of course, this is by no means a bad thing, Russell asserts herself by saying, 'I think too often people measure the success of projects on numbers through the door so we tried not to think that way and keep what we were doing as useful a resource as possible,' and as a resource, Temporary Studio certainly achieved its goal. Its final events were populated by students, graduates, makers, ravers, artworks in a transient space, and zines sourced from a number of creatives and collectives in the city.



Temporary Studio itself led to exchanges in Calgary with TRUCK Contemporary Art Space, which included a residency on the city's C-Train, offsite projects including a Public Notice Board, and Go Here, an exhibition at the Suttie Art Space, attached to Forresterhill Hospital in Aberdeen.

## DISTANCE


Aberdeen is far away from me now. I hear of and encounter glimpses of its activity through a scroll of my phone, an exchange of Facebook messages with friends and acquaintances in the city. I take a mental note of new directors and individuals working in the city's festivals and spaces (Wagon, Look Again, Peacock Visual Arts, The W OR M, Citymoves are those I can remember), I see a new space, a new club-night, I'm invited on Facebook, I click "Interested". I could go but it is nearly 7 hours away from me now, it's beyond a border now I never thought I'd be south of.

I wonder about the institutions of the city, how they are forming and solidifying within a very different context to those established even 7 or 8 years ago. From a perspective that can bear witness to the problems of organisations founded in the past and facing a very different reality now, I hope that the foresight granted can enable a more thoughtful establishment of such spaces in Aberdeen.

In her essay *For Slow Institutions*, Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez examines how exhibition-making and curating spheres can look to "commoning" as a process through which collective action can instill sustainability and resilience within themselves.

Collective action of course, has its dangers but Petrešin-Bachelez advocates within the essay a slowness embedded within institutions so as not to over-work, under-pay and stretch, twist, contort, and a variety of other verbs that could be used to describe the figure of the curator/programmer/artist of today.

I am reminded in reading this of Transmission Gallery's statement last summer, citing exhaustion and other commitments of committee members as their reasoning behind delaying a members' show that would fall upon the shoulders of "historically underrepresented, disenfranchised and underpaid peoples."



I imagine a new artist-run space in Aberdeen. It is coming to be at a very different time to spaces such as Transmission. With the welfare state dismantled by Neo-Liberal Conservative and New Labour governments Transmission found its committee members faced with challenges that would not have been visible to those establishing it. For a city such as Aberdeen, whose activity is beginning to bubble and come to the surface with an acute awareness of such conditions, all those involved must consider the precarity and difficulty of what it is they are asking themselves to do – as well as the opportunity that is presented within this to-and-from. Collective action can bring with it a danger of collapse or stillness, as Transmission found as it heaved under the pressure of labour expected of them by not their own organisation, but those governing it, and so within Aberdeen a more fluid approach might yet prove a more useful model for artistic showcasing.

Aberdeen's size is both its opportunity and its necessity for artist-run activity – a city's intimacy can be the largest barrier to establishing the new, and yet can also provide it with the greatest chance of success. In recent years the activity I have seen from a distance in Aberdeen has attracted me to returning to the city – and yet there remains no infrastructure for young, emerging (or for that matter, established) curators and creative practitioners to enter into. If I was to return, what would I be returning to?

Instead of asking this, I have begun to ask myself, if I was to return in 5,6,7 years time, what would I be returning to?

With organisations such as Wagon Art, The Anatomy Rooms, Suttie Art Space and The W O R M's profiles having been established or increasing it is necessary to ask how it is they are representing themselves. In a city that has the potential to act as a microcosm for care and informal strategies of cultural production, with communities as ready to engage with and support as evidenced above, where do these organisations see themselves, and how do they see the exchanges between each-other? Conversation is important when the majority of these spaces remain a small walk between each-other.

In this instance it is probably most useful to model our response on what most would agree to be the most agreeable political one. With polarisation of left and right slowly creeping from all corners, it is in the young that mutually beneficial choices are being made. In Aberdeen, an old guard of artists taking up space in studios, spaces and cultural organisations, will forever act as a stopper to establishing newer, more outward-looking models of production.

The emergence of new social spaces and ways of understanding cultural production will co-exist within, alongside, on top of the old structures, and perhaps just change it slowly through means of infiltration, over time.

## Seán Elder

Seán Elder graduated from the Contemporary Art Practice programme at Gray's in 2015. Following his M.Litt in Curatorial Studies at Glasgow School of Art, he is now Associate Curator at Grand Union, Birmingham





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