

*'The News', a solo exhibition by Toby Christian, is the second part of an exchange between David Dale Gallery, Glasgow and Swimming Pool, Sofia. Below is a slightly formalized version of the talk between Toby Christian, Max Slaven (curator and director David Dale Gallery, Glasgow) and Viktoria Draganova (director Swimming Pool, Sofia) that took place at the opening of the exhibition in October 2017.*

**Max Slaven** So, I suppose this began when I had a studio visit with you Toby, back in March, and the conversation developed from there.

**Toby Christian** Yes, I was really excited when you invited me to do an exhibition in Sofia. I am very aware of your programme at David Dale in Glasgow but I was excited to do something away from Glasgow, so ... firstly, yes, thanks for the invitation and thanks also to Swimming Pool for hosting the exhibition. I think it's important to stress that I don't want to say things in this situation that somehow de-code the work, because the work is not encoded. I don't believe there is anything here you can't understand by just looking at the work. So this talk isn't about getting the inside story of objects which are esoteric in this way, where there is some sort of secret language embedded in everything here... I hope this exhibition is completely legible. This applies to the texts on the windows too – we spent a long time working on the Bulgarian translation of the original text so that it could be read in both languages.

**MS** Maybe if we can start by you giving us an introduction to the thinking behind, or origin, to the exhibition?

**TC** So, to introduce my thinking around the show, there were three things at the beginning. The first stemmed from a conversation I had with two artists in an Indian restaurant in Liverpool. We were talking about the news and current affairs. And, I realized that I was talking about certain events and they both were quite quiet, and both artists said that they recently stopped looking at the news because it was inducing a sense of anxiety and that they felt much happier without looking at the news. Now obviously this could be seen as quite problematic, as of course it is good to have a sense of what is happening in the world, globally. But the

conversation began to be about the accelerated and continuous distribution of news. That you can't really escape all of these causal mutations of current events around the world. This was the first thing – an idea of not looking at the news. And, I tried this for few days, and I eventually found myself looking at the news again, perhaps even more.

The second thing was a memory, and in citing this I am not saying that my memories are somehow more significant because I'm an artist... this is the memory, which is written down in the press release and is from when I was about seven years old, of my mother teaching me how to make fire, and sitting there and starting with newspapers making knots. Before we'd start I would ask her or my father which papers we could use, and she or he would say we couldn't use that day's papers because these are the news, and we couldn't use the ones from the day before or the day before, because these are still relevant. But we could use the ones from the day before that, as those were somehow not so relevant. This was pre-internet, and we didn't have a computer in the house. So that's the second thing.

And the third thing is that for a long time, six or seven years, I've been writing about objects that I've encountered, visited or collected. My training has been in sculpture, first at Wimbledon and then at the Royal Academy Schools at postgraduate level. But I started writing about objects to talk about things I had seen, and to describe them without any other people or characters in those spaces. So, myself and the reader would share them. The intention was to try to describe them as objectively as possible. Just to say I have seen this thing. So, these texts would always be in the present tense, trying to present the idea that I could offer the reader a sort of collaborative process, to imagine the object together. And that I could control the presentation of the object through being very detailed about it. This writing that I've been doing has increasingly started to generate potential for making 'physical', sculpture... Sometimes that influence is quite literal, and sometimes it is a tangential process. Alongside those three ideas and around the time David Dale invited me to do the show, my second book was published, *Collar*. And so just to briefly give some context of the book – it moves between streets in Brazil, and then to Glasgow, to scenes there, and then it moves to Marseille for reasons that are there in the book. But one of the chapters

that presented itself to me as potential material for experimentation with installation or sculpture was a scene I describe in a tile shop in São Paulo, where there is a stack of newspapers which are there to wrap samples of tiles inexpensively. So, I suppose alongside those two other ideas I began to think about this stack of newspapers... I was thinking really intuitively about how I might use a stack of newspapers as sculptural material.

**MS** So, I wondered if you could expand on the installation here, and how these ideas informed it?

**TC** What you see around you on the walls are three phases of an installation, three concentrations of a performed installation process. I wanted to map the interior of the space with the newspapers from this city. And so, in these rooms I tried to do this using nets or grids. I was less interested in using grids that were measured and precise – I wanted this mapping of the space to relate to my body, as it is now, in the same sense as when making fire with my mother I remember my hands and her hands and how quick she was and how slow I was making those knots. But something about trying to acknowledge the size of my body now... In the first room the knots are spaced based on my 'fathom' – the distance between my fingertips when both arms are outstretched as far as possible... there is a further connotation of this word, towards understanding, as in saying "I can't fathom that". To do with being embraced and being understood. Here is a grid that loosely equates to a movement of my body. And, of course, it is not completely accurate to measure.

I was also interested in making something that naturally warps... this action or posture changes in its nature. The arrangement of the newspaper knots in the second room, if it is at all possible to divide this space into rooms, is measured using my cubit, from my elbow to the tip of my middle finger. And the arrangement in the final room, the most closely arranged knots, is measured with my span, the distance between the tip of my thumb and little finger, when my hand is outstretched.

These knots of newspaper are used to start a fire because it concentrates the density of the paper. The two long 'handles' of the knotted paper are almost cylindrical, and allow a lot of air to be provided for a small flame. Then the flame is carried to the centre of the knot, where, hotter, the flame

can ignite the compacted paper more easily. An image perhaps in reaction to the news and the use of the newspapers. News and silence. In keeping with my initial memory, the most recent newspapers here are dated on the Wednesday of this week – it is now Saturday. This might then create some kind of atmospheric framework in the room, in which the concentration of these newspapers, knotted or muted or made illegible, increases as we move through the gallery.

**MS** In each room, there is also a small object – a stone carving based on a computer mouse. Can you talk about the idea behind bringing these objects into the installation?

**TC** Contemporary fine art, and its dissemination can seem or feel relentless... Contemporary art seems to be always trying to create quirks perhaps in the same way that the media are. So, if you take the model of a historian and a producer of current events, a journalist, we might say that a historian is always trying to form some sort of causal narrative over a period of time, over a number of years perhaps, and the journalist is trying to provide commentary on contemporaneous events.

I am also thinking about my work in art schools, where for the first time in my life I have a desk in an office. There I became aware of these objects that I use and hold when I'm working ... I started going to the stationary suppliers and seeing the subtle modifications between these mice for computers... The very first mouse was called a turtle and it was essentially a box with a huge ball inside it. These stone carvings are not accurate copies of mice, they are more versions or ways of thinking about archetypal types of mice. This one is an '80s mouse, which is comparatively boxy, you would rest your hand on top of it. The mouse in the middle space has a small groove in the side to rest your thumb in, and the one in the far room is a very ergonomic mouse, which feels really different to the other mice to hold, almost like it holds your hand. I used to work a lot with stone carving. I was trying to think about returning to that, but making the things less art-historically reliant. I used to previously reference Baroque or High Renaissance vernaculars, and I lost interest in that... These objects here are mutations around something that fixes the hand when working, so again the idea goes around some form of an object that might represent a tool of labour.

The sculptures are presented on these carpet tiles, which I have been collecting for a long time, which are reclaimed from offices or businesses, now closed in Glasgow. People were just giving them away – they were stained, dirty, and they were various colours. But I noticed straight away that a lot of the colours tried to emulate some kind of natural wood flooring. I chose these tiles to make platforms, or mats for the mice. The mats are no longer modular, the corners are cut to be round so there's no suggestion that we might actually be able to multiply or duplicate this to make a larger area of the same material because the corners wouldn't tessellate completely. And they reference the way that you cut paper to stop it being torn, like exercise books which are given round corners to protect them or enable them to last longer. So, the relationship between these grids and the mice and then also the writing...

**Viktoria Draganova** At the beginning you mentioned how important writing is to your practice. What about the text exhibited in the show? We spent time together working on the translation, as the words you use seem to be loaded with all that: meaning and texture, image and reference.

**TC** I wanted to produce some writing for this environment, and I was very excited about trying to write something for a Bulgarian readership. My writing appears in books, in journals and in installations and so I see all of these things as moments of publishing – the exhibition as a moment of distribution too – like an exhibition is a moment to publish. With this text, here I wanted to put something in which seemed outside of the schema somehow. In the conversations with Max and Viktoria we were talking about this object that was somehow alien and about these objects that present themselves to me that I collect and find and write about. This process is not something I can control – it's not an intellectual concoction, it's just something I might notice or buy or be drawn too... and in this case it was a Dinosaur encased in a bouncy ball found in a newsagent in London.

So, you can read it and hopefully as clearly as possible you can picture that ball clearly. My writing in this way is always in the present tense, always very objective in its tone, which inevitably produces poetic effect. You might notice it in this text – and I don't really want to spell this out so much – but

those phrases, which seem the most objective very often have an ambiguity or a subtext. In my texts quite often other concurrent images are formed and often even other characters too, or nuances of their presence. I was also thinking about this gallery, the location of this gallery and of it as not being a 'white cube' space. It was formerly a domestic space, then a place where people made clothing – so it had different uses. I'm thinking about the view – so that these bouncing balls present dinosaurs, which dart about a space, in a way to surprise you with its bounciness. I wanted to try to think about scale in the presentation of the text: if you read it in the daytime you might be focusing on the plane of the acetate and the actual pane of the glass, but you might also simultaneously be looking at the landscape and the beautiful mountains, albeit out of focus.

**MS** I'm conscious of not going on too long, but I had one observation that I wanted to bring up. I see the exhibition as really based on time and a sort of spiralling out of that time, from the short to the long. The titles of the three mice sculptures are based on times of the working day, and the sense that the time of your working day is categorized by the minute, and you're always rushing from A to B. And moving from these minutes to the idea of the news being present for a finite period of time. These sequential 'presents' constitute the past and that is possibly the case within days or now minutes with contemporary app based news delivery. Then the news, or collection of 'presents', becomes useless – or only good to start a fire. But then, there is a second life where it comes back as a some kind of a historical record. The same as this historicisation of the mouse over a period of maybe 40 years, in which the exhibition begins to also talk of minutes becoming decades. Within the context of this space, which speaks of time, it is not a neutral white cube... you can see, and we previously talked about this, that there's a variety of different decades' marks and fixtures within the space....

**TC** Yes definitely – I think also we're very familiar with the notion that 'white cubes' are designed to emulate a place somewhere between a car showroom and a ziggurat – they have this kind of thick, rarefied atmosphere. And in comparison, in thinking about the temporalities within this room, the potential narrative and the material of this room, or objects which don't give away their age so

readily, like the mirror. So there's a whole range of different times that this place presents... it was an intention through doing the show to use that, to try to somehow incorporate that.

**MS** Yeah, there's a sort of concentric circle out from minute to decade which I find particularly interesting. The memory aspect of the show – there's a certain objectiveness or pseudo-objectiveness from the news, a certain relic based memory from the mice and then a very subjective nostalgia-based passing of time from the story of the knots and the recounting of this ball – which, as much as any recounting is intended to be objective, your perception of it is unavoidably subjective.

**TC** But the idea that nostalgia is somehow a stored record is an interesting one – I don't know if I entirely agree but I'm reminded of an interview Alain Robbe-Grillet gave with the Paris Review in the spring of 1986. He talks about his belief that we invent memories, that memory is a creative process, just as we invent projections into the future.

**VD** I have a question – I was wondering, does it feel different to make an exhibition in Sofia? Because you're based in Glasgow and London and we were also talking about this centre/peripheral situation while noticing that Glasgow too might be deemed to be in the periphery. In a certain sense this distinction exists everywhere and it is probably the institution, which creates or employs a certain type of a context. But does a certain context make you work in a particular way?

**TC** I think it goes back to the thing I said at the start, that I really have a belief that everything in here is legible and I'm not interested in art that's somehow esoteric or cryptic. So in some ways making an exhibition in Brazil for example I had to adapt my ideas to the huge space I was working in, but I like to think ideologically no, it makes no difference where I am in the world. I want to make a show that can be met by a public, anywhere. I hope, I don't know if that's possible. But that's the ambition. The objects in my texts, these objects which we all know, these carpets which we all know, these newspapers which you certainly know, mice, hands, bodies.

**MS** If I can just have one last comment, it's on that sort of latent violence within the installation that has this, literally, incendiary potential. And

within that, there is the cleansing or obliteration of the news and written word – ceasing all sort of historical record – through burning it down. I suppose there is that potential capacity that is interesting. This is sort of brought down from any dramatic possibility by the depressing mundanity of the office tones and structure – the sense that the marble, this rarefied material could be some sort of a retirement gift or something. That the material is really not living up to its possible elevated status. I see this as another type of violence. But I wanted to ask if there was an anger, or something on that emotional spectrum, which you felt permeated the show?

**TC** I don't know about anger... I think it's interesting that you say that these newspapers are like historical records. Because they are also politically biased, inflections and nuances of narratives. We spoke a lot about in Glasgow which newspapers to use and we were talking about newspapers like the Sun newspaper in the U.K., which is rightly boycotted by many people in Liverpool, we were talking about all of these different newspapers having a real bias. Actually, all these newspapers are completely biased. And I remember describing being in London and using public transport, seeing huge stacks of the same Metro newspaper and everyone taking it and everyone reading it in the morning. These narratives are administered on a daily basis. But in response to an idea of violence or anger, I would say then here I'm trying to slow things down, trying to decelerate things, materially, experientially. And it's the same with my writing. I spend a lot of time trying to do that. There's the fight.