

Snowballing
Alex Clarke
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Super Dakota

Set in a world of collapsing institutions, precarity and chaotic criticality, *Snowballing* is a fictional text about a relationship between two people, her and him. Following a fire in their studio, her takes the opportunity to become, first, an anonymous artist, eventually, a fictional person, leaving him behind wondering whether his accumulation of fear was itself actually becoming a demonstration against power and if her was right all along – that self-dissolution might be the only productive form of self-forming.

Conversation between Shesna Lyra and Alex Clarke, 5th March 2022, Paris and London.

Why is this show called *Snowballing*?

Really, for me, I think making artworks or exhibitions is about making placeholders for a sort of diagram of exchange - relationships across things, ideas and people. Intersubjectivities. It's really a social dynamic, to talk to one another.

The show I did before was called *Spit Trail*. *Snowballing* felt like a logical sequel, or expansion.

When you reduce those questions of work *being* communication and those tensions between language and visual language, I suppose I'm proposing or forcing an idea that maybe the mouth, saliva, lubricating fluency, for example, is a liminal space where the language of thinking and connection takes it's first moment of materialisation, or coming into being.. and with a spit trail it's so deliberately embodied, it's not relative to materiality but the material body.

'Snowballing' itself means many things of course. It's dumb and a direct way of charging or loading up embodied exchange. But 'snowballing' also refers to academic systems of citation and reference and 'knowledge exchange'.

The exhibition is really in this mid-point between art and life, but also text and object, or abstraction and materiality, in a way. 'Snowballing' is the name of the exhibition, but it's also the name of a text. Does 'Snowballing', the text, really exist?

Yeah- it's getting that way. 'Really exist?', that's nice - performative, like fiction spilling outwards or something. I like what you've said before about 'spatialising fiction'. I guess the question of what it really is is more about authorship - is it really 'written'? Really, the 'writing' placed into my studio practice is just collage- in the case of 'Snowballing' the method of collage is a larger narrative.. like a book.

All the material is taken - conversations, text messages, other people, other failed abandoned texts, listening to Judith Butler read their writing, thinking about voice and listening to Eileen Myles speak their poems, notes, workplace language, emails from the institution I work in, music etc. Sometimes that stuff is 'written into' the narrative, like two people talking about that subject, or it's just directly collaged on top, as it were, like concluding an idea, written as a list of questions, with Kate Bush's *Cloudbusting*.

What is it about? Do those characters really exist?

Well, we've got the synopsis haven't we. Shall we read the blurb?

Do the characters really exist.. yes, absolutely, but they're many people.. hopefully boundaries of personhood and identity dissolve. For example, maybe Sturtevant is sometimes a subject of discussion, sometimes it is Sturtevant having the discussion.

I have one chapter called *Homeopathy* which I showed before in an exhibition before this one, about a boy who fetishises being crushed and eventually, via saliva, dissolves into everything and everyone, the whole thing's sort of a vehicle for these questions of self, definition and legibility.

*You are everything,
and everything is you.*

And it goes deeper into appropriation right? Is this where your relationship to appropriation begins?

In questions over what a practice might be, we can understand the what, where and how etc. but I think where things get most interesting for me is the 'with whom'.

We can equate those questions to a practice, but also what a 'studio' or work is, and, crucially, how we situate artworks- the whole network is important.

I want to populate all of these things with people, that could be a drawing by Andy Warhol of a boy sleeping from 1955, but maybe that includes John Giorno, in *Sleep* from 1964, or maybe actually that's all about Sturtevant, or maybe it's just about a conversation with a friend about Sturtevant.

Critical Distance through Critical Intimacy or something.

In any case I think I've always just wanted to pluralise the first-person.. I hope that just feels more like thinking or feels how thinking feels, not just 'look at what I did' and not simply some transactional exchange.

So this is really the core of your practice- the encounters you have and how you contextualise them, like in the case of the Andy Warhol drawing. Why did you pick up that Warhol drawing?

Resting Boy 1955-57, well I'm not sure if this is 'why' but the how is that I guess I wonder.. if it's about relationships, what can a relationship really can be with, let's say, Andy Warhol.

Just as things were locking down and when we didn't really know what that even

meant, on the last evening me and my partner thought we'd like to go the Tate before it closed to see the Warhol, we went, the museum was dead, the exhibition was, you know, pretty great and probably really great given those viewing conditions. Anyway, I remember we walked home, across London, that was cool, and I'd bought the postcard of that particular drawing. And I put it on a bookshelf, as we all do, which was opposite from what then turned into the space where I'd sit and work-from-home as it were.. I mean my job, not the studio.. and that drawing sat there opposite me for that whole period while I talked to students through my nearly decade-old broken MacBook Air. So choosing something like that, and the only reason why I'd tell an anecdote like that, is to say how mundane and extra-ordinary those relationships are sometimes.

How did they turn into the mirror paintings? The technique is so intriguing, how are they made?

They're made through a very particular technique of reverse-glass-painting. Everything is painted onto the back of a sheet of glass, in the reverse order as you would a painting, it's a really complex system of layers. There's very different types of paintings pushed through this system in the show.

Why glass?

I mean, the screen, so dumb and I'm so into it now. It compresses time, gesture, colour, into image.

It's like a 2mm lens of mediation that makes it the copy of itself, they sort of look impossible, like you wonder about their resolution or something. They're kind of cruel, operating at a distance or something. The fluidity of the liquid paint is such a language for talking about these subjects in this work that to be able to still those blooms of paint as if they're still wet is fun. It also makes them really hard to reproduce and to look at, you have the painting inside, but also the reflection of the room and yourself looking at them, so dumb, and therefore more true or something.

Could you talk about the different types of collage you use throughout the show?

Yeah I kind of use and misuse that word for many different things, it's useful. I think it's all collage. A friend called everything 'compressions', which is better. These reverse-glass paintings are much more about *being* that.

Your Kissing Benches- why do they resonate and return in your practice?

Yeah, this form has stuck around. It's useful to refer to them as palindromes. They're mirrored left to right and also flipped upside down, you know horizontally and vertically.. 3D.. very my-first-sculpture. Two benches in the show are from a previous show.. I think 5 years ago.. that's nice. One I left worn and used and yellowing. The other I re-gesso-ed, like re-grounding a painting. Kissing bench, or

courting bench... It's a heavy-handed and direct way of figuratively situating the viewer and exchange in an embodied way.

But their dimensions are specific?

It's just Judd. I probably thought one day 'how big's a bench?' and looked at the dimensions listed on the Judd furniture website. I didn't want to 'design' anything.

Why this material?

Wood, pine.. familiar on many associative registers.

Would you call the black bench that can be sat in 'interactive'?

No I wouldn't say that word. Being able to sit on a bench in an exhibition is normal. But I suppose of course they pronounce those interactions that take place in an exhibition- artworks, objects and contexts.. you being one of them.

What about the elements inserted into the other benches- do the shirts on the kissing benches belong to someone?

They're my clothes. There's two kind of classic sweaters, one dyed, one bleached, and a long-sleeved t-shirt that's dyed and bleached. One is kind of hung from the dowels in the seat of the pine bench on the wall; one is in the gesso-ed bench on the wall with two bowls, one of the bowls is dyed with the same dye as the jumper; the long-sleeved t-shirt is inside the gesso-ed bench on the floor with residual vinyl from a previous exhibition scattered over it.

How are these little bowls made?

Very much at home. Domestic, if I'm thinking about 'inhabited research', then sometimes it's useful to get rid of the studio and the artwork. Like the clothes, they have a proximity or intimacy or something. They're plaster of Paris which is then carved or whittled into shape, definitively not ceramics, they're useless, another type of image or something.

Where does the residual vinyl come from?

For a while now, and particularly in these reverse glass paintings, I've been making these very intricate stencils with a vinyl plotter. What that means is that I can take a file and transpose it into a painting, whether that be, for example, a text document, a half-tone image of the spit trail from *Cruel Intentions*, or a Warhol drawing. The *Resting Boy, 1955-57*, Andy Warhol paintings in the show are made from torn residual vinyl stencils from other paintings not in the exhibition. The vinyl scattered over the long-sleeve t-shirt is from a previous painting that failed nicely of this italicised text called *Like You*. On the floor between the two spaces, there's also the first few lines of a text called *Sturtevant's Vertigo* which is a dialogue between two people about t-shirts, slogans, porosity, and poems as safe-words.

For the text paintings, laying and removing these documents between layers of paint or mirror solution, it's laborious, like removing every line, word, letter, each dot of each 'i', maybe closer to painting-as-writing rather than language-as-image.

What about the photos, who are these people? Where are they taken?

Well.. another workplace outside of the studio. They're students entering or leaving an art school. In this case it's Central Saint Martins where I've been working as an associate lecturer for a while now. The photographs were taken on two specific days - the last day in the building before lockdown and the first day back in the building, so they bracket almost two years of heavily mediated communication and remote exchange.

I think that I think that all the conversations I might have in that work and working are something like inhabiting research and I think that I think that these photos provide a context that positions all of the questions I might want to ask in making artworks outside of the hypothetical or theoretical 'could be' and anchors them not only to the social, but the political. The diagram of exchange I first mentioned gets taken out of the gallery and into something realer, maybe actualisation or something. I think that I think that there's a ground-up ideology that to understand our social conditions through the renegotiations performed and lived by students is.. infinite, amazing. Bearing down over that ideology, or authenticity, is the institution.. almost the opposite of those things, a top-down opposition.

It doesn't work to oversimplify such complex politics, but I guess I'm using those images to situate the possibility of communication and relationships, which includes ideology, negation, problematisation, precarity, disillusion, dissolution and so on.. all of which is where the text *Snowballing* begins or gets its narrative I think.