

Writing An Insecure Form

Maybe studio?

On Google's instructions I arrived at the end of a residential street and found myself in a car park expecting to find a block of artists' studios. The ochre beige-brown 'L' shaped building that ran along two sides of the car park was punctuated by rows of small windows, darkly rimmed. When the curtains were drawn some of the windows revealed pockets of harshly lit Corinthian Pink walls belted midway by a floral border, or lilac walls, framed by the out-turned edging of an abstract geometric pattern in matching hue of mid-range violet. This was not what I was expecting.

Shout when you're near.

I must have got the wrong address. I turn around and check my emails, the postcode, Google maps but no, they all insist that this is where I want to be. Two women, pulling on their coats, appear from sliding glass doors tucked into the building's central nook.

Can I help you?

Inside; signed in. To our left a window looks onto a reception. Before us glass doors open onto a communal seating area with puffed plastic dining chairs, in aquamarine, arranged around fake-wood tables. I think, though I might be misremembering, really I'm too far away to see. Three figures sit simultaneously together and apart: their shoulders curled protectively inwards, their backs to us. We take the stairs to our right, which are an even more sickly ochre than the walls we left behind outside. High-gloss-orange-stained-pine frames windows and doors, guiding our hands upwards by supportive rails.

Welcome to Mildmay Park Residential Care Home.

Upstairs, a left and a right or left and a left, one way or another, I've already lost my bearings. Walls give part-way to panels of glass etched with fine lines arranged in grids. The glass overlooks the central corridor, like windows looking onto an interior street, which is peppered with notices and signs of forthcoming events.

This way.

[A tumbling sensation]

Doors that lead to private rooms are arranged into convivial pairings. Set side by side, but turned inward at an intimate right angle. Were you to exit them at the same time as your neighbour, fumbling your keys in their locks, you'd find yourself back to back, maybe even touching.

I'll introduce you.

[A thought]

Going along.

I went up in a corner.

There's no difference between you and a cigarette.

Not crystallise by harvest.

[Loops along]

The simultaneity of Owen's arrangement is crucial. In the dispersed cluster of speakers and screens there is no central nucleus of attention. Your eye and ear scramble to gain traction, alighting only briefly on any single element, before becoming distracted by a nearby chord or flicker of colour or change of tempo. You zone in and out of the entanglement of voices and faces and musical notes and texts on screens. You find yourself staring at one, listening to another, reading something else; it induces a synesthetic confusion of experience. It takes a while to get a handle on your place in all this. In fact, only once you have ceded control— succumbed to the logic of the old people's own thoughts and to the work's own rhythms — do you begin to drift along with it.

Drift.

Do I? I don't know. Do I?

[Some repetition]

Owen has accumulated hours of audio and visual footage from his time in the care home. But the installed recordings are just the beginning. Their provisional nature also informs the events that he arranges outside of the home. These involve assemblages of artists and musicians and writers, and footage of the care home residents. One such get-together resulted in a day-long improvised soundtrack which Owen sees as standing somewhere between a gig, a lecture, a performance and a community centre.

The practice of making social.

This isn't the first time that he has sought out social gatherings to form the basis of his works. His 2014 film *E.P. (extended player/european park)*, draws unlikely visual and sonic parallels between town centre shoppers, anti-austerity protesters and Mike, Swindon's resident busker. In a similar vein, *Goldfinch* (2015) interweaves footage and conversations with women from the Carterton Women's Institute and 84-year-old jazz musician named Dave Collett. *Goldfinch* took on various forms — text, film, live events and performances — sometimes in combination. What links all these works is Owen's interest in harnessing the latent power of shared, everyday experiences.

Are you hungary?

Blood sugar.

*Going Along Without a Body* which also cultivates human relationships, this time through intergenerational social gatherings, is a further development of this process. This is in part due to the nature of Owen's residency which is Cubitt's version of (what galleries and museums inelegantly refer to as)

I always want my own front door.

Touch on this:

Soul.

This is Ben Owen's studio and has been for the past year and a half through a Cubitt Community Studio Residency. For the first six or so months, he did very little physical making. His activities turned, instead, on human encounters: making conversation, striking up relationships, getting to know, fostering trust.

I believe in just a pile.

Work out ways of letting it breathe.

Since then an assortment of physical, visual and sonic making has been underway. Identifying some common ground came first, pairing music and storytelling. He began inviting improv jazz musicians into the care home to spend time with him and its residents. The musicians, Owen, and the old people sit and talk and sing and listen. They make together, and play together and observe each other. Faltering conversations criss-cross rooms: hands quiver, are held out and beat an invisible rhythm. Lungs are filled, lips moistened, eye contact made and avoided. Words are sought and lost and repeated. In response, musicians rumble or parp or purr or thrum, pressing, stroking, and plucking, adding a further texture of improvisation to the filmed and recorded goings on.

When we came out of the shelter, me and my mum was covered in soot.

Riffing.

[Murmuring]

Where d'you meet these boys?

There is an 'R' on her hand. Is that shorthand? A shorthand tattoo?

The sight of these jazz and classical musicians in the semi-domesticated environment is sometimes incongruous. Unwieldy instruments are pressed into modestly-sized bedrooms and communal spaces: a double bass burrs at Edna's shoulder alongside her walking frame; a tuba player perches on a sofa between Jess's bed and a window, the sound of London traffic droning, and intermittently growling, in the background.

It was quite bad. There were bombs whistling down.

[A tumbling sensation]

The capacity to absorb complicated moments.

Like the jumble of the building, the effect of *Going Along Without a Body* (2016 — 2018) is a motley of disjunctive visuals, sounds, and words. These spill from a disorderly arrangement of variously-sized screens and leads and speakers displayed at different heights. Flat screens lie supine, iPhones propped, blocky television sets sit atop custom-made plinths covered in brown and pink laminates. Speakers are clad in wood-effect wall paper; leads snake between monitors and amplifiers. The footage you see and hear is accumulated from Owen's many encounters, workshops and conversations with the residents; they run concurrently, looping in and out of phase.

I've lost it.

It'll come back.

Being vulnerable.

'Community Engagement and Outreach'. But the engagement here feels more intimate than the term outreach implies. It is more like in-and-outreach. This is not simply a gallery's demonstration of the range of its impact, outwards, fulfilling its obligations to generic communities. Here Owen and his artists work with and alongside, and sometimes just near, the residents and staff within the care home.

You can't destroy energy, it's what we are.

The process of gathering together and recording the meetings and interactions of all sorts of people is complicated. But Owen's arrangements are sensitive to the complexity of these encounters that bridge, but do not artificially smooth out, differences of generation, class, cultural interest, education, skill, or political and religious belief. Frissons, awkwardnesses and strains endure — through silence, looks of boredom, and disagreements: Joan is certain that spirits exist, David isn't so sure; Jess hates jazz improv but she's very happy to sing along to her own tune; Steven, meanwhile, naps disinterestedly at the end of the table. These moments brush up alongside bonhomie, accord, and confession — Jess's chuckle, David's flash of mischief, Leana's look of utter absorption in her present thought. These assortments of modes and moods of encounter are ever present in *Going Along Without a Body*, surfacing sometimes together, sometimes apart.

Can I tell my joke?

Holding hands.

Yeah, swing.

Resonated with her somehow.

Such 'poetic moments', as Owen calls them, are not conveyed, nor enacted; they insert themselves in the situation of the work. People and their discussions are overlaid, coexist, dissolve and reappear, sometimes disembodied, plucked from the voices that first spoke them.

I'm not at all happy here.

This does not always result in easy viewing or listening. Because of Owen's provisional, lo-fi, and responsive approach, chords grate, colours jar, words unnerve, audio and visual footage falls discordantly out of sync. 'It's about setting up an insecure form', he tells me. And the thing about insecurity is that it is beset by uncertainty, vulnerability, prone to logical inconsistencies and structural weaknesses, the navigation of which is all part of the thing. No, is the thing. The very thing.

[Pause here]

Words — Lizzie Lloyd

Without a body or something.