

Andy Holden

Interview by Tess Charnley

20th May 2020

Andy Holden's exhibition The Structure of Feeling was scheduled to open at Block 336 in March 2020. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the exhibition was postponed along with the rest of the gallery's scheduled programming. As part of our effort to recalibrate and find new ways of working, we are presenting a series of interviews with artists.

For the first in the series, Tess Charnley (Programme Coordinator at Block 336) interviewed Andy Holden about his inspirations, his artistic methodology, his upcoming exhibition and how his work has shifted in the wake of COVID-19. Andy Holden is an artist whose work spans sculpture, large installations, painting, pop music, performance, and multi-screen videos. Previous works have included collaborations with his father, ornithologist Peter Holden, examining our relationship with the natural world (Natural Selection, Artangel, 2017), a large knitted replica of a chunk of pyramid and a video of returning this piece of rock to the pyramid from which it was taken (Pyramid Piece, Tate, 2010), a seven-screen video installation which recreated his teenage manifesto which called for 'Maximum Irony! Maximum Sincerity' (Towards a Unified Theory of M!MS, Spike Island 2013), and a library of books and sculptures dedicated to the notion of 'Thingly Time' (Kettles Yard 2011). Holden performs regularly and releases records with his band The Grubby Mitts and runs the project space Ex-Baldessarri in Bedford. His work is included in the collection of Tate and Arts Council England.

Your work extends beyond just the visual arts, including music, writing (in terms of the monologues that comprise the audio in your video work and cartoon shorts), and your own curatorial practice. Who are your key influences? And how do your different practices influence and inform one another?

I used to have some pithy kinds of answers that I fooled myself into thinking were explanations for the reasons that I was doing things. These over-arching, loosely ideological reasons seem to get lost in the world of specifics over time. I'm not so sure my work extends beyond the visual arts, although I'd like it to - I'm all for the muddling of categories. It's just that visual art is now such an expanded field, it seems to capture most things. Occasionally the music has crossed over and just been experienced as music, and that was always a personal ambition; to try and sneak art out through different channels, to try and muddle audiences, to allow art to be encountered before people realised it was art. But the reality is probably like trying to catch a glimpse of the dark by quickly turning the light on. And also at a certain point the music became more just that - music.



Andy Holden & Peter Holden, *Natural Selection*, 2017, Towner Eastbourne, installation view.

This slipping of categories was part of the approach to *Natural Selection* (2017), in that it was a show for anyone interested in the natural world, and through collaborating with my dad we could form a new hybrid audience; two different types of audience each bringing their different reality-tunnels to the show. One might come for the birds, another because it was art, and maybe it would just alter each of those tunnels in a subtle way. Often a different formal output, say playing a gig, is a way of escaping the formal constraints of the other, but also sometimes it can be a way of

illuminating the other in the negative, this isn't that, and doesn't ask that of it; here the emphasis is affect, over there it is concept. Ideally though both are best when both are both. My favourite works are where there are a number of multifarious parts all orbiting each other and I can be somewhere in their midst, or hovering over the top watching them interact, hence the reoccurring eye balls floating through space motif. I realise that sounds a little aggrandising and delusional, although sometimes whole worlds can be discovered by even the clumsiest interpreters.

The things that inspire me, rather than influence exactly - the things that give me the impetus to make something - are often mini Einstein-Rosen bridges between two points in time; things from what seemed like previous time are actually ongoing and I suddenly feel I can dip back in, and with that comes the hope of a discovery of how one experience can be understood through another. I mean, that is very general. Maybe simply how one thing is actually a helpful way of understanding another thing that it wasn't intending to comment on. Not in a mechanistic way, and not in a mystical way; another form of that, somewhere in between. Influence is different. Influence is far more connected to the unavoidable proximity of surroundings; the inescapable nature of upbringing; chance encounters with people and things; cultural zeitgeist, which I do, as anyone does, my best to overcome. Always trying to peek beyond ones own *umwelt*. I try not to be the artists I love, whose spell is most intoxicating, but the spell is always there.

You've recently been referring to your artistic methodology as stemming from the branch of interpretation known as 'hermeneutics'. Can you explain what you mean by this and how it manifests in your practice?

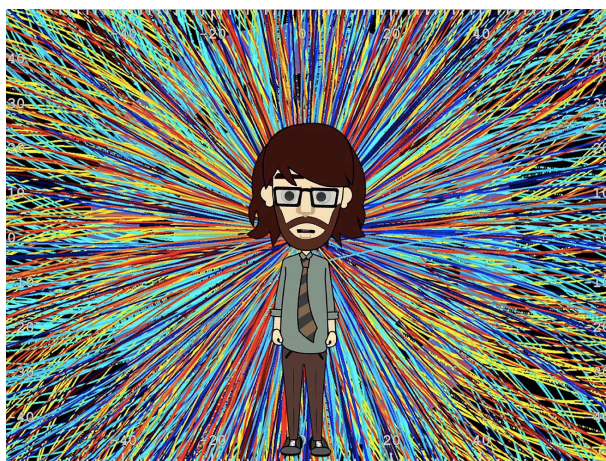
I used to like Ursula Le Guin's Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction as a description of an artist; the artist, like fiction, as a receptacle that can hold anything. The bag came before the spear; it has always been necessary to go out and gather. I mentioned hermeneutics as a more specific explanation of recent projects to try and be a little less general, to point to one thing that can regularly be found in the bag. The more recent works were attempting to look at the nature of interpretation itself. On the one hand the interpretation of certain texts, either cartoons through physics and logic, or nostalgia through the framework of my old manifesto calling for irony and sincerity simultaneously. Or Scooby Doo through Freud, or love through love songs, or whatever, to bring the question of how the work is interpreted into the work itself. It is an endless, doomed attempt to not see things as we are but as they are.

The reoccurring propulsion of many pieces was the question of how I come to interpret the world in the way I do and how that is contingent on previous experiences. What is the ground of interpretation at play when I come to make a value judgement, where did the framework come from? Hence digging backwards recently to the canonical texts of c.20th thought, and also mining myself for my own interpretative frameworks. It is a tragedy that we don't get to know more people better, perhaps except through fiction, but as it is I'm limited to only really having access to myself to investigate my own frameworks, but always with the hope of then opening that up to something more general, more relatable. In the animated short films (lets call them the *Cartoon Hermeneutics*, it sounds grand and paradoxical) I embed myself deep amongst the cornerstones of western thought, walking around them and setting them in new landscapes, mumbling fragments of these canonical texts like the outcasts at the end of *Fahrenheit 451*. It's a case of taking a spade and digging down, seeing at what point the spade is turned. As geologists say, rocks remember. That's what the plaster slice-strata pieces are a basic symbol for. It's probably all in the Albert Camus quote: "a man's work is nothing but the slow trek to rediscover through the detours of art those two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened." Although with my working practice, when I'm conscious of it anyway, I'd add: and to see how those few images have affected the way in which we have subsequently interpreted the world.

You've previously collaborated with your father, Peter Holden, an ornithologist. What part does the natural world play in your work now?

It has moved from being something that was definitely part of the work, a way of looking at one thing in order to look sideways at something else, to becoming something else. In a way, in an attempt to expand on my answer to the first question, in *Natural Selection* (2017) and the collaborative lectures and films co-authored with my dad, looking at the nature of nest-building in birds was a way for me to explore what is innate in human nature and what has to be learnt. Or with the *Social History of Egg Collecting* (2017) I would explore obsession, and use it to make a study of class in British society, looking at how our understanding of the countryside is also connected to our concept of society and moral and legal frameworks. And through the side door, and this is a reveal of no surprise to anyone who saw any of the shows, but is explicitly not addressed in the shows; it let me really make sense of my relationship with my father, though our almost half-decade long performance as a father and son double-act, playing exaggerated versions of parts of ourselves. And through that, hopefully it stopped it being about us, but could open up onto the nature of male parental influence in general.

Now it is different; I'm out the other side. I would have never expected, when I first hatched the plan for a version of that work on my dad's kitchen table, whilst living together as adults, that we would then spend three years touring that to museums all over the U.K., like a strange family circus. The work did for me what I always secretly hoped it would; helped me gain the understanding of birds that I had failed to acquire from my dad growing up, that he had tried so hard to impart. Like with the *Pyramid Piece* (2008), I made amends. And now of my own volition I get up at 5am and go and listen to the dawn chorus and I say, as if I've always known it; I think I hear a Bullfinch! Or whatever, a Song Thrush, certainly a Starling. With this work, as with most of the works: if you want to become something, act as if you already are, and now in a sense I am. Nature is very soothing to the tormented mind. The slow trek to rediscover was worth it, birds seem to live without illusions, without becoming disillusioned. They have a cosmic confidence which now is a kind of regular tune that can pull me out of my own thoughts, and it helps to know which bird is singing which melody-line in the chorus, as then you can get really loose yourself. There is a performative aspect to the making of most of these works, starting by doing what is unlikely but necessary, then seeing what is possible, then hopefully finding yourself doing the impossible.



Andy Holden, *Laws of Motion in a Cartoon Landscape*, 2011-2016.

Your work plays with multiple dimensions and multiple materials. For example, your upcoming show at Block 336, *The Structure of Feeling*, is a combination of film work, cartoon shorts, sculpture and painting. This echoes the mix of materiality in your cartoon shorts themselves; a combination of painted backgrounds, your cartoon avatar, found footage and more. Do you believe that to create a world in your art, whether that is in the form of a 'cartoon landscape' or an installation in a gallery, there has to be multiple layers of materiality, perhaps mimicking the multiple layers of materiality we encounter in the real world?

It is true that this show more than others feels like world building, although I baulk at it with distance

as it is a world only populated by a cartoon version of me. Awkward. Not awkward for cartoon-me - he's alright in there, too busy expounding to himself to feel lonely, no eyes upon him to feel awkward. I'm not fully in control of the meaning of this show as a whole, as although it's the bringing together of a body of work, each piece was made separately, using the cartoon figure as a formal device. Your first question and my inability to answer it is still haunting me, and actually in trying to answer this one I can simultaneously try again with the former. The title, *The Structure of Feeling*, is a phrase from Raymond Williams that I have used a lot when previously trying to understand my work. It is a way of understanding through many interconnected media, or literature and culture in general which, for Williams (probably badly paraphrased), is a sensibility

that is not yet dominant but can be observed in the process of emerging. It's not defined yet in any one artefact but is perceptible in the way component parts interact to reveal a tone or world view; a feeling that is not yet the dominant resonating structure of the time, a low frequency which our ears have just started to pick up.

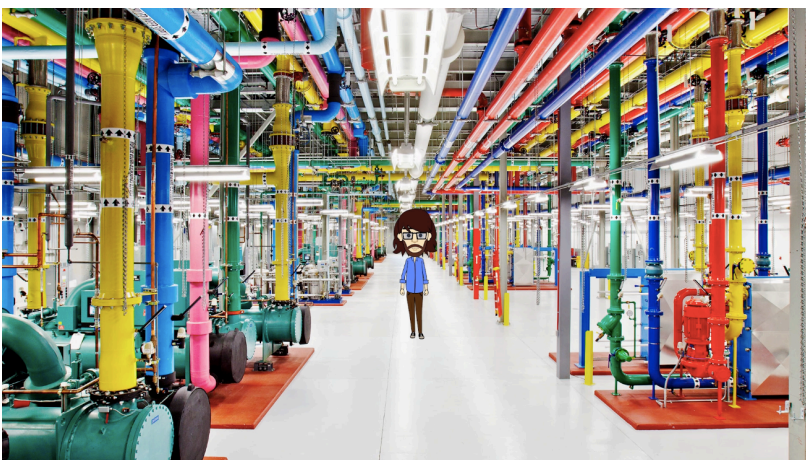
The show is a number of pieces trying to articulate something that is not yet accessible to me, which is the end of the cartoon landscape. *Laws of Motion* (2011-2016) thrashed out a thesis of the world as a cartoon, and the structure of feeling is still within the cartoon landscape. But at the point where the structure of the parts are such that it feels something else is about to emerge, a new way to make sense of the world, for me, might be required.

In relation to your work *Laws of Motion in a Cartoon Landscape*, you've spoken about the idea that 'to cope with the world as it is now, as an artist, you have to become a cartoon character'. Surely this is even more relevant now, with the COVID-19 crisis. How do you see your cartoon work, your cartoon world, developing and changing in relation to the magnitude of changes globally? Do you see 'the language of cartoons' as a way of processing the world around you and, if so, how has this manifested itself recently?

This certainly *was* the case, and the work evolved in line with Brexit and then Trump; the mainstreaming of conspiracy theories; the speed and fragmentation of social media; the increasing interconnectedness of things; and the distortion this caused to the experience of the physical landscape. Politicians were using a deliberate strategy of stupidity and chaos to remove the ground of fact, maybe influenced by Russia's deployment of confusion taken from the avant-garde, as Curtis suggests in *HyperNormalisation*, as a strategy, and we are still seeing this with the deliberately confusing guidelines around COVID-19. But I was increasingly feeling, and the Coronacene maybe also confirms this, that we might be edging towards a new space that is not so multi-morphic, gooey, loud and cartoony. Life is now no longer the speed of a cartoon chase sequence; it is a space where solitude is increasingly common, a return to the local. Things don't occur at two points of time simultaneously with such frequency, and the body can no longer remain suspended over the cliff edge.

In *The Structure of Feeling*, the cartoon body is melancholic and subjected to Newtonian laws once again, can no longer access cartoon motion, or is experiencing it only as a dream, being analysed by Freud to relocate it back in childhood. Wordsworth's *Prelude* is used as an analogy, the cartoon desert is actually the Lake District after climate change, a wasteland only populated by attention-economy billboards. My cartoon self is dead or dreaming, floating through space where cartoon sequences are now constellations in the sky, antiquated symbols of a formally

erudite way of understanding the world. Maybe it is simply a blip, but it won't return exactly as was. Elmer Fudd might now finally give up hunting, and Bugs can retire with what carrots he can get his paws on, or better still start growing his own carrots. The dead cartoon character, my shedding of my cartoon-avatar skin, is maybe the need to dispense of the indirect communication, the cartooning of emotions, and trying, probably foolishly, to return to the present. It is definitely the marking of rupture of sorts, for me anyway.



Andy Holden, *What a Time To Be Alive*, 2020.

Your cartoon-avatar always appears as a solitary figure in your 'cartoon landscape', even when other voices can be heard in the audio. What is the reason for this?

I was very sad and lonely when I was making these. That's the truth. Or the truth on reflection. There is a real risk of these coming across as inauthentic as they have sprung from genuine feeling. Obviously at the time I deceived myself that I was making something conceptual, wearing an almost curatorial hat; a bit of this, a bit of that, a third element, and there we have it. Not all of it, some of it. It's maybe more difficult to describe a work once you are outside of the place you were when you made it, it looks different from the top of the hill looking back down at it. Newtonian Motion, self-doubt and intense personal experience all crept back in and Cartoon Motion was inaccessible, so he's on his own. But also it is never only one thing, it is also, as I mentioned, a feeling that felt true to the world more generally, the structure of feeling of a post-cartoon landscape, the misanthropocene in general, for want of a better word.

Your exhibition at Block 336 was originally supposed to open in March. Watching the works now, in mid-May, they seem to take on a new meaning in light of the ongoing crisis - particularly *What a Time To Be Alive*. Do you think the work's impact and meaning will continue to evolve and change as the world does? How do you think the COVID-19 crisis will impact the viewers' readings of the exhibition when it is able to open? Do you see the cartoon world you've created as providing some form of comfort or escapism?

I'm terrified of the show now opening in the new world of the Coronacene. It fills my stomach with a dread because I really have to renounce it all. I have no control of the reading and I can imagine how it will be read and I imagine it looking very awkward, not at all a product of or connected to the new world order. It will look horrible if it seems accidentally profound, unearned meaning by coincidence. I can't see it offering much solace. I think art in general now has to enter a new epoch. It is time for new priorities, and maybe this show isn't one of those, which is, all things considered, for the best. *What a Time to be Alive* (2020) is I'm sure true at whatever time you are alive, although it is also true that it sometimes feels more so than others. The future is already here, it is just unevenly distributed.



Andy Holden, *Wouldn't Dream of It*, 2017.

In your work *Wouldn't Dream Of It*, we see your cartoon avatar moving through the haunted house in Scooby Doo. What role does nostalgia play in your work, both in terms of your impetus for making it but also in terms of how you want the work to be received?

I've always had a complicated relationship with nostalgia. From my very earliest works right back at college, tutors would say, 'but isn't this just nostalgic?', and I'd try to say, no, no - it is *about* nostalgia. This is a texture and tone that permeates so much of Britain,

from culture and entertainment to politics explicitly. I wanted to explore that and still do. Why does a nostalgic object cast such an inescapable spell? When Nostalgia was first diagnosed it was considered a sickness, Swiss soldiers pining for home, and the effects of nostalgia were physiological. It is a malady I suffer from, mildly mostly, with occasional intense lapses, so in that sense it is another self-investigation, but it is also a cultural one. In *Maximum Irony! Maximum Sincerity* (2013), in which I revisited my teenage manifesto and rebuilt much of the world around its making, this was one of the key questions. Going back in time, through film making and performance, to see if things were as they seemed or if they could have been other than they

were. And they were. It taught me to look back with an equal dose of contempt. *Wouldn't Dream of It* (2017) isn't meant to be nostalgic, it is about how we can interpret the illogical; using Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* to try and unpick a collage of Scooby Doo haunted houses as if they were dream formations, mapped onto me recounting a dream of a house I had that is also mapped onto these houses. In dream analysis, it is always a collage of earliest experience and remnants from the previous few days. I've heard it mentioned a few times that people are having more vivid dreams during the pandemic lockdown – it is true for me, is it true for you?