

From Floor to Sky

P3 London 5 March to 4 April

This exhibition is a tribute to the legacy of art educationalist Peter Kardia, who taught at St Martin's School of Art in the 1960s and the Royal College of Art in the 1970s and 80s. Kardia's pedagogic experiments include the infamous 'Locked Room' at St Martin's, in which students were trapped in a studio and left to fend for themselves with blocks of polystyrene, sheets of brown paper or balls of string. Coercive and intimidating as this may have been, Kardia certainly impressed his students with his erudite and questioning approach to art education. Twenty-eight former students have each selected and contributed one early and one more recent work from their own archives. A few have chosen to make new pieces (Nina Danino and Kardia's wife Carlyne Kardia). Several re-present or remake their graduation pieces (Guy Martin, Katharine Meynell, Alison Wilding and Danino). At least one is dead (Carl Plackman). Some are blue-chip artists (Richard Deacon, Richard Long, Richard Wentworth); others were largely unknown to me (Frances Eamshaw, Martin Ive, Ismail Saray). Sudd disparities - as well as the sheer number of works here - give the show the air of either a belated degree show or a school reunion for the UK's baby boomer generation.

The most common concern here is a commitment to materiality. The majority of the works are sculptural and viscerally present, although there are also several intermedia works that engage with the physical world in more oblique ways. Many of the earlier works reveal a by-now deeply unfashionable concern for nature. Deacon's early *Untitled #1*, 1971, is a gritty and gripping post-minimalist work constructed from rough-hewn wooden beams. Bill Woodrow's classic *Untitled*, 1971, is a witty fusion of photographic and sculptural elements in which an eviscerated branch is propped on a photographic image of water lying on the floor, and lent against an image of a landscape hanging on the wall. Brian Catling's *Standing Bowl*, 1978, is an arrangement of steel parts that bears a resemblance to a plough. More obviously, Long and Hamish Fulton have made entire careers from treading the ground in search of a vacant meaning, some absent poetics or

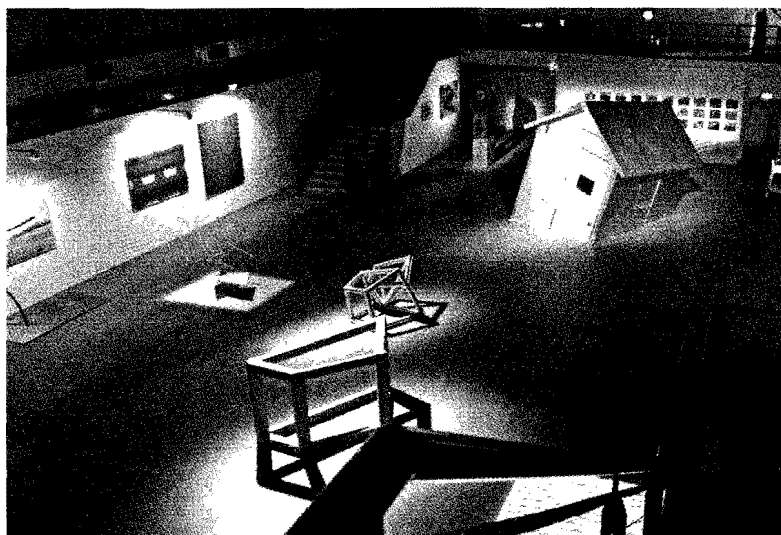
salt-of-the-earth authenticity.

Kardia taught - or rather demanded - that his students grasp both the 'scientific and philosophic study of perception' and 'undertake a "study from nature" in the traditional sense'. This equivocation has haunted many of these artists' careers. Roderick Coyne's brilliantly austere early installation *Wing Broken By Shadow*, 1970, consists of a series of painted yellow lines - like road markings - on the floor that have been 'broken' by the dark shadow thrown by a spotlight hitting a structural column. However, his *Redrawn Landscape*, 2010 - a large digital print of a landscape featuring some cyber-looking shapes superimposed on top - seems crudely dualistic in its contrast between 'nature' and 'technology'. Terry New's earlier work, *Untitled*, 1968, represented here by photographic documentation, looks sleek and minimalist but his latest work, *Totem*, 2009, has the hallmarks of a deeply conservative mysticism. Fulton's lively early work *London 2 February 1967*, 1967, a photographic documentation of an organised walk in which a group of students were tied together in a corral with a piece of string and instructed to walk from the front entrance of St Martin's School on Charing Cross Road to 'the countryside', was a participatory group effort (Kardia appears in the image). His *A view from the highest point in North America*, 20^o3^o4, however, suggests a rather more indulgent sporting feat. Nature, in many of these works, seems to be a form of salvation.

Wentworth's laconic approach to the natural world (and our human encounter with it) has aged better, with his just-so placement of plaster rings around the base of trees in *Untitled*, 1971, and *South*, 2010, a hooked walking stick hung high above viewers' heads. Roger Ackling's subtly attractive works are the result of lines burnt with the aid of a magnifying glass on wooden surfaces. I had never seen them before, and their quiet power knocked me back. In print, Gillian Cook's work sounds dull - she makes sculptures of leaves and facsimiles of natural forms - but when you encounter them, they are ghostly and affecting. Carlyne Kardia's presence here could attenuate the not-so-subtle overtones of nepotism that permeate this exhibition. Indeed, the show gets its name from one of her works, *From Floor to Sky*, 2010. Thankfully, the work itself is full of life: it is a process piece that lasts the duration of the show, during which time the artist will create a tower made from great folded sheets of plaster.

After leaving St Martin's, Kardia was appointed head of Environmental Media at the Royal College of Art, a new department that sought to promote the use of new technologies such as film, video and sound. Martin Ive's video and photographic work is bonkers and brilliant: in his 1977 graduation performance *The Voice*, Ive, dressed as a Japanese geisha, performed bad kabuki impressions around Hyde Park. He has recycled the performance into a series of photo works here: *Mountain Scene*, 2008, in which jocular self-referential text - 'the painting suffered deep bouts of remorse' - is overlaid on images of kitsch Japanese-style landscapes. Paul Etienne Lincoln's practice predates Matthew Barney's explorations of the interplay between myth, scientific endeavour and materiality. *Velocity of Thought*, 1976-2006, documents the recreation of the Panhard Special, a motorcar constructed in 1976 in the middle of the first oil crisis whose engine was, Lincoln claims, fuelled by a mixture of linseed oil, nitrous oxide and natural gas. More restrained, complex and elegiac was Damno's *First Memory*, 1981, a work that explores 'the woman's voice, which was a marginalised form in

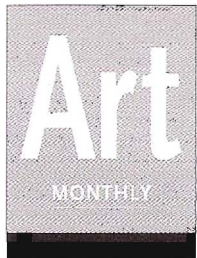
From Floor to Sky
installation view



experimental film and art' at this time. A series of slides of interior fragments – the corner of a room, the top of a dressing table – melt into each other as we listen to an audio account of everyday encounters.

The presence of female voices is what really shakes things up here. Kardia's authority may have been well earned, but it is distinctly patriarchal, progressivist and univocal. From the late 1970s, the influence of Lacan and a host of feminist and post-structural thinkers would confront the watching eyes of the male gaze. Meynell's *Diary*, 1983, which incorporates photographs and found objects (rank hair from the bath plug, dried clove buds), seeks to redirect the image of women's bodies away from the male gaze. Jean Mathee's sprawling archive housed in vitrines, and her projected image of a timeline, reveal a more de-centred approach to art, one that incorporates significant events and tragedies, including her sisters' suicide and filmmaker and tutor Stuart Marshall's death from AIDS in 1993. In the book that accompanies this show, itself a resource and insight into the art school experience of the mid 1960s to late 70s, several artists praise Kardia with a hint of fabled reserve (Boyd Webb remembers Kardia as a 'fearsome, laser-eyed truth seeker'). Several artists here who are now themselves teachers credit Kardia with influencing their own pedagogy. John Hilliard notes his 'lasting effect' on his work and teaching, and Calling states that Kardia 'taught me everything I needed to know about teaching by demonstrating the gnosis of reflection'. Yet Cook described her experience as 'not always comfortable', and Wilding remembers the RCA as being 'dominated by men'. We can be starry-eyed about many things from this period, but I don't think the fearsome patriarchy of the 1960s and 70s is something to be envied.

COLIN PERRY is a writer and critic.



■ **ALL WASHED UP**
In politics as in comedy timing is everything, especially when it comes to passing unpopular legislation. The week before the long summer recess, when MPs are keen to dash off for their

annual 76-day break from parliamentary duties, is always a good time – even better if it coincides with the announcement of a General Election. MPs, anxious to return to their constituencies, especially those in marginal seats, are not going to hang around to debate a complicated bill concerning the digital economy when there is an election to fight. Thus it was that, in what is known as the 'wash-up' period of a parliament, fewer than 40 MPs turned up to debate the controversial Digital Economy Bill, which has now become law.

The most controversial section of the original Bill was Clause 18, dealing with illegal file-sharing and net piracy, which granted Ofcom draconian powers to deal with copyright infringement, including the right to block access to websites. In the approved Act, however,

these powers, which were intended to 'future-proof the legislation against methods of copyright theft yet to be invented, were limited somewhat and made subject to review in 12 months' time. However, should illegal downloads not fall by at least 70% during this period, technical measures, including suspending an individual's access to the internet; could be introduced. This 12-month 'consultation period' is a classic example of the government delaying the inevitable and wearing down opposition in the meantime.

Critics point out that the music and film industries have been slow to adapt to the potential of the internet; instead, they have relied on their lobbying power to influence MPs and, in particular Business Secretary Lord Mandelson, to fast-track legislation intended to punish illegal users. For its part, as John Naughton has pointed out (the *Observer*, 11 April), the Government has failed to recognise the difference between intellectual property and other kinds of property rights: 'Copyrights and patents represent an attempt to strike a balance between rewarding innovation on the one hand and the larger needs of society to build on that creativity on the other. But in the last 50 years, the balance has become ludicrously skewed in favour of rights holders.

The internet has highlighted the extent of the imbalance that now exists.'

Ironic.ally, it is not the sophisticated illegal users that will be hit by the Act but the 'soft underbelly' of file-sharing: teenagers. Meanwhile, the terms of the Act could also potentially criminalise innocent internet service providers: for instance, the owner of an internet cafe could be held liable if a user were to download free pirated material. Universities and libraries are also vulnerable in this respect. The new legislation forces ISPs to police the net, introducing yet another level of self-censorship (see Editorial AM334). The law is overwhelmingly on the side of corporations (see Artnotes), leaving the innocent or unwary individual highly vulnerable. As for the proposal to grant individuals the right to appeal, it looks good on paper but in reality the track record of individuals taking on giant corporations is hardly a reassuring one.

While the Act is ostensibly about protecting the creative industries, the powers likely to be granted to Ofcom following the review will enable it to track individuals through the internet. It is sobering to think that it was the abuse of such powers that finally persuaded Google to withdraw from China. ☒

■ **NO POLITICS PLEASE, WE'RE BRITISH**

Art Monthly is grateful to Arts Council England (ACE) for the polite reminder sent out to all regularly funded organisations (RFOs) last month that, during an election, 'purdah rules come into force which limit the work of taxpayer funded organisations to ensure that government/council resources are not used to support a particular candidate or the views of a particular party'. Strangely, although this rule has been in force throughout the 34 years during which the magazine has been in receipt of public

funding, it is the first time that such a notice has been received, presumably because hitherto it was not thought necessary - which raises the question, what has changed?

The answer is: everything. Paradoxically, if anything were needed to underline the politicisation of ACE since New Labour came to power in 1997, then surely this thinly disguised warning to RFOs to 'stay off politics' was it. The decision to send out such warnings - sorry, 'election guidance' - is itself a reflection of the new culture of timidity generated by

government control freakery. New Labour's abandonment of the arm's length principle that previously governed relations between government and the Arts Council, in its various configurations, was the most radical shift in policy since its founding after the Second World War. Only the future can tell what the result of this election will bring for the arts, but it is to be hoped that there will be no repetition of the decision to send out veiled threats to RFOs which are fully aware of where their responsibilities lie. ☒

» LETTERS

■ **CONFLICT V ENCOURAGEMENT**

Since Colin Peny quotes me in his review of 'From Floor to Sky' (AM335) I feel a need to respond.

Regarding my comment about my student experience being 'not always comfortable', I would respond by stating my belief in the essential place of discomfort in all learning and developmental processes - both personal and institutional. Indeed, what new movement in the arts, in education or in any other

field has taken place without conflict and disagreement? New thinking does not usually emerge where all is harmony and light.

Speaking personally, Peter Kardia's influence was on my intellectual development; preconceptions were challenged, actions and choices had to be justified. I internalised this experience so that in later years I would hear his voice questioning whatever I was doing. This has never seemed a negative thing but

something I have found useful.

Regarding the charge of nepotism, I find it rather absurd given that the focus of both book and exhibition was Peter Kardia and his teaching. By its very nature he was bound to select his ex-students of whom his (now) wife, Carolyne, was one. ☒

GILLIAN COOK
London NW6

Colin Perry replies:

I read Gillian's comments as suggesting a negative connotation, but evidently this was not the case. So apologies to you, Gillian. As regards the point that 'new thinking' does not emerge except through 'conflict' (rather than in 'harmony and light'), I find the distinction unhelpful. Of course it is important to urge students to readdress their pre-conceptions. But, for me, a good education is a process of encouragement and dissuasion. The idea that confrontation, shock tactics and cold baths are the way to the truth is something that belongs in the history of Methodism, penal discipline and public schooling, not the contemporary art school.

Second!), this fDrm DJ educational 'conflict' surely depends on a rather blind obeisance to the pedagogue's authority? Indeed, one could equally argue that reflection and distance lead to questioning, and tally v.p a list of people who lived lives without conflict and achieved much (Kant, for a start). This ties in to Gillian's second point: f didn't say it was in fact a nepotistic show, but that it had 'overtones' of that. I have no evidence either way, and certainly most exhibitions do involve nepotism to one degree or another, so it would be exceptional if this show was any different. This exhibition, however, highlighted these relationships explicitly through the quasi-hagiographic structure that it employed and the closeness of the relationships involved. f don't think it is 'absurd' to question the manner in which this

show was put together, even while f found much in the show that was genuinely interesting, engaging and unexpected.

A POINT OF CLARIFICATION

The exhibition was initiated and organised by Roderick Coyne. The title of the exhibition was chosen by him in the early days to facilitate a period of three years working on both the exhibition and the Black's publication. Obviously, Roderick chose the title to serve as an umbrella for the diversity of works that were selected by the artists. The implication that such a title would be chosen at short notice by one artist is somewhat naive. The title appropriately implies, amongst other things, a process of transformation from one state to another. I wanted my sculpture to transform a space within the exhibition and negotiated with P3 and the curators an area next to a deep stairwell. I felt my plaster installation should make present the scale and height of the vaulted space. I obviously had general ideas about how I was to go about building the fragile work, but no real formed idea of how it would evolve. In the event, I later named my work after the exhibition 'From Floor to Sky'.

CAAOLYNE KARDIA
Dorset

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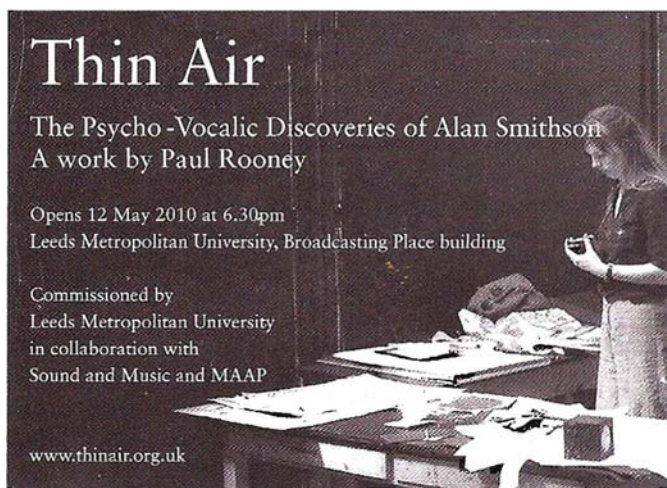
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