



Jes Fernie
Projects 2008–2018

Jes Fernie is an independent curator and writer based in Essex, UK. She's interested in art, architecture, feminism, literature and destruction. She works with artists, architects, curators, developers, taxi drivers, bishops, engineers, choirs, fabricators, writers, academics, publishers and farmers to make art, architecture, conversations and books.

For many of her projects, Jes organises events in far-flung places with a wide range of people. These have included lectures on buses, workshops with blacksmiths, performances at the end of the world's

longest pleasure pier, cake-as-sculpture competitions, curators' tours of forgotten seaside towns, experimental performances by a choral collective in a Brutalist loading bay, upcycling furniture classes for teenagers outside Asda, lectures by candle-light in an 18th century church and operatic performances in a barley field.

This publication brings together a selection of projects that Jes has realised over the past ten years.



Råängen

Råängen is a long-term commissioning programme for Lund, south Sweden lead by Lund Cathedral. It is curated by Jes, along with Jake Ford of White Arkitekter, and is a platform for discussion about what happens on Lund Cathedral's land in Brunnsög, an area on the outskirts of the town.

Between 2017 and 2023 *Råängen* (which translates as 'raw meadow') will develop a narrative that builds on the involvement of artists, architects, local people, developers and university staff, creating a foundation for future stories in a new neighbourhood. It will provide a framework within which to discuss the fundamental issues at stake in the development of Brunnsög: value systems, belief, ownership, fear, faith, time, beauty, commitment and endeavour.



Brunnsög, Lund 2017. Photo: Petra Bindel

Background: Nathan Coley, *Heaven Is A Place Where Nothing Ever Happens*, commissioned by the Folkestone Triennial, 2008, installed adjacent to Lund Cathedral, 2017. Part of *Råängen*: www.raangen.se. Photo: Peter Westrup





Flood House

Flood House was a practical and poetic investigation into the living conditions of a seasonally flooded landscape. It functioned as part projected future dwelling and part practical laboratory, monitoring the weather conditions of the Thames Estuary in Essex, southeast England. It was moored at various sites in the Estuary in 2016 when it drifted from mudflat to mudflat as if in a future flooded landscape. Matthew Butcher (Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL) designed *Flood House*. Jes and Focal Point Gallery in Southend worked with him on a programme of commissions and public events developed in response to the project. These included Ruth Ewan's *All Distinctions Levelled* and Joanna Quinn's story *Mudlark*.



The Electric Belles choir, performance at the launch of *Flood House*, Jimmy's Bar, Southend Pier, 2016. Photo: Jes Fernie

Background: *Flood House* at Wakering Boatyard, Essex, 2016, www.flood.house. Photo: Brotherton-Lock

All Distinctions Levelled

Ruth Ewan's weathervane was located onboard *Flood House* and formed a dialogue with audiences from afar. The word 'LEVEL' alludes to the extreme changes in water levels that come with the rise and fall of the tide in the Thames Estuary. The word is also a palindrome as well as a reference to a speech by the 14th century radical itinerant priest John Ball. In one of his rousing sermons he rails against the injustices of the English tax system and the extreme inequalities that led to the Peasants Revolt of 1381, which began in Essex:

'My good friends, things cannot go on well in England, nor ever will until everything shall be in common, when there shall be neither vassal nor lord, and all distinctions levelled; when the lords shall be no more masters than ourselves. How ill they have used us! ... They have wines, spices and fine bread, when we have only rye and the refuse of fine straw; and if we drink, it must be water. They have handsome seats and manors, when we must brave the wind and rain in our labours in the field; but it is from our labour they have the wherewith to support their pomp ... Let us go to the king, who is young, and remonstrate with him on our servitude, telling him we must have it otherwise, or that we shall find a remedy for it ourselves'

Excerpt from a speech by John Ball, documented by Jean Froissart in *The Chronicles of England, France, Spain, 14th c.*



Ruth Ewan, *All Distinctions Levelled*, 2016, photo: Brotherton-Lock

Background: *Flood House* at Wakering Boatyard, Essex, 2016.



Mudlark

At first light, I leave my bunk. I get myself a flask of coffee, pick up my little VHF radio, my notebook, pencil and binoculars, pull the hatch open and crawl out onto the upper deck. I stay low, train my sights on a flock of ringed plovers at the edge of the estuary. They lift and fall in a chattering mass. It is low tide. We float in barely a foot of water. The sea has left the estuary, moved off on other business, exposing shining mudflats scored with the winding rivulets my daughter calls snake trails. The smell of it: salt, diesel and gloop. Something uncovered. Something very old and rich; not quite rotten but potent. The slap of shallow tea-coloured water against the sides of my swaying boat. The clinking of jars and test-tubes on the shelves inside.

Further up the estuary, past the make-shift boatyards at Leigh-on-Sea, past the rusted hulks of abandoned barges, are the bent silhouettes of winkle-pickers, out early with their buckets, grubbing in the mud for cockles. Some of them look small enough to be children. They slowly make their way round a few old fishing boats lolling on the mud, hulls exposed, waiting for the tide to return.

Beyond the winkle-pickers, where there is still deep water, the ro-ro ferries and container tankers journey back and forth. They never stop. Sailing upriver to London, past the power stations and pylons, chimneys and cranes, all the mechanised latticework of industry. Or downriver, past wind farms and fog nets, following the water as it spans outwards into the North Sea. And beyond the ferries and tankers, in the hazy distance, stand the border control rigs. Great metal structures. Square boxes balanced on single poles. They look like old-fashioned cameras,

stiff and top-heavy. A line of them, miles out to sea, guarding the mouth of the estuary.

There's a creaking at the back of the boat, a hatch opening and a grunt of effort as Ajay heaves his backpack and sample kit out onto the roof. I remain where I am. It is important that I re-establish the order of command on this vessel. I need to claim back the separateness I allowed him to trespass over the first night he stayed.

"Morning, gorgeous," he says.

I look over my shoulder at him, put a finger to my lips and then gesture downwards.

"Ah," he says. "Kid's still asleep."

I nod, return to my binoculars.

"Such a cute kid," he says.

"We'll need samples taken every hour today," I say. "Contaminants, pesticides, plastics."

"Yes, boss," he says. Then: "D'you ever wonder why we do this?"

"Do what?"

"Monitor it. The endless decline. You could just draw a downward line on a graph and have done with it."

I can hear him zipping up his waterproofs, pulling on his waders. I sip my coffee, then say: "Before, when I was on my own, I believed I was collecting data for those who might find this planet in the future, so they could see what happened to us."

"Wow. That's cheerful. Jesus," he says.

"Now I have Noel, I do it for her. It might be useful."

"I guess it changes stuff. Having a kid. Always thought I might settle down. Now I don't know."

Ajay's been hitching round the world for years,

a global hobo, working the luxury cruise ships in between shifts on eco-protest boats in the Arctic. His last job was on one of the huge freedom liners, monstrous things big as hospitals, endlessly ploughing their way round the deep shipping lanes of the world, providing a permanent off-shore home for tax exiles and retired billionaires.

I met him at a climate conference ten years ago, an event hosted by the activist group we both work for, where we briefly fell into bed after a night of free organic wine. Much as we did the other night. He's acquired dreadlocks and an Australian twang since then, despite being Essex born and bred like me. He's appealing in a curiously uninvolved way. Perhaps that's the nature of his appeal. It is containable. Brief.

I say: "We need samphire too."

"Can't believe you eat that stuff."

"It's good for you."

"All right then, Mum."

There are some things I seem to need to remember repeatedly. One of them is that I do not like jokey role-based labels. Because they are never really jokey, those demeaning little jabs.

"Take the VHF," I say, tossing it to him. "I have work to do inside. If you need me, call me through that."

He turns the radio around in his hands. "Haven't seen one of these for years. On the freedom liner, they used little digital ear bud things. Really cool. I should have brought one for you."

It doesn't do to think of the things I could have used from that ship. Ajay would never have thought to pick them up. He doesn't live like we do. He isn't constantly on the look-out for stuff he might be able to use, to adapt, to repurpose. He still assumes that what he needs will be provided for him.

Noel and I are largely self-sufficient. We exist off-grid. We wash with sea-water. Eat seaweed, fish, eels, cockles, mussels, birds' eggs. Grow salad and herbs in a plastic bag on the roof. Cook on a small propane cooker. A mini wind-turbine propped on the top deck like an old-fashioned television aerial provides us with a little bit of power, but on calm days, there's nothing. We sleep when it's dark, moving through the day with the sun; its arc determines ours. We have buckets covertly stationed beneath the fog nets further up the coast so that when the sea mists come rolling in, and the nets are strung with glistening beads of condensation, our buckets are there to catch the drips of fresh water before they get piped off into the main water system. We collect them after dark, when the only people moving around are people like us. And, if we need them, we get tinned goods and practical items like

medicines and batteries from passing trade boats.

Our boat – *Mudlark* – has a small engine but it's rarely used. *Mudlark* is a vessel designed to float in and out with the tides. We move soundlessly backwards and forwards. We wake up where the water chooses to take us. We drift. My tai-chi instructor used to say if someone tries to attack you, you should take their strength and use it against them. He would mime a punch coming towards him in infinite slow motion, then wrap his hand around the approaching fist and move backwards with it, like a dancer. You allow the movement to move you; you do not fight against it.

Five years ago, before I had Noel, we had a huge mid-winter storm surge and *Mudlark* was swept miles inland, riding the flood waters. I sat in my bunk, wearing my lifejacket, sipping vodka from a hipflask and giving myself up to a greater strength, as the wind howled outside, and my flat-bottomed boat was carried in a torrent of churning water over streets and fields and car parks and former flood defences as if it were flying. We came to rest alongside what had been a motorway flyover and was now a concrete bridge arching like a rainbow over the proud new sea. I realised I was just outside the block of flats I'd lived in as a student, now derelict and half-submerged. The past is being swept away, faster and faster.

But this place is prone to flooding, always has been. Much of it is made up of what people like to call reclaimed land – as if we had owned it before. The more accurate word would be claimed. Or stolen. Depending on the sensitivity of your moral compass. It is land that once lay beneath the sea, and humans have found ingenious ways to push back the sea so they can farm on it, or build luxury homes, or new airports. But the seas are rising and the South-East of England is tilting into the ocean and the long history of the earth tells us that what was once on top will one day be on the bottom. Mountains used to be on the sea bed. The sea bed will rise up to form mountains. And if you sail just east of here, on a calm night, they say you can hear music still playing on the submerged fairground rides of an amusement park called Adventure Island, now several fathoms down.

"Did you hear my stomach then?" says Ajay. "I'm starving. I'm no good without a cooked breakfast. A shadow of myself." He's manoeuvring himself off the edge of the boat, I hear his waders sink into the muddy sludge of the estuary with a long *ssssschlopp*.

I go back down inside the boat through the hatch and pick up the radio receiver. "Ajay, are you receiving me?"

His voice comes crackling back: "Roger that, *Mudlark*. Receiving you loud and clear."

I look up to see Noel sitting on her bunk, watching me through her magnifying glass, her brown eyes huge and unblinking. The first thing I saw of Noel were her eyes. Nearly two years ago now.

“Breakfast?” I say. She nods.

Ajay’s voice comes again: “The sun’s coming out. Is that an island over there? Or Kent?”

“Kent.”

“I forgot how fast the weather changes here. The mist has vanished. You can see the border control rigs really clearly.”

“It’ll be back sooner than you think,” I say, and glance out of the side window towards the marshy land across the water, where wisps of fog still linger like smoke.

The border control rigs were installed years ago, the idea being that they would prevent unwanted criminal or refugee craft from entering the mouth of the Thames. But all that happened was that the criminal craft got faster and harder to detect – submersible drone boats whipping past, remote-controlled by spotty kids in Shanghai – while the refugee vessels would simply moor up underneath the rigs, attaching themselves to their great rusting poles, using them as shelter while they waited for help. There was meant to be a system, a process, but it became back-logged, congested, over-loaded. These were the words used. People on the news took it in turns to explain why the system wasn’t working, while the refugee craft kept arriving, increasing in number, widening out and forming what became a kind of waterborne shanty town, a jerry-rigged collar strung around the neck of the rig.

There’s a community of sorts underneath each rig now. When the mists clear, you can see them quite clearly. The roofs and chimneys. Some days, you can hear music coming across the water. Ajay worked out there in the early days, on one of the brightly-coloured charity boats, providing food and water and clothes, but he says he got sick of activists just going over there to have their pictures taken with grubby babies. Ajay always has a reason why he had to give something up and it’s never anything to do with him. He tells me the activists now spend their time arguing with each other about responsibilities and interdiction, the jurisdiction of the high seas, the invisible boundaries of the ocean.

There was a man I knew. Vaguely. Came from London but had a holiday apartment overlooking the water near Canvey Island. Kept a big luxury yacht within view of his apartment, and had a smaller speedboat, painted jet black, that he used to shuttle between the border control rigs and the mainland, late at night.

This man would say: “There’s all sorts of nonsense talked about what goes on under them rigs, but they’re just people like you and me. And I respect that. They got stuff to sell. I got stuff to buy.” And he would open a bag to show me painted bead necklaces, hand-carved wooden toys, small plastic tubs of medication, passports. “I’m not going to say where’s it from when I’m selling it. Some people are bigoted. But you want something, I’ll get it for you. You let me know, sweetheart. You let me know what you want.”

I’d encountered him once at the mouth of the estuary. I was doing tests where the river meets the sea and the waters are both things at once – neither saltwater nor fresh, but something transitional, brackish. Industrial water: the great Thames at the end of its working life, brown and grimy with accumulated labour. Limited conditions for fish fauna. Not much diversity. Just your stubborn survivors: flounder, mullet, smelt. Unlovely creatures with names like insults.

Mudlark had inadvertently bumped up alongside his luxury yacht. I’d looked outside and seen it sitting high on the water, its smooth white prow blotting out the sky. Its name – *Melinda* – in sweeping gold lettering.

He knew me from his after-hours activity. I often sit on my roof at night. I see him come and go in his fast black boat. We have traded. He has useful things. I have useful knowledge. But the grandiose way he invited me on board *Melinda* suggested we’d met at a cocktail party. Different boats, different lives, I suppose. Although *Melinda* was made to look as un-boat-like as possible. Leather sofas. Ornamental ferns. Glass cabinets. Vast touch-screen control panels. Downlighters. Uplighters. As if the boatishness of boats was something shameful, down-market.

“All automated,” he said, gesturing airily, “I don’t have to do nothing.”

There was a woman on the sofa in the cabin surrounded by dark screens and mirrors. Red hair. Red toenails. Glanced at me as you would a delivery boy.

“What am I saying? I have to do her every bidding,” he said, and laughed.

“Oh you,” she said, as if bored of all words.

“Caroline’s the captain of my vessel if you know what I mean.”

I smiled. He was the kind of man who required his trading partners to smile. He required from me a certain level of friendliness, a certain acquiescence. He would always want me to have a drink.

“You’ll have a drink?”

A refusal would anger him because it meant I was not going along with his version of how he did business.

“I wouldn’t say no,” I said, and heard my voice echoing his – the drawn out vowels, the pub chumminess, the oi oi saveloy bonhomie. The same way I used to emphasise my accent for taxi drivers after a night out when I was a student so they knew I was a local.

He was saying: “I like a drink. I’ve worked hard, you know? I’m not happy for that money to go to the tax man. I’m not happy for him to know every little detail.” I was nodding, smiling, while my eyes behind my sunglasses swept round the un-boatish boat, seeing little of use. No ropes, no tools. His voice faded in and out, as his yacht bounced up and down on the wash from a container ship, a series of statements and justifications: “I’m a self-made man. I’m a proud man. I like my privacy. Just doing what I can to get by.”

“That’s right,” said Caroline.

We were all admiring the view and watching each other. We were all seeking to gain.

Ajay through the radio says: “You still monitoring birds? I got a few lapwing here. I got lapwing. I got shelduck. I got plenty shelduck.”

The next time I saw the man he was in the black speedboat. It was three in the morning. He’d come barrelling up the moonlit estuary then cut the engine suddenly, using *Mudlark* as something to hide behind. In the distance, I could hear the officious *vuvv-whump vuvv-whump* of a police boat smacking the water, heading rapidly up another channel of the Thames. He’d sat hunched in the stern of his boat till the sound faded, then stood up and nodded at me, somehow narrower and less distinct now. Featureless. Wearing a pulled-down cap he would never wear on *Melinda*. He opened a small cabin door, reached in, and took out something which he threw onto my upper deck. It landed with a clank.

“For your trouble,” he said, his voice a wink, an elbow in the ribs. “Nice bottle of whisky.” Behind him, the cabin door he had pushed shut swung slowly open again. A small round face, two large brown eyes, a gagged mouth.

Ajay says: “More birds. Pintails. Shovellers? Maybe shovellers.”

You get used to seeing things only in terms of what you can use. What’s essential. What can be left behind. You see a furtive man standing in a shallow-sterned boat in dark water at night. You see a child of about two or three years of age looking at you. You see plastic ties at its wrists and ankles. You see the bottle he has thrown you. You pick it up.

Ajay says: “Ringed plover. Oystercatcher.”

You think that when you make monumental decisions they will always be witnessed. This is not

the case. You can make decisions that change lives and nobody will ever know. There will be just a splash, then a smoothing over of the black waters, the sound of your own breath in your ears. Bodies that go into the river will surface eventually, but usually several miles downstream, often out at sea, and who can be bothered with yet another bloated corpse on a waterway that carries hundreds of them every year. The accidents, the drunks, the tramps, the boy-racers, the jumpers, the addicts, the lonely, the lost, their pale bodies slowly cart-wheeling beneath the surface, a slow succession of circus clowns.

Ajay through the radio says: “Did you see that thing about the President?”

“I don’t watch the news.”

“What? Nothing at all?”

“I’ve had too much of it,” I say. “I don’t need anymore.”

It is pleasant inside *Mudlark* in the morning. The sun slants in. Noel is reading one of her books. The weightlessness of the boat, the way it is always moving, can make it feel like we live in a kind of shimmering bubble.

A crackle of static then Ajay says: “I was thinking, if we got some kind of harpoon gun, we could hook ourselves a satellite balloon.”

“No.”

“Harpoon the balloon, pull it down, adjust the settings, send it up again – and you’re back on the net. Pirate internet via satellite!”

“I don’t want the internet.”

“What? How are you going to know anything? How can you buy anything?”

“I trade.”

“I saw a guy do it in New Zealand. It’s dead easy. Man, this mud is lethal. Nearly lost a wader then.”

“No internet. No harpoon gun.”

I look out of the window, peer down at the mud. It is pale brown like a milky chocolate pudding. Beneath the sound of the passing oil tankers and the shrieking seagulls, there is a smaller, closer sound: the tinkling of tiny streams making their way through the mud. Water, like money, is always moving. Quiet and insistent and treacherous. *Mudlark* shifts slightly. Noel glances at me, turns a page of her book.

“I’ve only been off the net for three days and I’m already getting the sweats,” says Ajay. “What if I’ve won a prize or something?”

He chatters on, telling me about life on the freedom liners, where he worked in the Australasian Zone, pretending to be Aboriginal. One wall of the Zone was made up of a huge glass aquarium, thirty

metres high, a ‘commemoration of the Barrier Reef’, where fish scooped from the ocean could look out over the ocean.

“You gotta feel for those fish,” says Ajay.

“Yeah,” I say. I am watching the water from the window. As it rises, it forms channels in the estuary and the divisions between land and water, mud and water, land and mud, become less distinct. It is all wet, all shining.

“I know you’re not into the idea right now,” says Ajay, “but if we got you on the net, I know a guy who could get you the kit. Headset, console chair. The lot.”

“There’s no room for it.”

“Make some space.”

“I’ve got rid of everything I don’t need, Ajay. I don’t carry ballast.”

I hear the clink of metal against glass as he collects water samples. Even over the old VHF radio system, I can tell that he is chewing gum as he works. A sticky viscous sound. A small part of my attention becomes completely focused on that faint noise and waits to hear it, a corset of irritation tightening around my ribs.

Ajay says: “My back’s killing me. Probably from sleeping on the floor. I’m getting old.”

Mudlark rocks and sways, makes her way.

Ajay says: “Do you think you’ll always share a bed with Noel? She’s only going to get bigger.”

The static on the radio is increasing. It’s getting harder to make him out.

I think of how Noel always wraps one arm around my neck like a monkey when I read to her at bedtime. How her breathing becomes quite strained and effortful as she pushes herself towards sleep, and then how it relaxes, suddenly, as she drops off.

Noel only has a few books. They’re hard to come by these days. Most have been compressed and recycled, ending up as fire-lighters or wall cladding. The ones she has are old favourites of mine, ragged paperbacks I got from my granny. Stories of brave sailing children, of orphan girls rescued by an absent-minded professor, and a tale of an iron man, a creature who pieces himself together from scraps found on the shore.

Books were the only things I salvaged from the end of my marriage. My husband and I were packing up our belongings, preparing to go afloat and live a different kind of life in one of the offshore communities near Tilbury when he said: “You can’t take those old books. They’ll just get damp and smelly. We agreed we’d only take what was essential.” And it was surprisingly easy then, to go out to the car with the books and to sit in the driver’s seat,

considering essential and non-essential items, and to quietly let the handbrake go so that the car coasted down the drive and round the corner, moving under its own momentum. To be honest, I’ve found it to be that way ever since. Leaving. Like the releasing of something I’d awkwardly wedged into place.

Ajay says: “You were right about the mist. Comes back in quickly.”

I look out of the side window. Swathes of mist are swarming back across the marshes. The tide is rushing in, slapping at the flanks of the boat. The estuary is returning to full strength. It is only here, on the water, that you really get a sense of its power. For most people, it’s simply something to look at, a flat grey super highway where tankers roll by, right to left, distant and unknowable. But on a boat in the middle of it, as it shifts and changes and lifts you away, you realise its enormity. No longer a 2D stripe of scenery but the element you exist in; a scum-flecked mass spooling away on all sides. Imagine the weight of a square metre of water – a ton or more, easily – then imagine how many times over that is replicated in this huge body of water, and then see how easily it moves, agile and fluid, its own great weight nothing at all.

Noel puts down her book. I get my binoculars and my radio, push the front hatch open and crawl up out onto the upper deck. *Mudlark* is moving at some speed now. She is being spun balletically by the current as we are swept downstream.

I lie flat, turning myself round so I am looking off the back of the boat, training my sights on the edge of the estuary as it recedes into the mist. I can just make out the spot where *Mudlark* spent the night. There are still a few brave winkle-pickers, stubbornly working as the tide comes seething in around them, and beyond them, a smaller figure, much further out, gesturing.

“*Mudlark?*” says Ajay.

“You’re breaking up, Ajay,” I say.

“*Mudlark?* Where have you gone? Where are you now?”

I turn the volume off on my radio handset.

And it is beautiful, the way we are so easily carried by the water, downriver towards the ocean. It always is. We are weightless. We are free.

Mudlark was commissioned by Jes Fernie for the *Flood House* programme in 2016.
www.flood.house



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where fish scoo
over the ocean
“You gott
“Yeah,” I s
window. As it r
and the divisio
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The Museum of Dark Places

The Museum of Dark Places was an evening of performances, new commissions, talks and walks in spaces around the Museum of London that took place in November 2016. Curated by Jes, it involved mythical creatures, experimental choirs, a talk on apocalyptic literature, a thought experiment on night walking, a tour of night sounds, and a performance called ‘In the darkness they swing their manes like pendulums’.

Participants:

Nicky Deeley (artist), Musarc (performative choir), Caroline Edwards (Dept of English & Humanities, Birkbeck, University of London), Matthew Beaumont (English Dept, UCL), Rosie Edwards (Dotmaker Tours), John Price (History Dept, Goldsmiths, University of London)

Jes edited a booklet for *The Night Museum* programme organised by the Museum of London. An invitation to celebrate the dark, the illicit and the lost, it includes texts on *LOSS*, *DARKNESS* and *ENDINGS* by Joanna Walsh, Frances Morgan and Matthew Beaumont, as well as drawings by Nicky Deeley. Interspersed throughout the booklet is a series of objects that form part of the Museum of London’s vast and fantastic collection.

Musarc performance with Sarah Kate Wilson, *Weird Nightmare* (p.19, 22), photo: Yiannis Katsaris. Nicky Deeley performance, *In the Darkness they Swing their Manes like Pendulums*, Postman’s Park, Museum of London (p.20–21), photo: Rosie Cooper







Joanna Walsh

Loss

I walk and walk further, until the Roman afternoon turns blue and the buildings are lighter than the surrounding night. I have gone so far from where I was, I don't know if I can find my way back. It's hot, hot. It must be round 8pm. Something keeps me off the main streets. In vicolo after vicolo all the windows are blank except the lit windows of restaurants. I take out a cigarette. Eating on holiday is the management of time, of boredom; a cigarette an excuse for an equivalent pause. I have been warned by smoker friends not to smoke, but with a sly smile: they want me to join their club, which is the death wish club, the opposite of marriage. Away from that life, where what I am doing is not life-like, I smoke more, and eat badly. Death can't touch me; cholesterol neither. I don't feel like eating, anyway, have hardly eaten since I got to Italy although waiters outside the restaurants grab me by the arm: *Hello! Bonjour! Signora, scusi!* Hunger doesn't manifest as hunger. I feel empty, but it's not physical emptiness. I'm synaesthetic, like people who see sound as colour.

I don't want to be too full as, were I not content, being already full, I would not be able to longer blame hunger for my emptiness. Without hunger to occupy me, grief might rush in to fill the gap. I need one gap to prevent the other. The streets of Rome offer me a succession of children's party treats: pizza, biscotti, granita. They're quick treats, though. Romans don't stop outside cafes for long, and their favourite treat is ice cream, which you can eat as you walk. I buy a *granita con panna* (frozen coffee with whipped cream) from the shop on the corner of the square. All that caffeine and sugar and nicotine makes me want to move, and my emptiness makes me light as whipped cream pumped through with air.

I have been brought up to take myself lightly, to appreciate that hard-edged, weightless thing called fun, which includes holidays, nice dinners, and other sanctioned treats. *A little of what you fancy does you good.* Oh, but only a little, that's the good life: a little of this, a little of that, don't get too passionate about

anything. And, if I did not enjoy the treats, if I found any other emotion occurred, I was not to say so: a word out of place could ruin everything for everyone. I never complained because, if I did, how would I know when to stop? I have no sense of proportion, no idea how much of anything is enough. It's easier to be empty, silent. And because I cannot eat, I walk, and I walk.

I walk from the Piazza della Rotonda across the Corso Vittorio Emanuele II, through the vicolos and stradinas until I reach the Campo Dè Fiori where the traders packing up the market are trampling fruit and flowers. In the square between here and the Tiber, when I visited with my husband, I remember that, in the garden of the Palazzo Spada, we found a short narrow corridor painted to look like a long wider corridor with, at its end, a statue, the size of a garden gnome, which appeared monumental. I stop just outside the Palazzo in the Piazza de Farnese, where there are fountains like huge stone birdbaths. Some of the Palazzo's cornicing is painted on to resemble marble, but this is ancient fakery so counts as genuine. By the birdbath fountains an old woman feeds pigeons alone. She wears a black velvet dress with embroidered cuffs, too heavy, too formal for the heat and for what she is doing, but it is not worn or dirty and her hair is cut in a neat silver bob, so she can't be a crazy woman. No one arrives to meet her. I watch her carefully, wondering whether she is the woman I could become. She crumbles something from a brown paper bag. She does not stop until it is empty. She must do this every night.

I'm lost now near the Piazza della Repubblica. All the restaurants are closed – they close early in Rome – and every clock shows a different time. All those ghosts. I imagine what your arms feel like round me, then I imagine my husband's, then those of other men I have known. I try to observe what effect each of these imaginings has on me, but I find I can hardly distinguish one from another, just the feeling of loving, and being loved. 'A city is a priori unsuited for a comparison of this sort with a mental organism.' Freud wrote, and he was talking about Rome, the layers on layers of culture, and history, and how they can't all be seen at once, as though there was no such thing as time or forgetting. 'The observer would need merely to shift the focus of his eyes, perhaps, or change his position, in order to call up a view of either the one or the other.'

I walk (I dance!) through the Piazza Navona. Around the white Triton fountain, which, like the station, is dressed in plissé plastic, beggars are selling small shining toys: plastic sycamore keys that light up and scream as they whirl higher and higher into the black sky.

Loss was commissioned by Jes Fernie and Lauren Parker for *The Night Museum* season at the Museum of London, 2016.

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History Rising

History Rising was a study of museum display systems by artist Marjolijn Dijkman and Jes. By distancing museum objects from their support structures, the project considered the assumptions that are made about how things are positioned, who chooses to display them, and how the social, political and aesthetic choices that are made in the process dictate the language of display.



Marjolijn Dijkman, *The Grand Release*, 2014.
Installed in a temporary studio space in the Netherlands.

New work by Marjolijn Dijkman was installed in two public museums in East Anglia (Norwich Castle Museum & Art Gallery and Wisbech & Fenland Museum) and an artist run space (OUTPOST, in Norwich). Dijkman's sculptures proposed strange and fantastical juxtapositions, relieved objects from the weight of history and created links with modernism, the heritage industry and the aesthetics of sci-fi.

The project began in 2013 and continued into 2015 with installations, events, exhibitions and book launches in Belgium, London and New York, including the ICA and CCS Bard.

Right: Marjolijn Dijkman, *The Grand Release*, 2014. Norwich Castle Museum & Art Gallery acquired *The Grand Release* for their collection with funding from Arts Council England/V&A Museum Purchase Grant Fund; The Norfolk Contemporary Art Society; The Friends of Norwich Museums; and The Art Fund. Photos, above: Marjolijn Dijkman, right: Thierry Bal





only to find that it was a self-portrait. *Living in the Past*, an experimental archaeology project produced by the BBC in 1978, followed a group of fifteen young volunteers recreating an Iron Age settlement. They sustained themselves for a year, equipped only with the tools, crops and livestock that would have been available in Britain in the second century. Looking back now, it is funny to see how much they represent their own time, talking about issues not very different from other communes at the time. Similarly the museum curator, her or his background, beliefs and political views always play a part in the representation of the historical narrative and the related selection procedures.

To give you a quite poetic example, at Norwich Castle Museum they use different colours for different periods of time in the exhibits: a particular red for the Anglo-Saxon period, yellow for the 19th century and mint green for World War II. When I asked why these colours were chosen, the curators said that these were intuitive decisions – colours were matched to particular periods of time that 'felt right'. I have to say that I love the idea of having a colour association with a specific period of history!

What colour could the 21st century represent? The details of how objects are arranged, the materials and colours used, the titles that are given, the little differences in museums of similar events – all these things become part of the narrative that's being represented.

J: The curator at Denny Farmland Museum in Cambridge laughed when I asked him if we could borrow one of their farming displays to show in a contemporary art gallery. By placing it in a white cube context you made a powerful statement about the history of modernism and the politics of display. Can you talk about this?

R: After visiting many different kinds of museums I became fascinated by the influence of modernism, even Dutch movements like De Stijl, in museum display



Above: Display of the Denny Farmland Museum at OUTPOST, Norwich
Opposite: Display at the Denny Farmland Museum, Cambridge

structures. At the Denny Farmland Museum, there's a display structure which reminded me of a Gerrit Rietveld chair. I love the fact that these artists tried to find a new language for a new future that took them beyond history and that this language ended up in a local history farm museum in East Anglia! The more museums I visited the more I started to notice the display structures instead of all the objects displayed. These contemporary museum displays driven by modernist aesthetics do make you wonder: are we here to appreciate the formal qualities of an object or are we interested in the ethnographic context in which it was produced? It's like a cult of the individual object. Rather than, for instance, packed vitrines showing many different versions of the same object which allows for comparisons and a discussion about different types of use or value (as in 'old-school' museums), there is sometimes only one object that's displayed on a white plinth, spotlighted and positioned almost as an artwork. The way some of these displays are purpose-made to present specific historical objects creates a strange merging of modernism and heritage. In the case of the Denny Farmland display,

I thought that the display structure and the objects really became one installation. When we took it out of the farm museum into the white cube space of OUTPOST in Norwich it temporarily became a kind of objet trouvé. The white cube multiplied the process already happening in the other museum and created a Droste effect, adding another context for the objects to be out of context. Something similar has happened through the process of putting this book together. There is a direct contrast between the 19th-century museum context of Wisbech & Fenland Museum and the white cube environment that I used to photograph the work *On the Enclosure of Time*. With its simple white walls and concrete floor my storage space resembles a modern art museum. Having everything stripped away in a context similar to a white cube positions the sculptures as artworks or aesthetic

History Rising: On the Enclosure of Time

When the poet John Clare was admitted into an insane asylum in 1837, it was commonly understood that the cause could partly be put down to the effects of the Enclosures Acts of the 18th and 19th centuries. Introduced by Parliament to increase productivity and limit the number of commoners who had access to land, the Acts radically changed the psychological and as well as physical landscape of Britain.

Land that was previously accessible to commoners was closed off, leaving a drastically reduced set of options available for people to graze their animals, fish and hunt, cultivate the land and escape their squalid living conditions. Perhaps most damaging of all, the Acts resulted in psychological scarring on a huge scale, constraining the human spirit and shutting down access to other worlds.

Before the Acts came in to force, John Clare could often be found drinking and singing with local gypsies under a tree near his home in Helpston, East Anglia. Escaping the limited set of expectations set by his peers (mainly wealthy poets in London) and his family, the tree and its surroundings represented a space where he was able to express himself freely. He refers to this tree in his poems as the 'Langley Bush'. During the Anglo-Saxon period, it was located in an open-air court attended by representatives from surrounding parishes who met twice

a year to judge serious crimes. The court was presided over by the Abbot of Peterborough who dictated the terms of use for the gibbet (a gallows-type structure). Clare, along with his neighbours, friends and work mates, was probably aware of this rich and murky history, which added another layer of intrigue to the area.

The tree became a victim of the Enclosures Acts and was removed. Soon after, the Vagrancy Act of 1824 made it an offence 'to be in the open air, or under a tent, or in a cart or wagon, not having any visible means of subsistence, and not giving a good account of himself, or herself'. Clare and his gipsy comrades were disenfranchised to the core. In a diary entry made on 29 September 1824, Clare states that 'last year Langley Bush was destroyed an old white-thorn that had stood for more than a century full of fame the Gipseys Shepherds & Herdmen all had their tales of its history and it will be long ere its memory is forgotten.'

One hundred and seventy years later, in 1996, the John Clare Society proposed that a tree be planted in the area to commemorate and celebrate Clare's legacy. Farcically, the chosen site was on private land. To visit the site without permission, one must trespass on land acquired from the commons during the Enclosures. Today, the tree is a symbol of restrictions to freedom – from the 19th to 21st century – as well as a representation of misguided nostalgia for the past.

Excerpt from an essay published in p.e.a.r. (paper for emerging architectural research), issue no 6, 2014, in reference to *History Rising*, a project Jes developed with artist Marjolijn Dijkman between 2013 and '15 on the subject of museum display systems.



Marjolijn Dijkman, *Victory Models (I, II, III)*, 2014

Jes Fernie

The huge expansion in the number of public museums in 19th century Europe and America came out of the founding of modern national states and the booming historical consciousness that went with it. This collective re-appropriation of heritage meant that museums weren't merely institutions but symbols of a particular culture and way of life. It's interesting to see the development of the museum in parallel with the development of the department store. Both are often free to enter and both offer a form of spectacle to attract the gaze of the 19th century flaneur. In addition to this, the design of museums often mimics the design of department stores, and increasingly take on the guise of high-end airports.

Marjolijn Dijkman

Yes, I love this collision of culture and commerce. It seems crude to us today, but in the early museums, visitors expected to be told the price of exhibits which allowed them to symbolically possess inaccessible objects. In the essay 'The Museum as Metaphor', Chantal Georgel talks about this link by looking at the genesis of the vitrine. Before 1830 these mahogany tables were apparently called montres which were the cases in which glass makers displayed their goods – they enabled people to see but not touch. After 1830 they came to be called 'vitrines', a term that was borrowed from interior design, commerce, the bazaar and the department store. Georgel calls both museums and department stores 'machines of capitalism'. I think that's a really powerful idea and this has influenced the conception of the works developed for this project.

Excerpt from an interview with Marjolijn Dijkman and Jes Fernie in *History Rising*, published by Onomatopée, Eindhoven, 2015. Edited by Jes Fernie and Marjolijn Dijkman. Photo: Bas Helbers



Oxford Street commissions
Rathbone Square, Dean Street and Hanover Square

Jes has been working with Great Portland Estates since 2014 on a series of art commissions located off Oxford Street in central London.

Rathbone Square

At Rathbone Square, Alison Wilding has made a drinking fountain, *Herm*, for the new public garden and Robert Orchardson has made three gates collectively titled *Infinite Geometry*, for each of the entrances to the garden.

A historic spring is located at Rathbone Square which was used by 18th century chemist Henry Cavendish to campaign for access to clean water in the capital. 250 years later, Wilding's drinking fountain marks a return to public drinking water provision. It is also one of a growing number of fountains that are currently being installed in London to reduce the environmental impact of plastic bottles.

The title *Herm* refers to Ancient Greek and Roman boundary markers used to protect public spaces; it is also a gender-neutral name, short for Hermione or Herman. Robert Orchardson's bronze gates employ the same geometric pattern which stems from the artist's long-held interest in repeated structures that extend towards a vanishing point, articulating infinity through single point perspective.



Robert Orchardson, *Infinite Geometry*,
Rathbone Square gates, 2018. Photo: Rebecca Heald

The vertical fins of each gate respond to the movement of light as well as pedestrians; at certain points the surface appears flat and impenetrable, while at other moments, the gates offer glimpses through to the garden beyond.

Dean Street

Gary Hume has made a marble relief work *Praise the Rain*, for the facade of the building. The work is a semi-abstract, floral design developed in response to the architecture of the retained Victorian brick and terracotta façade, as well as the broader public realm. It offers a moment of pause and connection to nature for office workers, tourists and shoppers in an extremely busy and visually frenetic urban environment.

'I tried to make something that is beautiful; something that is part of nature, as we all are. Unlike most of what surrounds it, *Praise the Rain* isn't for sale. It could be viewed as a weed that is struggling to grow through the cracks of the pavement. I'd like it to slow people down, to consider a world beyond urban life.' Gary Hume, 2017



Gary Hume's work *Praise the Rain* being fabricated at Kim Meredith's studio in Snape, Suffolk, 2017

Hanover Square

Rhys Coren is working on a commission for Hanover Square, Mayfair, to be installed in 2020.

Background: Gary Hume's work *Praise the Rain* being fabricated at Kim Meredith's studio in Snape, Suffolk, 2017. Photo: Thierry Bal





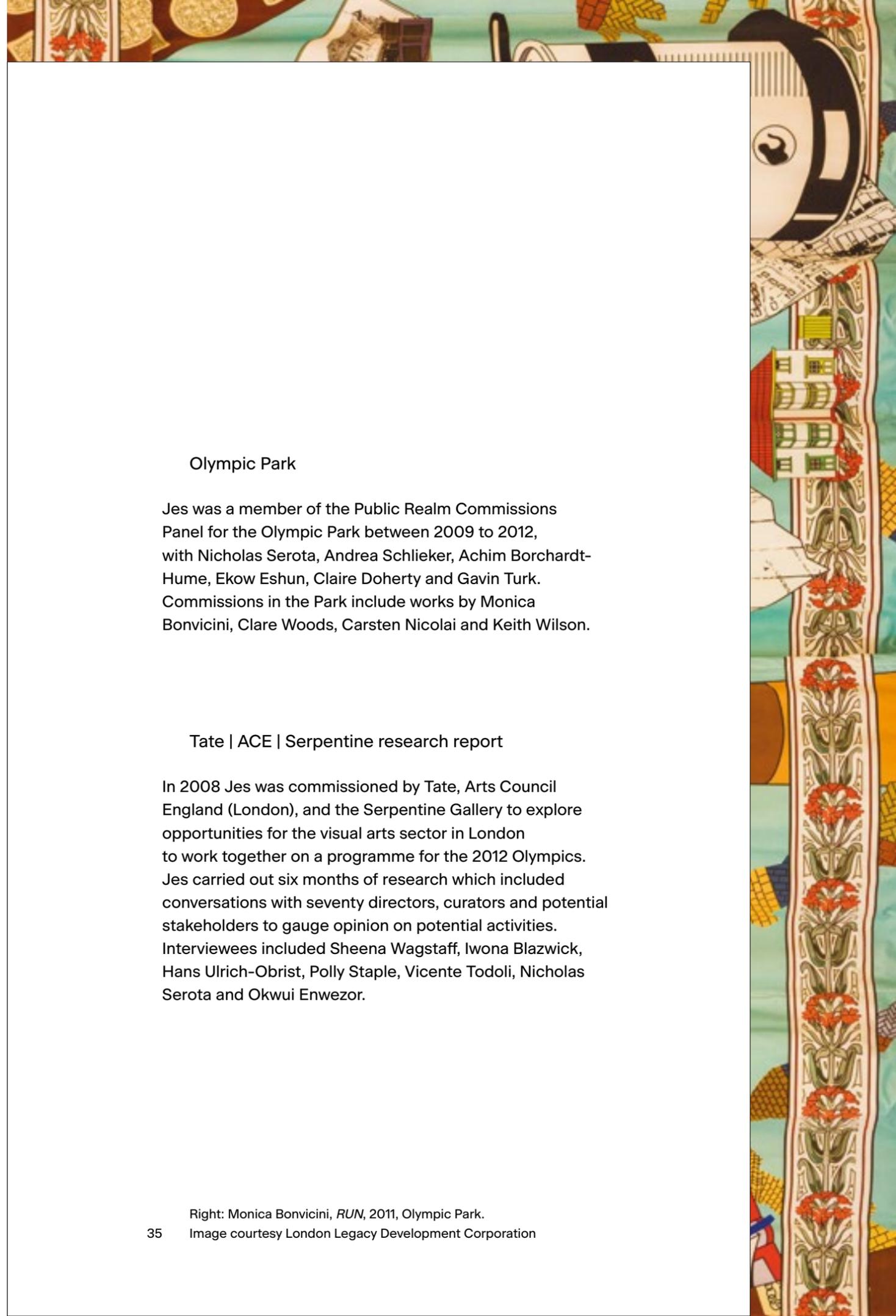
Olympic Park

Jes was a member of the Public Realm Commissions Panel for the Olympic Park between 2009 to 2012, with Nicholas Serota, Andrea Schlieker, Achim Borchardt-Hume, Ekow Eshun, Claire Doherty and Gavin Turk. Commissions in the Park include works by Monica Bonvicini, Clare Woods, Carsten Nicolai and Keith Wilson.

Tate | ACE | Serpentine research report

In 2008 Jes was commissioned by Tate, Arts Council England (London), and the Serpentine Gallery to explore opportunities for the visual arts sector in London to work together on a programme for the 2012 Olympics. Jes carried out six months of research which included conversations with seventy directors, curators and potential stakeholders to gauge opinion on potential activities. Interviewees included Sheena Wagstaff, Iwona Blazwick, Hans Ulrich-Obrist, Polly Staple, Vicente Todoli, Nicholas Serota and Okwui Enwezor.

Right: Monica Bonvicini, *RUN*, 2011, Olympic Park.



Future Perfect

Between 2012 and 2016 Jes was co-curator, with Theresa Bergne, of *Future Perfect*, an art commissioning programme in Hengrove, south Bristol.

The programme was made up of three commissions by Nils Norman, David Thorpe, Martino Gamper and a book of drawings by local resident Garth England. The theme for the programme was the future; a notional, fantastical future which embraces extraordinary possibilities and dreams. The commissions included a curtain for the community hall, new pathways and play areas in the local park and primary schools, and an archive display structure.



Murdered with Straight Lines: Drawings of Bristol by Garth England

Garth England was born in Bristol General Hospital in 1935, four years before World War II broke out. His mother named him after a blind pianist in a romantic novel by Florence Barclay, a blockbuster in its day. With the exception of a brief period in Germany in the 1950s when he did National Service, Garth spent all of his seventy-nine years living in neighbourhoods in south Bristol: Knowle West, Hengrove, Totterdown and Bedminster.

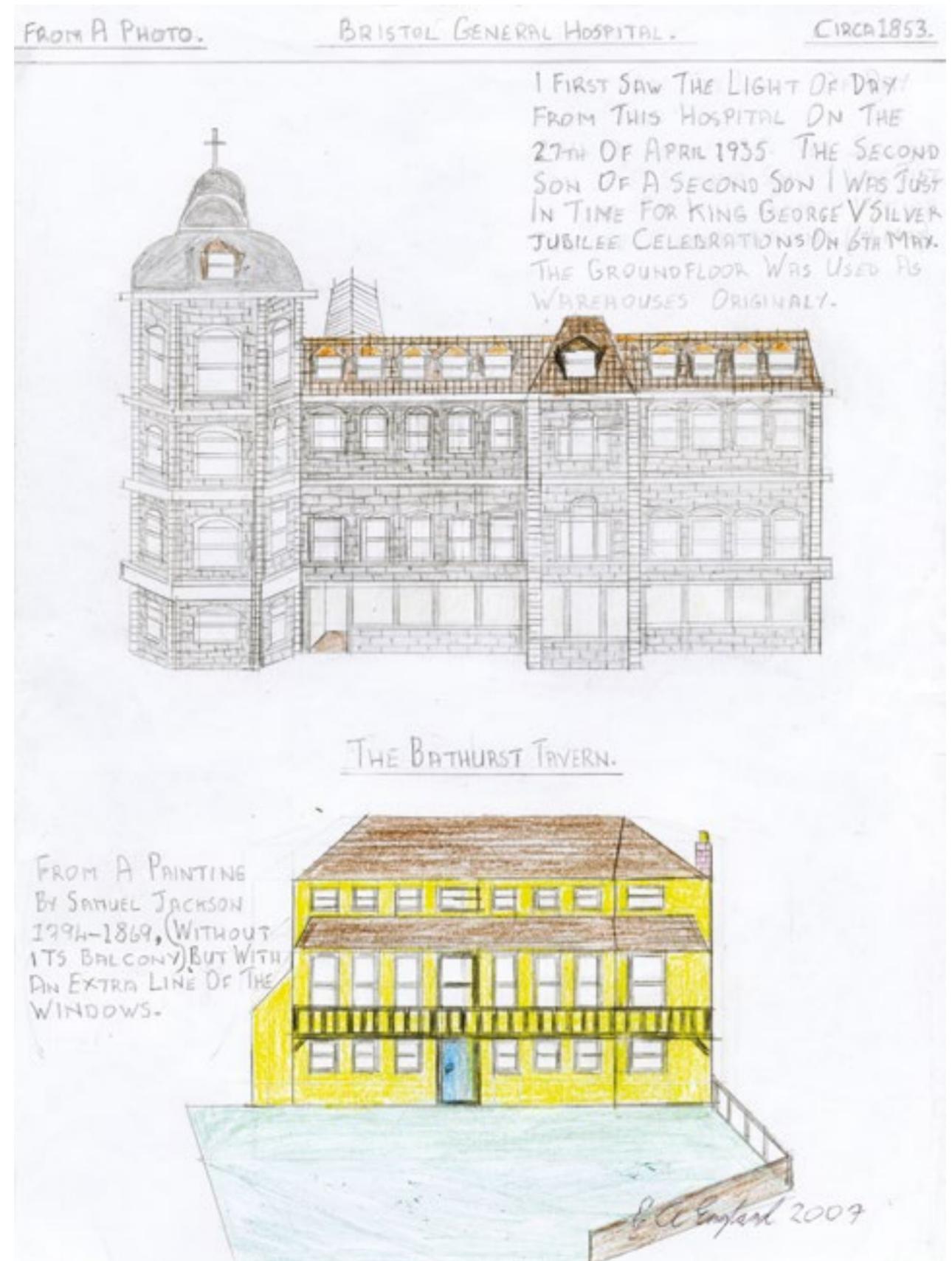
Throughout his life Garth held a series of jobs that embedded him within the community in which he lived and worked. As a paperboy, telegram boy, milkman and railway man, he was a regular fixture on the local landscape; a friendly presence who understood the rhythm of the neighbourhood, as well as its unique social and architectural character.

At the age of seventy, when he moved into a residential care home, Garth

began to map out the details of his life. Using A4 sheets of paper, coloured pencils and his formidable memory, he recorded, in painstaking detail, the buildings, people, conversations and stories that he had amassed over time.

... *Murdered with Straight Lines* is made up of a selection of these remarkable drawings. Together they tell the poignant story of a childhood lived through a world war and its aftermath; the development of Britain's Welfare State and social housing provision; vernacular architecture and the rise of modernism. Garth charts the introduction of fitted kitchens, larger windows, and flushable toilets. He beautifully sets out the change of fashion in furniture from heavy, wooden dressers owned by grandparents across the land in the 1950s, to the more contemporary designs bought by his parents, with jaunty angled legs and melamine surfaces.

... His job as a milkman dictates the terms of his relationship with the architecture around him. While most people walk up the steps of a house and enter through the front door as the inhabitant or a visitor, a delivery person only experiences the façade, surrounding landscape and, occasionally, the owner. Next to some of his drawings, Garth makes notes about the unique characteristics of either the architecture, the owners, or the vicious dogs in the houses to which he delivers milk: 'House of Many Steps', 'Beware of the Dog' and 'Bible punching Bessie'. In some cases, it seems like the houses are speaking directly to us, assuming the guise of the owner: 'Round the Back if you don't mind' and 'Don't bring your float here!'





The book is being published at a particular moment in British history when the Welfare State is slowly being dismantled and community life is unravelling. Garth's drawings are a testament to the achievements of 20th century Britain and a call to arms for an ongoing commitment to the greater good. In a sense, we, the readers, have taken the place of Alan, Garth's childhood friend. We are being shown what it means to live in a community, to notice the small things, and celebrate the creative potential of every individual.

Garth died in 2014, but he knew of our plans to publish his drawings and gave us his blessing. When we asked him what he'd like the book to be called, he said 'Murdered with straight lines – that's what my art teacher used to say about my drawings. He didn't like the way I always used a ruler'.

Excerpt from an essay called *Come and See, Alan*, published in *Murdered with Straight Lines: Drawings of Bristol* by Garth England. Published by Redcliffe Press, 2016, designed by Polimekanos, edited by Jes Fernie and Theresa Bergne. The book was part of the *Future Perfect* programme curated by Jes and Theresa.



Garth England delivering milk, January 1963, Bristol



Nathan Coley
46 Brooklands Gardens

Jes worked with Nathan Coley and the residents of Jaywick over a period of two years to realise a long-held desire to work in this unique Essex sea side town. Established in the 1930s by the property tycoon Frank Stedman, Jaywick was conceived as a place where East Enders could escape polluted London air and enjoy a holiday by the sea. A pioneering individualistic spirit developed through the sale of low cost freehold plots and self-build chalets, many of which have since evolved into homes that are inhabited throughout the year.

46 Brooklands Gardens was installed on an empty plot in one of the small residential roads in the area of Jaywick known as Brooklands. The sculpture took the foot-print of the original house which had been recently demolished. Its paired down aesthetic (plywood slats bolted onto a rusting steel frame) reflected the simplicity and inventiveness of the surrounding houses. The language of opposition, as expressed in the dazzle pattern created by the wooden slats, created a barricade-like form which played on the perception of Jaywick as a run-down town. From the outside the sculpture appeared ghostly and abstract, but its multi-coloured interior opened up a vista through which expectations could be reappraised and faith, temporarily, restored.

During its three month life-span, *46 Brooklands Gardens* fuelled debate both locally and nationally on issues relating to the future of Jaywick and the value of contemporary art in the public realm. It was the focus of intense media coverage on local radio and television as well as national broadsheets and art and architecture magazines. While the sculpture was primarily made for the residents of Jaywick and installed over the winter months, it was visited by many people from across the UK and abroad. These groups included representatives from the United Reform Church who set up a nativity scene in the adjacent garage over Christmas, as well as members of the Jaywick diaspora who were looking for the ghosts of their past.







Writtle Calling

Writtle Calling was a temporary radio station situated in the grounds of Writtle College, Essex in September 2012 by artist Melissa Appleton and architecture practice Post-Works (Matthew Butcher). Jes worked with Melissa and Matthew on the public programme.

The structure was located near the site of the first regular public radio broadcasts by Marconi engineers in 1922. Transmitting under the call sign '2 Emma Toc', the original station broadcast live performances every Tuesday evening from an ex-army hut. The *Writtle Calling* broadcasts were transmitted in the summer of 2012 on a local FM bandwidth to an area with a 10-mile radius, and streamed live on the *Writtle Calling* website.

Participating artists, writers, musicians and scientists included Heather Phillipson, Kevin Atherton, All Saints Bellringers, Pablo Bronstein, Ronald Blythe, Edwin Burdis, Mark Leckey, Longmeg, Roger Luckhurst, Marina Warner, Jonathan P Watts and Writtle Voices.

Heather Phillipson, PRESSURIZATION, *Writtle Calling*, performance, 2012.



Daddy Long Legs



Jes in Edinburgh in 1986 with flattop and winklepickers.

As a teenager, I lived on a prostitutes' beat. Walking home in my school uniform was an exciting affair. I wasn't in the slightest bit sexy – I attracted a niche market of desperate men looking for absurdly tall, spotty women dressed as schoolgirls. I never felt remotely threatened. The drivers were profusely apologetic when I explained that I was walking home from school.

As a 6ft 2in woman, I have been able to monitor, on a daily basis, the extent of society's limited parameters of what it is to be female. Now that my daughter is fast approaching my height, I am looking at the situation anew, scratching around for any signs of progress. Will she be called 'sir' with the regularity of a finely tuned clock? Will she be mistaken for a transvestite and nearly beaten up in a dark Manchester side street? Will she be offered sex in Soho ('Looking for a good time, mate?') or be asked if she is a model ('A model what? A model citizen? Certainly not an aeroplane'). Will she have to cross to the other side of the road late at night when walking behind a woman who thinks she is a man? (The mental gymnastics!)

But let's go back a bit. It is 1985. I am 15 and living in Edinburgh. I walk into a barber-shop and take my place in a row of men and boys waiting to be shorn. When my turn comes, I ask the slightly ageing barber to give me a flattop (all the rage in those days among the boys). I am pretty certain he has never cut a girl's hair, but I am also pretty certain he doesn't know I am a girl. I am wearing a black poloneck jumper, black jeans and smart black suede winklepickers. I have no boobs and no hips. When he is finished, I look like a pencil. I look *incredible*. Something neither male nor female; a pale, sullen, chisel-boned, androgynous entity. It was clear to me then that my experience of being female was in direct contrast to almost every female around me.

Every bit of social cueing pitched me as an aberration. Every film I had seen, every advertisement, every relationship I witnessed,

taught me that the natural order of things is that a woman looks up to a man. This relation of small to tall is so elaborately enshrined in the minutiae of daily life that it is pretty hard to unravel. It sets up a pattern of well-honed oppositional binaries: protector/protected, masculine/feminine, powerful/powerless. It dictates who we are attracted to, and how our fantasies are constructed. The archetypal photo of a male-female couple (his arm around her, her head nuzzled against his chest) speaks volumes about the strict code of behaviour expected of each sex.

I realised early on that this fantasy was not an option for me. So I pushed it to its logical conclusion – and assumed the guise of a man who looks like he needs sex in Soho (not just a woman who looks like a man, but a desperate man!). I comforted myself with the thought that if I looked like a man, at least I looked like the kind of man that I fancy – fine boned, effeminate, a bit gay. I developed a character that reflected my look: obstreperous and opinionated.

Needless to say, my boyfriends had to buy into this identity in some way. By then, I had started to wear short skirts and lipstick (hence the transvestite incident), but some days I just couldn't face the cat-calling or the leering. Then, I would wear jeans, and sod it if my boyfriend and I were mistaken for two gay guys holding hands. It is extraordinary, waking up each morning and deciding whether I want to be thought of as gay man or leggy woman that day. It would be liberating if it were not so depressing.

The first boyfriend I lived with, after graduating and moving to London, happened to have the same name as me (we can add narcissism to that list of characteristics). I had lopped the second 's' off my name, Jess, when I was 10, after deciding that an 's' was an 's', so why did I need two? Later, it seemed that this was only half the story. I wanted to mess with expectations and gender roles, and create confusion on paper as well as in person.

When I had my first child, I gave her

a boy's name (which turned out to be the name of a famous female porn star as well). My partner and I were primarily looking for a name that didn't end with a diminutive vowel sound; we wanted a name with a bit of oomph that ended in a consonant.

I am aware that throughout her and her brother's early childhood, the only time they got to see tall women in films or read about them in books was when there was a requirement for an overbearing, physically aberrant, barren and untenable character. That, or a seriously sexy dominatrix. Think Miss Trunchbull in *Matilda*, and Jessica Rabbit. Now that the kids are older, it has become more subtle with comedians such as Miranda Hart assuming the mantle of gawky, socially inept, single (hilarious) buffoons.

Female politicians such as Angela Merkel and Theresa May are regularly depicted in political cartoons as monstrous creatures, looming over their male counterparts with their barren wombs threatening the status quo. It seems a bleak, intensely unimaginative place in which to grow up and test out ideas about who you are and what type of space you would like to claim in the world.

The aggression that is levelled at girls and women who dare to raise their voice on public platforms tells us that not much has changed and, if anything, it may be getting worse. Market forces and the wide availability of a particular type of vicious, misogynistic porn have clubbed together to create an even bigger pool of girls and boys who aspire to conform in order to gain social acceptance. Sometimes, it feels as if our understanding of each other's sex has narrowed to the point of oblivion.

But as this pool of conformity and fear grows, so too, it seems, does the smaller oppositional pool of freakery and bolshieness. Popular social commentators and writers such as Caitlin Moran and Laurie Penny sound a claxon to their ever-increasing female and male fan base: 'Fuck the status quo. Bring on the revolution!' And then, a man with a beard, dressed as a woman, wins the Eurovision song

contest and I am told in admiring tones three times in the space of as many weeks that my daughter looks like a cross between David Bowie and Tilda Swinton, or (even better) the bastard child of David Bowie and Tilda Swinton – and I realise there may be hope.

The more women are able to create their own social position, achieve high educational goals and earn a decent living, the further we move from a conventional understanding of the power dynamics in relationships, including expectations about height.

While concepts such as 'marrying up' or 'marrying down' are still prevalent, they are increasingly being challenged or dismissed (let's think of this 'up' and 'down' in relation to physical stature as well as financial and class-based hierarchies). There are lots of examples in recent years of women choosing to be with men much younger than themselves (notably, the mother of my bastard child, Tilda Swinton), or men who choose to be with women more financially successful than they are. And there are even increasing numbers of men whose partner is taller than they are, although research shows that the number is not increasing significantly.

I recently found out from a relative in Australia that, at the age of 25, my great aunt dug a hole on Cottesloe Beach, Perth, buried her dress in the sand, and assumed the identity of a man. She changed her name from Margaret Bale to Martin Able and took a series of men's jobs including bar steward, 'strong boy and cellarman', political canvasser and factory worker. There was an article in the *Perth Daily News* (6 August 1910), entitled 'The disguise of sex', which detailed the escapades of a woman in search of more options. Apart from sounding like a Sarah Waters novel in the making, the story is spookily prescient. What would Margaret/Martin make of my dalliance with gender bending? And how much has changed since she buried those clothes?

Published in *The Guardian* 26 December 2015

Jes Fernie

The Extraordinary Story of a Colchester Lady's Escapade

When Margaret Bale buried her clothes in the dunes of Cottesloe Beach in Perth, Australia, a few days after Christmas in 1909, she was careful to keep back some of the items to send to a charity for children of the poor. She dressed herself in the men's clothes she had bought the previous day at Freedmans & Co's drapery store, including a blue serge suit and a pair of size 4 Blucher boots.

After working as a teacher in a church school for three years, she was due to travel home to her life and family in Colchester, Essex. She booked her passage on a White Star liner but never stepped on board. Instead, she cut off her hair, 'discarded the garb of her sex, masqueraded as a man, and followed male occupations' (as it was later reported in local newspapers).

She assumed the name Martin Able and was, by all accounts, considered to be a fine man, well-spoken with an educated air. In her role as a clerk and canvasser in the Fremantle office of the National Liberal League, she worked 'most enthusiastically with vim and aplomb of the most ardent political partisan'.

Apparently, her 'aristocratic and carefully modulated accent' convinced several of the Fremantle Club that the 'suave and feminine-voiced bottle-holder was the heir-at-law of an ancient British baronetcy'. Most beguilingly of all, she managed to procure a position as a 'strong boy and cellarman' at the Oddfellows' Hotel.

Back in England, her parents and sisters were increasingly worried about her unexplained absence, a situation exacerbated by the fact that her mother was extremely ill. Her father hired a private detective, sent a photograph to the Perth police and wrote a lengthy description of his daughter for distribution amongst local press. When Margaret was finally outed she telephoned the police herself saying: 'You require Martin Able? I am he. What do you want?'

When asked about her experience of living as a man, she replied: 'I will not say I enjoyed myself: it was interesting, and it's nice to be a man and do things. You see, really, girls have so little to do, haven't they? They sit at home and sew, go to church and sing hymns; all very



well and proper of course, but not too interesting, is it?’

Fast forward a hundred years. It’s 2002, I move to Colchester from London with my Greek, Canadian, Swedish partner who gets a job teaching Political Theory at the University of Essex. Our meagre income makes parenting an impossible task in the city of kings. As far as I am aware, I move to a place where I have no family history or ties. I am in a county called Essex that people outside of Essex seem to treat with a form of enthusiastic disdain more commonly reserved for criminals and bankers.

I am depressed about living in a small town with so much sky. It’s everywhere. There are no high-rise buildings to break up the view and there’s very little that relays a sense of conviction and excitement about life. Nothing that says, ‘I am here and I’m going to change the world!’ Even though I continue to work in London, I miss the daily fix of concrete, noise, seedy night time lights, the smell and energy of the city. I feel out of place, my body like an alien entity negotiating narrow pavements and low horizons.

Slowly, I begin to create an identity for myself which reaches beyond the tightly policed makeup of my clan. I take day trips to low-lying murky islands, talk to ghosts in abandoned churches, get lost in the hazy line between land and sea, and sleep under oak trees so old they’re listed in the Domesday Book. I begin to work with artists on projects that unearth a complex, nuanced view of the county; I enjoy confounding expectations of what it is to be an Essex girl and realise that there is all to play for when a place is so universally reviled.

Many years after our move to Essex, my mum comes to visit with news of a great aunt from Colchester who became infamous in

IN MAN’S ATTIRE.

Australia for running away from home and assuming the guise of

a man. She shows me press cuttings in which the story of Margaret Bale is relayed in the form of a detective story with subheadings of such glorious proportion that I find it hard to believe it isn’t the brainchild of some frustrated, desk-bound hack (‘A Girl’s Remarkable Freak/In Man’s Attire/Experiences in Masculine Callings’). A crudely doctored photograph of ‘Martin Able’ sporting a stiff collar and tie sits alongside one of Margaret Bale wearing a white cotton dress and a locket. It’s intriguing, odd, vaguely surreal.



“Mr. Martin Able
Alias Miss Margaret Bale

I do some more digging and discover that Margaret lived two streets from my house. Do I start to believe in some sort of convoluted, cross-dressing, scurrilous fate? If I walk carefully enough in her footsteps to town (on which journey I am mistaken for a man at least once a week, due to my height, my hair, my choice of attire), can I project myself into her thoughts and yell down the years, into the wind: ‘I’m here! Let’s steal this show!!’

I imagine her father’s disappointment when he is told that his third daughter is born. Hopes dashed for a son; someone to continue the family name, wear Blucher boots and march, shoulders square, into the Great War.

My mum’s cousin (Margaret Bale’s granddaughter) comes to the UK from Australia. We arrange to meet. She hands over more archival booty. I discover that while Margaret agreed to revert to living as a woman when her identity was revealed, she refused to return home. When she is informed that her mother has died in her absence, she responds calmly ‘Yes, I know she is gone. Just so! But it can’t be helped now.’

AN AMAZING ESCAPADE

A YOUNG LADY'S REMARKABLE ACT.

THE "DISAPPEARANCE" AND "DISCOVERY" OF MARGARET BALE—FORMERLY A KALGOORLIE SCHOOL TEACHER.

In December of last year Margaret Bale, a young woman about 25 years of age, and who had for the three years previous to it a member of the teaching staff of the school conducted by the Sisters of the Church (Anglican) at Lamington Heights, Kalgoorlie, left the goldfields with the stated intention of returning to England, the land of her nativity. Reaching Perth, this young woman stayed with some friends till December 22. On that day she disappeared. It was not until Thursday last that she was discovered in a mysterious way, and her whereabouts. On Thursday last the young woman stepped back into the world, and became Margaret Bale once more, after having for over seven months assumed male attire and passed herself off as "Martin Able."

The escapade of Margaret Bale has amazed those who know her. Her occupation is such that she made comparatively few friends here or at the coast, but those whom she did meet, the acquaintances of her childhood, and what she has gone through. On her own explanation, the young woman had become tired of the dull monotony of her existence, and it was when she was in Perth preparing to return to England that she contrived herself of a scheme to alter matters. When she left her friends on December 22 she conceived the extraordinary idea of giving up the life that she had been leading, and, with the object of effecting a drastic change, she dressed herself as a young man, and, as it were, began life afresh, taking as her name that of "Martin Able." Whether she had ideas of making the change a permanent one is not at all clear, but the manner in which she concealed her identity demonstrates that there was some determination in her planning. Miss Bale was to have sailed from Albany for Liverpool on January 6 last, and when on December 22 she did not return to the home of the friends with whom she was staying in Perth a search for her was at once instituted. All inquiries failed to find her, and the boat she intended sailing by left Albany on January 6 without her. Her disappearance was reported to the police, and the detectives undertook the task of finding her. Months of search were unavailing, and eventually the matter was made public throughout the State, and, just as the deepest interest was being manifested in the case, the missing young woman was discovered under circumstances of a most extraordinary nature.

Officers of the Detective Force all about herself. "Able" had plenty of enjoyment as a young man, and he visited the unregulated race meetings at Birnie, and went to dances. As an exponent of the art of Terpsichore, however, "he" was not a success, and his gyrations at one dance led to "him" being described "as a supple hater." To keep up the deception the young man smoked cigarettes and cigars, and even palled up with young girls who were attracted by the "young man's" nice face. It was a novel experience for her to be ogled by little coquettes in the streets, and she was a trifle embarrassed on several occasions when girls endeavored to "mash" her. As a "young man" Miss Bale was a huge success, and she doubtless would have still been undiscovered but for the publication in the "Sunday Times" of her photograph. A young lady employed in a shop in High street, Fremantle noticed the similarity between the features of the missing Margaret Bale and "Martin Able," and when she conveyed her impressions to the detectives it signalled the setting of the sun of "Martin Able," and the return to the world of Margaret Bale.

THE LATEST PARTICULARS

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

A Book by "Dryblewer."

PERTH, Saturday. Margaret Bale who has become notorious through having disguised herself as a boy during the past few months, is at present lodging at the Parkerville depot, Wellington-street. It has been ascertained that in addition to the adventures recounted, the girl not only acted as steward to the Fremantle Club, ocellerman and barman at the Oldfellow's Hotel, Fremantle, and conductor of an Art Studio in the same town and clerk for a city firm, but also masqueraded as a shop assistant in a city clothing firm, and for a brief period was an employee of a paper bag manufacturer. It is also said that in her lodgings she mixed freely with those whom she was endeavoring to imitate. To-night a representative of "The Sun" interrupted this extraordinary young girl while she was interested in a game of chess at her present domicile. She, reluctantly answered the few questions put to her. In reply to the query as to her future intentions she stated that she had not yet made up her mind as to what course she would follow. As to her experiences amongst men she stated that they had been distinctly novel. Her appearance indicated the ease with which she had so long been able to masquerade as a boy. The fact that this masquerading young lady

GROPERDOM GOSSIP

TERRACE TALK AND HAY-ST. HAPPENINGS.

As tipped in this column last week, Jack Scablan was first past the post in the Labor Leadership Stakes. John Haggell Holman was a fair second, but Bill Johnson finished down the course, and was really never in the race. As for Walker and Tray, they pulled out before the starting bell rang. Johnson's defeat came as a surprise to some people, but the fact is that the astute William saw early that he had no hope, and threw all his weight and influence into the Scablan side. Hilly and Scablan are neighbours at Guildford, and it is already predicted that the brick Masonlander is going to be the man behind the gun. There's nothing like variety, anyhow, even in the matter of metaphors.

A lot of people are fervently hoping that Walter James will be soundly whipped up at Beverley. Not because they dislike the Groper Knight or deprecate his talent, but because they reckon that Walter ought to have waited till the general election and walloped out Gill, Swan or Bill Price (a task not very difficult of accomplishment) instead of anchoring himself to a pocket borough. Beverley, they point out, is a gift for a very ordinary Liberal, but let want of decently strong man who are prepared to take a chance, Balcatta, North Perth and Albany are held by the Labor men, instead of the Liberals. "It's a horribly selfish of Walter," snarl the disgusted National Leagueurs. And it is possible that this feeling will be reflected to some extent in the election figures. As for Nat Harper, he avows that his prestige as a Senate candidate, combined with the local standing that the possession of a 4000 acre farm gives him in the eyes of the Broolton hoodlums, will enable him to wipe the floor with the floundering Walter. But Nat always was a genuine individual whose own prospects were scorned.

The Lands Department has a rotten custom of allowing Anatolia to take up land, and the Agricultural Bank puts the coping stone on the edifice of supplying the colored farmers with Havings Bank loans. One of these Churney-head entities was sent down for three years the other day for an unspeakably awful offence, and the Children and Patrons of the hospital departments are trying to look as if they knew nothing about it. It isn't long since a cotton-tailed protégé of the Agricultural Bank, who came down to Perth to cheer a big wed of the people's money, took the change along to James Street and "mashed" it among French blouses and white bladders. Parliament shouldn't lose any time in prohibiting Anatolia from taking up farming land or mineral leases.

The Full Court didn't take long in deciding that Judge Booth made another of his many blunders in nominating Charles Collins in respect of his action for damages against Bill Hill, of Morris Street. The Chief Justice briefly remarked that Mr. Booth's law was bad, and Justice Burnside and Bellan gently murmured that they favoured, and one more

I also learn that while she was living as a man, she was probably having an affair with a married man who divorced his wife and later married her (Margaret). The fact that she was pregnant when she got married was a source of great shame for her children. Her husband became an alcoholic and committed suicide when their three sons were young, leaving her with little money, the status of 'single parent' and the bleak, overwhelming stigma of suicide. It's not one of those stories that ends happily. It seems that Margaret Bale, her husband and their boys all maintained a form of familial silence, lodging ghosts into doorways, piling up secrets for future generations to unearth.

Whilst carrying out research for this piece I stumble across a website that mentions a lecture on Major Bale, Margaret's father, by a local historian in Colchester. John Edward Bale was a Captain in the 1st West Indian Regiment who was also an artist of some local repute, specialising in architecture and streetscapes (another shiver as I recognise more ghostly footsteps, with my career-focus on the relationship between art and architecture). I dimly remember a beautifully executed drawing of a Colchester ruin that was mounted above my Gran's piano throughout my childhood. Major Bale was an Empire man of good social standing whose views on the burgeoning campaign for female suffrage probably weren't as enthusiastic as his daughters. I'm imagining this; I have no evidence for it. I'm wondering why it was that Margaret was so eager to leave Colchester never to return.

The historian does his job diligently, relaying facts and information gleaned from dusty library shelves, but he has no idea there is a far more interesting story around the corner. I want to stand up and yell

'You think this is IT? There's a fabulous cross-dresser in the fray!'

A few days later, my teenage daughter's best friend's gran asks my daughter's best friend if my daughter is her new beau. As I type this, my daughter lounges next to me mulling over what she should wear to a Jinx Monsoon concert tomorrow evening. 'I want

to look like a girl who looks like a boy who is trying to look like a girl'. Ha! That's the next generation of mischievous chameleons in the bag.

When I was a child, my mum's old friends would telephone and ask 'Hello, could I speak to Margaret please?' Who the hell was Margaret? No Margaret here. It took me ages to

comprehend that my mum had changed her name from Margaret to Lorraine in her 20s and that these two people could be one and the same. So, there she is again, this phantom wending her mischievous way through the generations, delighting in confusion, scattering marbles in her wake.

We all spend our lives trying to find, or construct, stories and identities to locate ourselves in the world. I found my story in the benighted county of Essex where I walk in the footsteps of my most excellent great aunt - that remarkable freak - thinking daily of her radical spirit and the slippage of her life into mine.

This text was written for this piece of print, January 2018.

Newspaper cuttings from: *The Sunday Times*, Perth, 31 July 1910; *The Sun*, 7 August 1910; *The Daily News*, 5 August 1910; 'The Kalgoorlie Miner', *The West Australian*, 6 August 1910; *The Hawera and Normanby Star*, 18 August 1910.



Archive of Destruction

Archive of Destruction is an on-going research project by Jes looking at public art that has been destroyed by natural causes or by human action through fear, boredom, decay and love.

Jes has organised, and taken part in, events and symposia on the subject over the last five years including ones with the V&A, Flat Time House, South London Gallery, TAAK (with James Beckett in Amsterdam), the RCA and University of Essex.

Firstsite

Jes was Associate Curator at Firstsite in Colchester, Essex from 2008 – 2014 where she worked on public programmes, commissions, publications and residencies. She organised and chaired a diverse range of projects and events involving artists, curators, cultural historians, local enthusiasts and writers including Johan Grimontprez, Florence Derieux, Barbara Stevini, Pablo Leon de la Barra, Nathan Coley, Louisa Buck, Aleksandra Domanovic, Mark Fisher, Tom Morton and Carla Zaccagnini. She formed a partnership with the University of Essex, edited a book about Firstsite, published by Scala in 2012, and was Head of Programmes in 2015.



Creation from Catastrophe

Creation from Catastrophe was an RIBA exhibition (2016) curated by Jes that considered the varying and magical ways that architects have re-imagined cities in the aftermath of natural and man-made disasters. The exhibition linked to Jes' research into the ways in which destruction can create the conditions for reinvention.

Starting with the five alternative plans for London created after the Great Fire of 1666, the exhibition took the audience on a journey through 18th century Lisbon, 19th century Chicago, 20th century Skopje, ending in current day Nepal, Nigeria, Japan, Chile, Pakistan and USA. Architects in the exhibition included Yasmeen Lari, Metabolism, Christopher Wren, Toyo Ito, OMA and Kunlé Adeyemi.



Top: James Beckett, *Palace Ruin*, Amsterdam, 2016. Centre: *Newspaper cutting on the destruction of Diego Velasquez' Rokeby Venus*, by Suffragette Mary Richardson, 1914. Research carried out by Carla Zaccagnini.

Books

House Taken Over

Edited by Jes Fernie

Published by Balin House Projects, 2018

Murdered with Straight Lines: drawings of Bristol by Garth England

Edited by Jes Fernie and Theresa Bergne

Published by Redcliffe Press, 2016

The Night Museum

Edited by Jes Fernie

Commissioned by Lauren Parker

Museum of London, 2016

History Rising

Edited by Jes Fernie and Marjolijn Dijkman

Published by onomatopee, 2015

46 Brooklands Gardens

A temporary artwork for Jaywick, Essex, by Nathan Coley

Editor Jes Fernie

Published by Firstsite, 2009

Two Minds: Artists and Architects in Collaboration

Edited by Jes Fernie

Published by Black Dog, 2006

Teaching

Jes has been a visiting lecturer at:

University of East Anglia

MA Museology Course

Goldsmiths

MFA Fine Art

University of Essex

MA Curating Contemporary Art

University of Leicester

MA Art Gallery & Museum Studies

The RCA

MA Sculpture

MA Architecture and Activism

MA Curating Contemporary Art

The Cass/London Met

MA Design for Cultural Commons

Central St Martins

MA Architecture: Cities & Innovation, Spatial Practices Programme

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Flood House

46 Brooklands Gardens

The Museum of Dark Places

Writtle Calling

History Rising

Future Perfect

Archive of Destruction

Praise the Rain

Herm

Infinite Geometry

Murdered with Straight Lines

Råängen

Jes Fernie