

Bold Tendencies 2021 Q&A with Andy Holden

To start, could you give us a bit of background on yourself, such as where you studied, where you're currently based and some of your key interests as an artist?

I'm never sure how far back to go when confronted with such a question. A lot of my work has been dropping myself back in time to probe my background, or tiny moments of it. It is not itself interesting, but the idea of formative moments and how they inform a later world view is always of interest. Some of my work has been about this, such as *Natural Selection*, which was a collaborative exhibition with my dad, who spent his life studying birds, and was a way of looking at questions of nature and nurture, both through exploring how birds make nests and by putting our relationship on screen.

A previous exhibition, *Maximum Irony! Maximum Sincerity 1999-2003: Towards a Unified Theory of M!MS*, similarly looked back at the formative moment of late adolescence and my attempt, with four friends, to start an art movement, with a manifesto which called for artwork that was ironic and sincere at the same time. *Pyramid Piece and Return of the Pyramid Piece* saw me try to correct a transgression committed as a child when I stole a chunk of the Great Pyramid, and so I returned the stone to Egypt to undo the guilt I felt about this act. So sometimes background becomes foreground and often my interest is the lack of distinction between the two.

What first inspired you to become an artist?

Seeing a print of the *Death of Chatterton* by Henry Wallace in a second hand book store.

You work with a range of subjects and mediums. How did you first develop a practice that spans so many disciplines and what have been the perks and challenges of doing so?

For a long time when you are doing a number of things, spinning a lot of plates, changing subject matter and medium, there is a feeling from people around you that at some point you'll choose one and concentrate on that. It would in many ways have been better to have taken that advice rather than my

disjunctive path. However, artists are often symptoms of the world and the world at the moment is quite fragmented, the idea of having one steady career is not in reality that likely. So I'm not sure if it is deliberate or symptomatic. Quite often I run a number of projects at once, *Laws of Motion* took five years, on and off, and *Natural Selection* was in development at the same time, but then it requires a specific moment to turn these into concrete works. I do take perverse pleasure in no two days being the same, although at times it slips from pleasure to anxiety.

In 2010 you had your first major solo show for Art Now at Tate Britain, Pyramid Piece and Return of the Pyramid Piece – itself including a large-scale boulder work. What was significant about this show for you, and what have been some of the most formative exhibitions or bodies of work you have created since?

A good work for me is always formative, in that it changes things, forges new friendships, new relationships. *Natural Selection* did this, with my dad, as in the end we travelled the country together like a light entertainment double act for three years. *Pyramid Piece* was a very singular thing, and had a conciseness that I haven't arrived at since. It was a leap, dreaming up a vast knitted object when I didn't know how to knit. Then spending a year trying to turn it from image to reality in a cold warehouse. Those leaps are the terrifying moments – when you look back at a work and think about how it might have been if you hadn't made the leap, it is often incomprehensible.

Often the reason for the leap has to be post-rationalised, only knowable once the work has been externalised. An example of this was my recent show at Block 336, and deciding, quite suddenly, that it would take the form of a post-covid theme park ride and would therefore need motorised carts to transport people around it and that I had better learn to use fibreglass and completely change the way the exhibition would be presented and managed. That leap made sense of all the component parts and tied them together, but there was also a time when this body of work existed without its resolution, which now seems impossible to imagine.

A central motif in your work is the question of why do we come to see the world in the way that we do. Why have

ideas of awareness, especially self-awareness, and perception become so important in your practice?

You are asking a question based on an answer to a question in a previous interview, which is a good move, as now I can't use that as my answer. It also sets up a great loop: "your work is about how we come to see the world as we do. How did your work come to be about being about the way we come to see the world in the way that we do?" I think this is something like the hermeneutic circle? You got me! How to break out of this? It would be hard enough asking my dad why he spent his life looking at birds - "you dedicated your life to watching birds - but *why?*" However: "*Your life has been spent reflecting on life and formative moments that create our understanding of the world - what formative moment brought you to reflect on the significance of formative moments?*" feels ironically even harder.

Can anyone really truthfully say why they do something? Especially if it has been a lifelong pursuit that organically evolved from that knot of nature and nurture. It evolved out of art of course, and the questions that come with thinking about what art is for, or for, for me. There is an origin story of Buckminster Fuller, standing on the edge of a cliff looking out and deciding to dedicate his life to the problems of housing. I don't have an equivalent. I should make one up, like the anecdote earlier about seeing a print by Henry Wallace in a bookstore. You'd think someone whose work was about self-awareness and perception would be a bit more self-aware and a little more perceptive, but maybe that explains my interest.

The first boulder you created was on a rooftop in Deptford in 2006. You have since installed variations in Kunstfort Vijfhuizen, Netherlands (2008), Athens (2010) and Jaywick Beach (2011). What was the initial idea behind the boulder, and how has it evolved through this series?

The idea hasn't exactly changed but with each iteration slightly different aspects get highlighted due to the specifics of the landscape. Each time the boulder blocks something out and makes something else visible. The Netherlands was pastoral, Athens urban gentrification, Jaywick was coastal, and on that occasion the economics of public sculpture came to the fore. Each time the notion of sculpture as folly, as facade, as foolish gesture is still paramount, as well as echoes of comets and

cartoons. They return like a punctuation mark, or orbit around the practice, and each time it returns it is not that different, but I am. Deptford was perhaps the most bombastic, placed high, precarious, a harbinger of doom. The idea that the work was positioned as an event rather than a sculpture started there, with the place you were invited too being distinct from where the work was, and that the work would mostly live in documentation.

The latest boulder, commissioned by Bold Tendencies and titled *In Praise of Folly*, is installed on the rooftop of Will Alsop's Peckham Library and was particularly influenced by Wile E. Coyote and the Road Runner series from Looney Tunes. Why was this reference so relevant to you and this iteration of the boulder series?

This one is a break with the old series, a fresh start. It is more overly a cartoon rock, still a folly, but more overtly referencing the boulders of the *Cartoon Landscape*. It's built to last, unlike the timber predecessors. More visibly precarious, but in reality much safer. It brings the aesthetic in line with my film work, leaving behind the wooded DIY sphere's and their performative baggage. It should feel like an object that has fallen out of the *Cartoon Landscape*, ominously looming over those passing below. But more likely it will fall backwards onto Wile E Coyote, more obviously a symbol of the times. A monument to the end of the *Cartoon Landscape*.

Why is it important to you that the boulder is conceived as a facade or a "folly" – why not fully enclose the boulder as a solid object?

It's the main idea really, that it isn't a sculpture, but a folly. In the sense of it is not built to function in the register that it presents in its facade. It's a prop for a narrative, and anyway, from where it will be viewed it is not necessary to build a back, and the viewer will assume there is one — seen close up will allow the reveal, like seeing backstage. It was inspired by my interest in architectural follies, the idea of building something deliberately out of time, incongruous, or eccentric, in a facade only. The gap between the thing and where it was viewed from is as important as the thing itself. This seemed full of metaphorical potential so I thought it would be interesting to see how it worked when translated to sculpture.

Your boulders seem especially concerned with the history and role of public art. How do you expect the boulder to be received by the unsuspecting public?

The idea initially was a question of what it would be like to build a work on a scale traditionally assumed by public art but without subjecting it to the processes and economics necessary within that space. By making them temporary and event-based some of the problems of public art were overcome. This work is built differently as it has to last six months and be subject to more of the practical concerns of an object placed in a public space. I love public work, not all public works, but the idea of art in a public space, and how it becomes a point of orientation, gives identity to a place, even if it is negative.

Saying that I have not yet managed to make a permanent public work, I've been asked a few times and each time during the process it has been aborted. It requires such a particular working method that I don't seem to be able to adapt too. These temporary interventions in the public realm hopefully allow a little more spontaneity. This iteration is interesting as the work will only be completely understood from the roof of Bold Tendencies; for those encountering it from underneath Peckham Library, it will be far more confusing. The visual identity of this iteration as a more obvious cartoon form should make it fairly understandable as that is a universal language distinct from public art.

At Bold Tendencies there will be a telescope and lectern board detailing the "Genealogy of the Folly". The opening weekend of Bold Tendencies will also see a market stall erected in Peckham to sell souvenirs and trinkets associated with the boulder series. How do you see these elements contributing to how people engage with the work?

The telescope and lectern are the central ideas of the work. That the gap between the viewer and the sculpture is made clear in the way the work is viewed through a telescope. From the roof the boulder appears complete, but distant. The lectern shows the way the work has evolved, the history of the work, like you might find at the site of a ruin, the information on the lectern tells you what you can't access through looking directly. I like the periphery of the work, where it mutates into other things, where the ideas become diluted and cheapened, and the market

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stall does this. Where the image of the work gets fixed and distributed in other ways.

How do you think about your new commission in relation to the Bold Tendencies 2021 programme theme of Arcadia?

Arcadia, a folly best viewed through a telescope. I hope this isn't how it reads.

What have you got planned for the rest of the year – are there any special projects in the pipeline?

I'll be curating *Beano: Art of Breaking the Rules* at Somerset House in the Autumn. The Beano is a comic Arcadia of sorts.