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PRACTITIONER REPORT:

I Gladly Strained My Eyes to Follow You: a guided tour of Pollok House

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I Gladly Strained My Eyes to Follow You took the form of a guided tour of Pollok House focusing on a selection of portraits of women from the house's historically significant collection of art and artefacts. The tours, led by Pollok House volunteers and scheduled at 2pm daily between 20 April and 7 May, were included in the exhibition Cabinet Interventions, part of Glasgow International 2018. Acknowledging the absence of information surrounding the women portrayed in the House, the artist invited writers, academics, fellow artists, and Pollok House staff to respond to individual portraits. Their reflections, thoughts, provocations and questions make up the content of this artwork.

Including a selection of texts specially written for the tour, this paper will contextualise and describe the project, setting it against the wider frames of reference that fed into and supported its development.

Keywords: collective practice, feminism, socially engaged, art, text.

Entrance hall

Unknown lady

Dates unknown

Karen Cornfield, House Manager, Pollok House, National Trust for Scotland

Is that a fly on her nose?

It's not meant to be there.

There's meant to be a story,

The person behind the face.

This portrait of a woman was painted by a man. We know about him, not about her.

'He had a name and was born on a date. He came from a country and was born in a place. He painted things that were typical of the time. He went to a city and another country. His work is exhibited among the work of other men. His most famous work is a painting'.

(But, not this one.)

When was she born and where did she live?

Where did she travel and what did she see?

Where can we see her life's work?

What was her passion?

What did she love?

Separated from her story,

Captured in a frame,
Hung upon a wall,
To be remembered without a name.



Figure 1: I Gladly Strained My Eyes to Follow You (tour led by Jennie MacLeod).
Photo: Tine Bek.

Shauna McMullan: Pollok House is a stately home set in Pollok Country Park on the outskirts of Glasgow, managed by the National Trust for Scotland. The Maxwell family lived for six centuries on the site, but the main part of the present house was built in the mid-eighteenth century. The House is best known for its extensive collection of Spanish art, and it is purported to be the place (the Cedar Room to be exact), where the National Trust for Scotland was founded in 1931 by Sir John Stirling Maxwell, former owner of Pollok House. According to Sir John:

The National Trust for Scotland serves the nation as a cabinet into which it can put some of its valuable things, where they will be perfectly safe for all time, and where they are open to be seen

and enjoyed by everyone (National Trust for Scotland, 2018).

Following an artist residency and extended period of research based in Pollok House (which was part of the research project and exhibition *Cabinet Interventions*¹), I wanted to think about what art and artefacts a contemporary 'national cabinet' might contain. How could the history layered within the 'cabinet' that is Pollok House inform the development and articulation of a new body of artworks? How might we understand the value and validity of a contemporary artwork in relation to the historical collection? Was this cabinet flexible enough to accommodate the immaterial as well as the material? These are ideas and questions Rebecca Solnit touches upon in *A book of migrations*: 'I have tried to define a place as a stable location where unstable forces converge ... whatever leads you to a place, when you get there other things lead you elsewhere on earth and in time' (Solnit, 1997, p.xiv).

Main corridor

Anne of Austria

1549–1580

Dr. Victoria Horne, art historian

The Spanish court painter Alonso Sánchez Coello completed this portrait of Anne of Austria in c.1570, following her marriage to King Philip II of Spain. The subject's aristocratically pale face is particularly striking against the dark, sumptuous fabric of her robes. The face is full and unlined with youthful pink blooms along the cheekbones. Bolstered by an unyielding ruff her face appears soft, nearly translucent. It implies the feminine virtues of serenity and poise. The young queen gazes out through deep hooded eyes

and, although impassive, good humour is suggested in her expression.

Historical records tend to emphasise three things about Anne: her charm, her fecundity, and her skill with a needle. These characteristics were fundamental to an early modern feminine ideal. This was an era in which women's bodies were used as political instruments to preserve and strengthen the power of a European ruling class as it generated vast colonial expansions. In this marriage economy, women were considered vessels for producing heirs and consolidating noble alliances. Anne's fertility is thus reinforced through the gestures of the portrait, in which her left un-gloved hand appears to cradle her lower abdomen, while the flawless white pearl dangling from her headpiece symbolises the young woman's purity.

The Habsburgs consolidated their dynasty through intermarriage (Anne's husband, Philip, was also her uncle). Historians now agree that this practice led to serious health issues and the eventual termination of the line. Of Anne and Philip's five children, only one survived until adulthood and succeeded his father as Philip III of Spain.



Figure 2: I Gladly Strained My Eyes to Follow You (Tine Bek / Anne of Austria).
Photo: Shauna McMullan.

SM: In total, I counted 52 portraits of women within the walls of Pollok House. Empresses, queens, courtesans, duchesses, countesses, baronesses, saints and women whose lives we know little and nothing about. They span 2,000 years from Mary Magdalene (c. AD 100) to the present day Ruth Maxwell Macdonald, who with her family still retain residency in the upper floor of the building. The women portrayed in the rooms and corridors of Pollok House lived their lives the length and breadth of Europe (in its different manifestations): Bohemia, Bavaria, Hungary, Austria, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Italy, France, Scotland and England. Thirty-nine have names, thirteen remain lost to history. Very little has been written about the majority of them, and in what has, they have been subsumed into the narratives spun around their spouses, fathers, patrons and brothers. In the majority of cases, more is known of the painter than the subject.

Confronted with the enforced absence of women's achievements from official histories, the collective struggle has been to locate those missing voices. Feminist researchers have therefore described their enquiries as taking place in the gaps, blank pages, margins and footnotes of authorized chronicles (Horne, 2016).

Business room

Ann Christian Stirling Maxwell

1871–1937

Sam Ainsley, artist

Women who read are dangerous, are they not? Can you guess from my gentle, solemn, well-bred face what it is that I am reading? Well, you will not guess, for it is Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the rights of women*. She

believed women must be educated equally with the men. The book was published one hundred years ago when she was 33, the same age I am now, but she died aged only 38 after giving birth to the woman who wrote *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley.

The man painting this portrait does not know what I am reading and hasn't asked; my husband will not be interested.

I think I also have a book in me, I really do; but even now, I have to write in secret. I am not taken seriously as a potential writer, I am even mocked by my family when I try to discuss the ideas that whirl around my mind; there is no encouragement to begin, let alone to continue. I am aware I live a privileged life and I try to hide my frustrations with the boredom, the endless visits, the tea and cakes, I truly do. Does my sadness show? I hope not.



Figure 3: *I Gladly Strained My Eyes to Follow You* (tour / mobile phone / Ann Christian Stirling Maxwell). Photo: Tine Bek.

SM: Sara Ahmed's *Living a feminist life*, which I read at the same time as undertaking the residency in Pollok House,

was an influential backdrop against which to develop a method and approach for *I Gladly Strained My Eyes to Follow You*.

‘Think of this: how we learn about worlds when they do not accommodate us. Think of the kinds of experiences you have when you are not expected to be here. These experiences are a resource to generate knowledge’ (Ahmed, 2017, p.10). Thinking about how to make feminist theory work in the places we live and work was central to the development of the artwork, acknowledging the absence of writing on women represented in the house at the same time as using it as an opportunity to explore the politics of location and the potential for overlapping the diverse histories and geographies connected to each of them. A house such as Pollok House offers an opportunity to think about the concentric circles of identity formed by ‘memory, the body, the family; by community, tribe or ethnic group; by locale, nationality, language and literature—and the wild tides of invasion, colonization, emigration, exile, nomadism and tourism’ (Solnit, 1997, p.9). It’s all here, if you look hard enough. Bringing the lives of these individual women together into one text / artwork / performance offered a way of exploring the themes Solnit talks about, at the same time as testing what they might mean contemporarily, within a current Scottish socio-geopolitical context.

The landing

Unknown lady

Dates unknown

Kate Davis, artist

Untitled

Unmasked

Unspoken

Unkempt

Unaccustomed

Unseen

Unsteady

Unnecessary

Unwilling

Unemployed

Unwise

Undressed

Ungovernable

Unsound

Unhealthy

Unflappable

Unlucky

Unmarked

Unpretentious

Unsightly

Unprincipled

Unable

Unnatural

Unwritten

Unbending

Unreasonable

Unsettled

Unstable

Unaware

Uncommunicative

Unwholesome

Unsaid

Untapped

Unbecoming

Unarmed

Untold

Unattached

Unwell

Unstuck

Unashamed

Unknown



Figure 4: I Gladly Strained My Eyes to Follow You (tour / unknown portrait / the landing).
Photo: Tine Bek.

SM: If we understand space as the product of social relations and interrelations then it must 'be predicated upon the existence of plurality, in which distinct trajectories coexist' (Massey, 2005, p.9); therefore, any meaningful attempt to represent or narrate a place or space needs to bring together multiple perspectives. A central component of this project was the collaboration with individuals from different backgrounds and disciplines. Eighteen women from the fields of art, literature, academia, education, history and heritage were invited to write a short paragraph of between 200 and 250 words, in response to one of the selected portraits. I asked women whose work, writing, thoughts and lives I knew to connect with the subject of the research. Women who I believed would have something interesting to say and write, who when brought together as a collective would 'use their particulars to challenge the universal' (Ahmed, 2017, p.10), and who ultimately would make an inspiring and challenging community of thinkers. These collaborators knew the subject of the work / research in different ways and wrote about it accordingly. 'Positionality provides a way of understanding knowledge and essence as contingent and strategic—where I am makes a difference to what I can know and who I can be' (Rendell, 2002, p.46). Reading through notes I scribbled down in a sketchbook during a talk entitled Expertise and Experience by professor and educator Anne Boddington at Glasgow School of Art on 12 October 2017, I am reminded of the emphasis and importance she places on communities of practice. 'We care to share' and 'dare to think together' are highlighted in fluorescent orange with an asterisk beside each, in the hope that I'll return and give them more thought. I did, and *I Gladly Strained My Eyes to Follow You* grew from greater consideration of these two prompts.

Morning room

Infanta Dona Maria Anna

1606–1646

Kirsty Leonard, artist

Maria,

What is the history of our correspondence?

What surfaces, what interfaces between us? What punctuations, dispersals, flowings over and through, unformings and reformings has your face performed in order to become the pixels that spread its lighted likeness onto mine?

Your eyes,

the painter's eyes,

the palette,

the canvas,

the wall,

all of the walls,

the probable shrouded cycles of storage,

the stretches and pulls of oil paint that make cracks,

the photographer's eyes,

the camera's eye,

the computer,

the email,

the screen.

The anti-glare coating on my laptop is eroded in the spot over your eyes; your gaze reaches mine minus one filmy remove.

But in spite of—or because of—this assembly of lenses, I cannot make sense of your face.

We do not correspond.

We say that we can read an expression. Perhaps it is a cliché, but I cannot read yours. Or maybe I read too well. When I try, I identify such a proliferation of expressions so as to efface their meanings. Can you feel amusement, sadness, indifference, boredom, anger, scepticism, relief, impatience, pity, tiredness, sympathy, serenity and contempt all at once? Probably. But I still don't know you.

How different is my attempt at decoding the expressions on your face to the labelling of the imagined feelings of an object? Is the impulse to make it signify similar to the heavy-handed gesture that further encumbers the forgotten skeleton of a building with disgruntledness; or a table top, already maligned by work and leaning elbows, with fatigue?

Your face supports nothing, not even its own expressions. For this, I admire you.



Figure 5: I Gladly Strained My Eyes to Follow You (tour / Sam Ainsley / *Infanta Dona Maria Anna*). Photo: Tine Bek.

The FACE, but not the countenance, is a landscape, several landscapes. An entire land parched with drought, the flesh defied. And in the wrinkles, in the creases where the pupils flash with anger, a cheerful incredulity. The network of cracks and furrows represents so many weak points; misery has entered them, infiltrated them and has been welcomed. Waiting for rain. (Lyotard, 1988, pp.184–185).

SM: I return to read this paragraph Lyotard wrote about a photograph of Samuel Beckett aged 80, in his book *The inhuman, reflections on time*, over and over again. Not only because of the exquisite image Lyotard creates of Beckett in my mind's eye, or how much he reveals about the life and history of his subject in such few words, but more importantly because of the attention and care I know he has paid to looking at and thinking about Beckett's face. The text is tender, detailed, analytical, poetic and expansive, and I wondered how it would be to create a multifarious portrait of the women of Pollok House through this action of close looking.

The family room

Lady Anne Maxwell Macdonald

1906–2011

Adele Patrick, founder and manager of Glasgow Women's Library

I was around the age you are when I made a startling discovery. In all my looking over the decades at the pantheon of landed women caught by art history (where wealth is frequently marked by the depiction of attentive servants or enslaved people) I had never identified with 'The Duchess', always her subjects.

How might it feel to be entitled, to stare out into the room, into the world with consummate self-possession? Approximating manhood?

You are not waited on here or adorned with jewels or the forms of 'feminine excess' that on the poor are still so pathologically loathed, so how can I read off your own strident inheritance of patrilineal conviction? I can hear your voice, read the letter you are penning. Is it the skin, the hooded eyes, the hairline, the teeth, that semaphore gun rooms, servants quarters, bell pulls, a retinue of 50 to service a family? Your interpolating gaze evokes paradoxical feelings.

Yours after all is a woman's name nestled amongst the Sirs, Field Marshalls, Viscounts, Major Generals and Earls, one of the six women amongst the regiment of 140 men given the Freedom of the City. A rare, garlanded woman acknowledged by the City Fathers and now by women searching for heroines hidden from history.

You evince an elusive unorthodoxy, caught in the act of decisive and yet casual largesse, giving a gift; to imagine this house, vista, walled garden as our own. Your mouth enunciates: To give land means to have owned land.

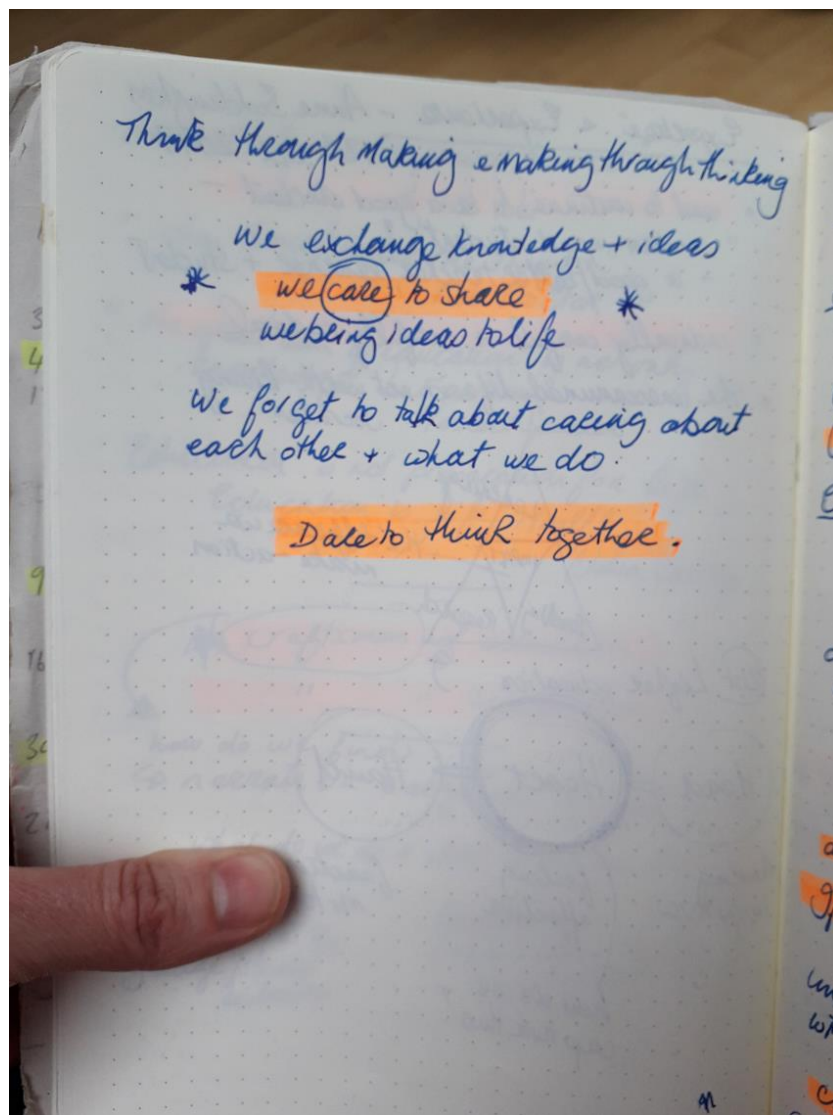


Figure 6: Notes from sketchbook. Photo: Shauna McMullan.

SM: I asked each writer to focus on the face. The content could be factual, fictional, imagined or real and could be written in the first, second or third person. It might speak directly to the woman in the portrait; to the viewer of the portrait; to the author; or be the words of the woman portrayed. It might include more than one voice. The important thing was to pause, to pay attention, to look closely, with care and in detail; to read the face. The result is a compilation: a female coloured, composite text, that reveals a portrait of Pollok House which is complex, detailed, nuanced, subtle, poetic, practical, abstract, intimate, descriptive, funny, theoretical and political. The

text is a place we wrote ourselves (and each other) into, which we occupy, and where we are present.

The silver corridor

Manon Jeanne Roland

1754–1793

Siân Reynolds, historian & translator

Framed like a cameo, this portrait shows a young woman in eighteenth century dress, with a frilled cap over her curly brown hair. She has perfect, unmarked skin, large eyes, and a serious, rather steadfast expression.

All the signs are that this was painted well after the death of the subject, in the post-Revolutionary years when there was a cult of Madame Roland as a victim of the Terror, who said as she went to the guillotine: ‘O Liberty, what crimes are committed in thy name’². The words are entirely in character for this enthusiastic revolutionary, the political wife of a minister, who shared the fate of the Girondins.

The portrait, though, is idealised, and based on no image from her lifetime. As a teenager, Marie-Jeanne (aka Manon) Phlipon described herself as having ‘a rather large mouth’³, a ‘voluptuous chin’, and a high-coloured complexion. ‘My eyes are not big, grey-brown, but they have an open, frank gaze and are crowned with eyebrows as dark as my hair.... My nose used to trouble me, I thought it was too big at the end’. She usually wore her brown hair in a jockey-cut with a plait. The most true-to-life surviving image of her is a miniature in the Archives Nationales in Paris, showing her with loose, very dark hair, and wearing a muslin gown. Owned by a man who loved her, it isn’t flattering—she does

indeed have a wide mouth and a large nose—but it is attractive and romantic.

Our picture is perhaps an early example of the airbrushed celebrity portrait.



Figure 7: I Gladly Strained My Eyes to Follow You (tour / Wilma Morrison / Karen Cornfield / Manon Jeanne Roland). Photo: Tine Bek.

SM: Within the daily and weekly routines of Pollok House, guided tours are common practice. They are part of the everyday and are led by a team of dedicated, experienced, knowledgeable and enthusiastic volunteers, looking at the House's collection of art and artefacts and sharing its history. Very early on during my residency I realised that the holders of many of the facts, anecdotes, histories, details and stories associated with the House were the volunteers, some of them having worked within Pollok House for over 40 years. They knew the House inside out and when they didn't know something, or were uncertain, they knew someone who would. They were its custodians and I watched and listened to their tours with interest and curiosity. Each tour was different depending on who led it, even when the material and subject was the same. Each guide would place an emphasis on something distinct; each would edit and adapt the material to suit their predilections and each would introduce their own anecdotes and interpolations by-the-by. Two things they all had in common were their unbound enthusiasm for the House, and their embodiment of the narrations they shared with visitors. They owned the stories they told, and I believed them. I had been thinking about something Nikos Papastergiadis talked about when he was thinking through Lefebvre's theory of the everyday and how the concept of everyday life can 'illuminate complex ways in which subjects exercise their potential to be emancipatory and critical' (Papastergiadis, 2006, p.32). I wanted to consider developing an artwork for Pollok House from the perspective of *its* everyday.

Sixteen volunteers signed up to lead *I Gladly Strained My Eyes to Follow You*, and we worked closely in the weeks leading up to the exhibition getting to know the texts, opening up their potential meanings and readings, and hearing ourselves speak them out loud in front of the portraits in the various rooms and corridors throughout the House. The contributors had done their work in writing the texts for the tour, now the volunteers took the time

necessary to own them. Some of the words and sentences in the texts were difficult to read and speak; some of the texts were provocative and challenging; some obscure, elusive, and abstract. Yi-Fu Tuan says in his book *Space and place*, that to experience in the active sense 'requires that one venture forth into the unfamiliar and experiment with the elusive and uncertain' (Tuan, 1977, p.9), and that's what each volunteer did. Tuan describes experience as overcoming of perils. The word 'experience' shares a common root (per) with 'experiment', 'expert', and 'perilous'. The 16 volunteers who performed *I Gladly Strained My Eyes to Follow You* stepped out of their comfort zones, experimented with their normal everyday routines and became experts of this new subject. In doing so, they invited visitors and audiences to Pollok House (and Cabinet Interventions / Glasgow International) to share this experience that would hopefully make us think about the absence of women's achievements from official histories, and the importance and responsibility we all have in acknowledging and challenging these gaps. Jacques Rancière writes about how artists and researchers build a stage where we frame stories of new adventures in new idioms that cannot always be anticipated, and how important the spectators' role is in interpreting and translating these stories. *I Gladly Strained My Eyes to Follow You* involved various communities of performers, spectators, translators and interpreters; the writers, the tour guides and the visitors to the House, each responsible in a slightly different way for interpreting the material. 'It calls for spectators who are active as interpreters, who try to invent their own translation in order to appropriate the story for themselves and make their own story out of it. An emancipated community is in fact a community of storytellers and translators' (Rancière, 2007. p.281).

Is it possible that a guided tour of a National Trust for Scotland property might contribute to a more emancipated community? I think it is.

The print room

Lady Anna Maria Stirling Maxwell

1826–1874

Shauna McMullan, artist

Your dress caught in the fire—it was the 21st November 1874, one hundred and forty-four years ago.

How are you surrounded, by whom and by what? Circles and lines, some seen, some not.

It begins with the line of gold that circles your face—a line that traces your eyebrows, upper and lower eyelashes, runs down through your centre parting along the right-hand side of your nose and outlines the sharp edge of your hairline. It is extended slightly with the gold chain sat heavy on your chest and all of this is drawn out by the sheen from your golden hair.

You fell forward and burnt your hand badly.

The gold turns to black in the form of a frame whose tone, weight, scale and craftsmanship vie for our attention, competing with your image.

Your hand had to be amputated.

Situated and fixed as you are here, next to the door, in the print room, between the library and music room, the circles ripple out—connecting you, and this house, with women who have lived and moved across the length and breadth of Europe. I doubt you ever imagined the company you would

come to keep. Jeanne from Paris, Anne Marie from Lignières, Isabella from Fontainebleau, and Dona Maria and Marie Theresa both from Madrid. Elizabeth from Glasgow, Anne from Edinburgh, and Anna Maria from Monimail in Fife. Sally from Shrewsbury, Arabella from Hackney and Caroline from London. Rufina came from Seville and Anne from Cigales, not forgetting Isabella Clara Eugenia from Segovia.

You died 17 days later on the 8th December.

We see neither of your hands here. Both are hidden from our view, as is the small gold circle on your left-hand ring finger, pressing lightly on your vena amoris, ending in a line running directly to your beating heart.



Figure 8: *I Gladly Strained My Eyes to Follow You* (Tine Bek / Lady Anna Maria Stirling Maxwell). Photo: Shauna McMullan.

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Notes

1. <<https://cabinetinterventions.org/>>.^[†]

2. There are several contemporary sources for this and it is usually quoted in English in the form given (not my translation, it is a standard one). It was passed on by eye-witnesses and is widely repeated by contemporaries and historians but the earliest I could find was by Riouffe (1795, p.70), who was imprisoned with her. I refer to it on p. 286 of my book (Reynolds, 2012).^[†]

3. Her self-description comes from de Roux (1966, p.258). You have it here in my translation, which is on p.53 of my book (Reynolds, 2012).^[†]

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About the author

SHAUNA MCMULLAN is an artist and lecturer. Her main areas of research are feminism, geography, and collective practice. Previous projects include: *Cabinet Interventions*, Pollok House, Glasgow (2018); *The Albert Drive Colour Chart*, Tramway, Glasgow (2013); *The Blue Spine Collection*, Glasgow Women's Library (2010); *Travelling the Distance*, commissioned by the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh (2006); and *Via*, shown in the Toyota Museum of Modern Art, Japan (2005). She works as a lecturer in the Department of Sculpture and Environmental Art at Glasgow School of Art where she is a contributor to the Reading Landscape Research Group; she is also part of the international research network Creative Centre for Fluid Territories (CCFT).