

How to Relate

How do I tell you about a work by Jem Noble? Before photographic reproduction and digital networks made time travel possible, I would have employed eidetic description, which would be so vivid and accurate that the artwork's very presence would be transliterated into language, and from this the reader could then draw the same inferences as if standing directly before it. But then the advent of conceptualism displaced the need to delineate sensory data, since the art object had become a longhand place marker for an idea; and this idea, more often than not, was already compressed into language, which could be readily handed on and reconstituted, like a stock cube, in the hot fluid of the mind.

But this stock cube can only be fully reconstituted if the artwork holds the meat of an idea in rather straightforward suspension. Noble's artworks have all manner of relations with ideas and meanings, but they do not contain them. One work might goad or tickle meaning into existence, another might strain one idea through the misinterpretation another; yet another work might extract significance from an imagined absurdity, a fourth might squeeze inferences from inherited flummery. And so a fully eidetic description of Noble's work would necessarily spill over the girdle of physicality and subject matter into more unmanageable registers of association and irrelevance, because an artwork, for Noble, does not sit at the centre of its constituent materials and associations, playing sovereign to its subjects. It is, rather, something that he has massaged into prominence from a matted universe of significances and insignificances.

The real question, then, is not *how* to describe an artwork, but at which point to *stop* describing it. An engineer for Nissan once told me that the company retrains new recruits in problem solving, supplanting the typical British knee-jerk reaction to product faults with a methodological Japanese approach that requires the engineer to ask 'why?' six times, each time directing the 'why?' to the preceding answer. For example: 'Why did the cup fall to the ground?' 'Because the man knocked it.' 'Why did he knock it?' 'Because the gap was too narrow and he was in a careless mood because he's in love.' 'Why is the

gap too narrow?’ ‘Because the extra space was needed to store the butter mountain.’
‘Why is there a butter mountain?’ ‘Because he thought butter was going to be this year’s
must have, but then everyone went on a diet. Do you want some? It’s really good on
ginger nuts.’

As you can see, the Nissan method may work within the closed system of car design, but
the moment you apply it to the world at large the process breaks down before coming
close to converging on absolute causes. This is because desires, mistakes and imaginings
make a mess of linear causality. On top of this, an artwork, while very good at asking
questions like ‘why?’, tends to be configured to trigger a deluge of doubts rather than
solutions; and Noble particularly delights in the fact that such unfathomable, messy
complexity is always just a turn of the screw away, and is generally poised, ready to twist
it.

Take his *Liberations*, for instance, where three videos are projected on to screens cut to
the shape of the objects represented: a washing machine, a tap, a loo. Larger than life-size
and with water flowing through them potentially forever, they have been afforded
mythical attributes, and quite right too. Such white goods occupy the broad category of
things that have been rendered invisible through over-familiarity, and yet they are
enduring and ingenious tools that maintain civic health, personal hygiene and domestic
harmony; they are the household interfaces of sophisticated engineering systems,
embodying centuries of knowledge of the physics of flow and the biology of dirt; they are
a means of disposal of matter that could be incriminating or embarrassing, and as such
are exceptional narrative cues and change enablers. Noble’s amplified cinematic heroes,
then, in their eerily vacated installation spaces, demand a re-evaluation of the terms of
their disappearance in everyday life. They may well recede into the complexity of the
system in which they, and we, participate, but this is because they too are characters in a
straggling epic and not simply incidental must-haves in our own petty trajectories.

These backstories of plumbing and sewerage technologies, of disease and toilette have
been subjected to historiography, even if they are seldom reread. A piece like *Magnetic*

City relates a history that, in all probability, would never ordinarily be made visible. By going back through a video hire shop's administrative records Noble traced on a map the peregrinations of a VHS tape of *Harold and Maude* – a kookily romantic 1970s film about intergenerational love – its journeys between the video shop and the homes to which it was rented forming a spiky thistle-like shape. When we narrate *Magnetic City* the shop becomes a point of eternal return within a subversively dull road movie, the tape a protagonist that delivers a second-order narrative to another group of sub-characters on sofas. Projected alongside the map a copy of the tape's opening copyright declaration plays, and the rolling interference, like stretch marks, verifies the inter-personal entanglements it has engendered between these first and second order roles, between the film's fictional characters and the real people who have watched it. While the map constitutes empirical evidence of measurable facts, the scarification of the magnetic tape represents something more irretrievable: the impact of the film on the thoughts, speech and actions of those who have watched it. And it provides yet another layer of geo-political commentary too, on the disappearance of the patina of use through digitisation, prompting essayistic thoughts on the psychology of dematerialised possessions.

But whereas *Liberations* still describes a world governed by the logic of commerce, *Howard No / Fuck Computational Theory of Mind* seems to particularise a series of consumerist non-sequiturs: an exhibition by an artist called Howard No, who takes the wooden frames of traditional easel painting as his medium, is mounted in a commercial storage unit, in collaboration with a luxury hotel, and then gifted to a tourist boat in the shape of a Guatemalan refugee's hairstyle. References scatter like a crowd of shoppers at the sound of gunshots, but it turns out that this is accurately illustrative of the computational theory of mind in hand: The Frame Problem. This paradox was raised in artificial intelligence circles in the late 1980s and has radiated through cognitive science and philosophies of mind, since it asks, 'how do we account for our apparent ability to make decisions on the basis only of what is relevant to an ongoing situation without having explicitly to consider all that is not relevant?' One answer is that an animal mind is dynamic, constantly updating its beliefs about the world and gauging effects of each incremental change throughout a system. But this gives rise to the question, to what level

of measurability are these computations performed and where is the edge of the system? When do we assume that, from this point onwards, the rest of the world is untouched? One answer is that we can never assume this, and that our speculations and anticipations must regress to infinity. This would produce a paralyzing state of extreme neurosis. Another answer is that it is not for us to anticipate the effect of the effect of our actions at all, but to attribute authorship to the whole system, and the animal, vegetable and mineral components that inhabit it. This would produce a paralyzing state of extreme irrelevance. The answer is possibly at ninety degrees to both these answers, along a third, fourth or fifth axis of contemplation. But anyway, it seems that we are back at the opening conundrum of how to relate something that exceeds the usual parameters of accounting; and it suddenly occurs to me that the only viable solution is arbitrary, whimsical abandonment...