Knotworm: Pauline de Souza interviews Sam Keogh

Pauline de Souza and Sam Keogh discuss Keogh’s work Knotworm. Originally commissioned for the Lyon Biennale in 2019, Knotworm comprised an installation of sculpture, collage, paintings and video around the base of a 250 tonne ‘tunnel boring machine’. Here, they discuss parasitism, sabotage, toilets and a series of tiny holes made in the outer margins of a copy of Doris Lessing’s 1985 novel The Good Terrorist.

Pauline de Souza: How were you invited to participate in the Lyon Biennale?

Sam Keogh: I was invited by Hugo Vitrani, one of the seven curators from the Palais de Tokyo tasked with putting together the show. Hugo first saw my work Kapton Cadaverine at the Rijksakademie Open in Amsterdam in 2017. It was a large-scale installation of sculpture and...
collage which hosted a performance. The installation was something like a film set, or an interior of a dilapidated spaceship complete with a cryogenic chamber, malfunctioning control panels and a ‘territory table’. The performance entailed a lonely astronaut character waking up too early from cryogenic stasis because of a faulty pod. He had been awake for between two to five years (he had lost track of how long) and was in dialogue with the ship’s onboard computer who read his diary entries from 2016 back to him – fragmented thoughts on the rise of fascism, Brexit, science fiction, slime moulds. These ‘computer voice’ monologues were interspersed with his attempts to make sense of where and when he was in time and also space as he explained the collage and sculpture strewn around the ship’s surfaces as vain attempts to make things work again, which in turn construct some kind of cognitive map of the audiences present. He would also occasionally address the audience as his hallucinations brought on by years of isolation.

I explain this work as it had a similar associative logic to what I presented in Lyon. As a whole it was convoluted, tangled or matted together; lots of constituent parts suspended in a medium. Or an aggregate of fragmented information, stories, materials and affects which is then sculpted into some kind of shape through a live performance or video. The hope is that these elements add up to a constellation which describes something about the present moment or circumscribes the present rather than describes it.

**PdS:** How did you approach your commission?

**SK:** The spaces the curators were trying to fill were a huge complex of warehouses in an old washing machine factory in the south of the city. So, from quite early on, it was made clear to me that they wanted something big. The biennial also relies on local industry to donate or lend materials to an artist’s project, so I was asked to keep that in mind. I had been doing some research on tunnel boring machines (TBMs), and knew one of the places that made them in Europe was in Lyon, so I requested the acquisition of one. It is basically a massive found object which satisfied the demand for spectacle and opened up a space for me to do what I wanted to do – make an installation of sculpture, collage and film which knotted together disparate anecdotes and histories of gentrification, tunnelling, sabotage and ecology. The specific TBM that was used in the work was previously used to extend London Underground’s Northern Line to Battersea Power Station, a newly gentrified part of Wandsworth made up of embassies, luxury apartment complexes and high-end shops. So that became one of the key sites in my research and in the video. But the risk was that the size of the TBM would crush any work in its vicinity. Its presence couldn’t be competed with, so it had to become a game of scale. I tried to think about the machine as a kind of host for a parasite, the parasite being a delicate and convoluted installation growing around its base which would somehow sap its energy or deflate its phallic presence.

**PdS:** Can you elaborate on the importance of the Japanese knotweed?

**SK:** The sculptural elements in the installation are made from sculptures of small toilets filled with cement which are sprouting this kind of multifarious system of overhead roots made from...
rubbish, plastic and Japanese knotweed. Knotweed is grown in France for biomass, so it’s easy to get, but in the UK it’s illegal. When she was Home Secretary, Theresa May actually introduced an ASBO (Anti-Social Behaviour Order) especially for failure to control or willfully planting Japanese knotweed in the UK. This is because it’s rhizomatic root system can grow incredibly quickly under the foundations of buildings, interfering with plumbing and electricity. It can grow up through cement and tarmacadam, so it can cause serious structural damage. It is also almost impossible to eradicate. To give an example, one of the only ways to get rid of it is to dig out the land to a depth of two metres around the plant and then dispose of the excavated earth in a licensed landfill. The disturbed plant matter is classed as a controlled substance because of the way it grows. In the right conditions, a segment of the stem only a few centimetres long can start sprouting again, even after laying dormant for over twenty years. All these factors mean that it can knock fifty percent off the value of a property if it is found on the land, making its control necessary in maintaining the ‘health’ of the property market in the UK. I first heard of it through Twitter. A friend had tweeted that it looked like they were going to be evicted by their landlord, but when the landlord came around and discovered this plant in the garden, he changed his mind because he wasn’t going to be able to sell the house.

I asked what this amazing plant was that could prevent evictions, and was told it was knotweed. It made me begin to think of a kind of heretical urban ecology where landlords and estate agents were considered as uncontrolled apex-predators who might be kept at bay by the introduction of Japanese knotweed. Or bringing the virulence of knotweed into relation with another type of virulence, that of property speculation and gentrification as a means to irritate a certain strain of liberal environmentalism that has no class politics, that doesn’t see these issues as tangled together within the totality of capital.

Sam Keogh, Knotworm, 2019, mixed media installation, detail, image courtesy of the Lyon Biennial
**PdS:** This overhead root system is largely made from what looks like vacuum-packed rubbish and dirt, all squeezed into long clear plastic tubes that grow from the knotweed sprouting out of the little toilets. And then there’s these small chairs for viewers to watch a film which plays on a TV perched inside the back of the massive TBM. Can you speak more about the choice of these objects?

**SK:** The rubbish the ‘roots’ are made from was all collected from the area outside my studio. I have been calling those rubbish roots ‘prolapsed roots’ in my head for a while, like a root turned inside out, made from the stuff which it moves through – rubbish and dirt made almost sentient. The toilets and chairs are also objects that were left behind when the nursery closed before the building became artists’ studios. The film briefly explains the history of the space; it was built beneath an elevated concrete dual carriageway in West London in the late 1970s and was designed by an architect in consultation with the community. It was run by parents and local activists with the help of a then supportive council. It was actually more than a nursery, it was also a family centre, meaning it ran adult education classes, health checks, and organised group holiday trips for poor parents, etc. So it was really an integral part of the community for decades. It was shut down in 2013, I think, as a direct result of Tory austerity. And it in fact sits less than two hundred metres from the ruin of Grenfell Tower, which burnt down for the exact same reasons that the nursery was shut – Tories hate poor people. The area directly surrounding the nursery is one of the main memorial sites for Grenfell and is covered in graffiti, votives, poems and prayers. So grief, loss and remembrance as well as deep anger are clearly articulated on every surface immediately outside the studio. And we, as artists, are in there, temporarily occupying this hollowed-out shell.

**PdS:** This is contrasted with footage shot in a much more affluent part of London. Is it the new development in Battersea that you mentioned?

**SK:** Yes. Early in the video is footage of hoarding with generic images of rich people drinking coffee and arranging flowers under the words ‘positive’ and ‘positivity’, and behind that hoarding is one of the largest building sites in Europe – essentially an absolutely massive luxury apartment, shopping and office complex built in and around the base of the old Battersea Power Station. This is where the TBM I mentioned was previously used to extend the London Underground. The film worms through parts of this site, stopping at various points, like a large orange fibreglass sculpture that sits beside a pond. The narrator picks apart the formal aspects of the sculpture, describing it as ‘charmingly cartoonish’. It also has a big ceramic flat cap and a Sports Direct mug perched on it, suggesting that the workers have taken a break from the power station and/or building site and are harmlessly profaning the sculpture as a picnic table. It is a strange and anachronistic evocation of an idealised image of the working class, who are, of course, excluded from enjoying this sculpture in the middle of a private luxury apartment complex. I think I use it in the film as a kind of counter example of how a play with scale can be used in a pernicious way to reinforce the malign powers of gentrification.
**PdS:** These sites are not clearly defined in the film though. Rather, they seem confused together through quite deliberate editing techniques and mixtures of diegetic and extradiegetic sound.

**SK:** Yes; for instance, the sculpture in Battersea is found inside the old sand pit in the playground. Or sometimes the camera dives down a plughole, transporting the viewer to another site, the Brunel Museum in Rotherhithe, or down one of the little toilets to emerge from a hole in a tree. The cameras I used to shoot are my iPhone and a very cheap endoscopic camera used to see down blocked drains, but it also implies the inside of bodies and being able to penetrate and travel through them. I think the formal quality of the footage, when you recognise it as endoscopic, anticipates a kind of claustrophobic image of a body’s interior. It somehow makes the world that it films bodily, or too close, or abject. But yes, the editing techniques I am using are a very old way of collapsing different spacetimes together into one multilayered place. Video is one of the places where it’s quite easy to do that, to make these edits that the audience is delighted by because they know their eye is being tricked, but still they go with the camera, down the pipe, or the toilet, or the drain to another part of the city.
**PdS:** Can we talk about the connection between the toilets and Doris Lessing’s novel *The Good Terrorist*?

**SK:** Maybe I can just quote one of the passages that I quote in the video first:

The smell on this floor was strong. It came from upstairs. More slowly they went up generously wide stairs and confronted a stench which made Jasper briefly retch. Alice’s face was stern and proud. She flung open a door on to a scene of plastic buckets, topped with shit. But this room had been deemed sufficiently filled, and the one next to it had been started. Ten or so red, yellow and orange buckets stood in a group, waiting.

That is a passage on page three, where Alice, a thirty-six-year-old squatter, has discovered where the inhabitants of her new home have been shitting. The council had filled the toilets with cement to dissuade people from moving in. It’s an old form of sabotage that is still used today: ruin something which is perfectly functional but unused in order to maintain its market value. In this case, it is a four-storey Victorian townhouse somewhere in West London in the mid-1980s, and the novel charts Alice’s attempts to clean and repair it. One of her first tasks is to chisel the cement from the toilet bowls, then she sets about digging a hole in the garden to dump the buckets of shit into.

The toilets in my installation are also filled with cement, but they have knotweed sprouting through them. I think the effect of combining these things is clear to the viewer once they have taken it all in. But to say something more about *The Good Terrorist*... it’s an interesting book. It was written by Lessing in the mid-1980s, so well into her dissolution with communism and her difficult relationship with feminism. Ultimately, its ‘moral’ is quite glib and reactionary – that radical language can make young and naive people become terrorists. But the book produces something far in excess of this lesson at the end. It describes beautifully, in the way that Lessing is famous for, the gap between what people claim to be and how they actually act, and how that gap is the real rather than symbolic space of politics.

It also describes the life world of this squatted house so lucidly as a kind of stew of people, materials, objects and actions. The prose feels sticky or thick, a jumble of objects suspended in a gloopy medium. The plot doesn’t progress so much as arbitrarily crystallise around these objects – the ephemera of scraped-by group living, a large catering pot, sleeping bags, a forsythia in the kitchen in brilliant yellow bloom, plastic bowls filled with powdered chemicals, ‘wholesome bread’, lentils, gun parts, dungarees, and lined curtains stolen from a mother’s house – all suspended in a mixture of soil, shit, soup, coffee and cold water (because the boiler needs replacing). There was something in the way that these materials are combined in the novel that I wanted to use in my work, to form a kind of aggregate that could be burrowed into.

**PdS:** You also talk about the book itself been being eaten by a moth or bookworm, and you make connections with the shipworm. Can we hear more about those?
SK: The shipworm is a much maligned little mollusc that burrows into waterborne wood. They have been a problem for seafarers for centuries because they can destroy wooden hulled ships. They are also interesting because they are so globally ubiquitous that they are classed as ‘cryptogenic’, meaning no one knows where they evolved. But they likely evolved in mangroves, where wood meets water. Mangroves exist in a lot of places, except for northern Europe, meaning shipworm only became a problem for Europeans once they started to colonise the rest of the world. In the video, they are described as a parasite of colonialism, boring holes in trade routes and slave routes, but they also provided the biomimetic inspiration for an early piece of tunnelling machinery called a tunnel shield, designed by Isambard Kingdom Brunel in the mid-1800s to dig the Thames Tunnel. This machine later evolved into what is now the TBM used in the installation. There is a scene in the film where I’m sitting on the tube train and reading a copy of The Good Terrorist where the outer margin of the pages has been eaten by a bookworm, a tiny larvae of a moth that also eats wood, boring through the book in much the same way as the massive TBM forms tunnels for the underground to pass through. So again, there are these moments of scalar shift from the tiny to the gargantuan, which are then tangled and tunnelled through each other.
**PdS**: You say ‘shit’ a lot in the video to enforce your idea of abjection. Can you talk more about this use of abjection in your work?

**SK**: Yes, I do say ‘shit’ a lot! There is lots of waste, abjected matter, rubbish and dirt in the work – I’m thinking of the stuff which gets pulled out of the ground to make a tunnel, the cement that fills up a toilet to prevent a squatter moving in and the buckets which collect that shit because the toilet has been blocked. All this stuff is the refuse of capital, and it includes people, lives, histories – the catastrophic piles of stuff glimpsed by Walter Benjamin’s angel as she looks backward through time. I think one of our tasks is to attend to these catastrophic piles, to insist that they are meaningful, or that they have buried within them undetonated elements that might be used in some way to break the surface of the present moment where it appears as impenetrable or smooth or inevitable or natural.

In the film, I quote another chunk of *The Good Terrorist* that involves digging a hole in the back garden of the squat in which to bury all these accumulated buckets of shit. But when they start digging into the earth, they start finding all these things – glass bottles, the skeleton of a dog, a broken garden fork, etc – and then they have to solve the problem of where to put that displaced material before they can fill the hole they’ve dug with their own shit. Once the task is complete, one of the squatters starts talking about shit, and mentions that if all the shit a person makes in their lives were collected it would fill the Battersea power station. I think that’s a really good idea. I think we should wait until the Battersea power station is built, and then we should fill it with shit.

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*Knotworm* was at the Centre Cultural Irlandais (CCI) in Paris, 24 January–1 March 2020. Sam Keogh has also recently released a short book entitled *IMPOSSIBLE KNOTWORM* in Ma Bibliothèque’s ‘Good Reader’ series, available to order from the Ma Bibliothèque website [https://mabibliotheque.cargo.site/Sam-Keogh-IMPOSSIBLE-KNOTWORM-2020](https://mabibliotheque.cargo.site/Sam-Keogh-IMPOSSIBLE-KNOTWORM-2020). A new iteration of *Knotworm*, which will include a performance, will be shown in London as part of Block Universe 2020.

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