

**EXIT REVIEW**  
**Degree shows in Liverpool**  
**Joanna Spitzner**

**Christina Baber (JMU)**

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Walter Benjamin spoke of the bourgeois interior as one of casings in which its inhabitants leave tracings of their existence and use. The interior of Baber's installation may lack the velvet surfaces of the Victorian home, but it offers the viewer a collection of traces from which the absence of its resident is strongly felt and a narrative of events is suggested.

"The smell of old people," another visitor to the space commented. Our setting is a grandmother's home, convincingly created—the royal family paraphernalia, sentimental tchokes, including an "I Love You Grandma" plaque—the décor indicates a personality, what turns this interior into a theater are its clues of the events our characters have endured. "What happened" is represented through a knocked over teacup and half-eaten biscuits, a partially smoked cigar in the ashtray and empty wine glasses, shoes, knitting left out—the signs of disorder are those of human presence, of being left-in-the-middle-of something, of disruption. [The final action is a broom pushed up against a short door (more on that later).]

If we enter this space as a criminal, breaking into someone's privacy, we soon become the detective—we are presented with the clues and must read its features—to envision absence. The crime scene is a contemporary space—a place full of evidence, of traces or *something happened* which can be read—we read a place to learn about what is not there or already gone. Evidence is always connected to something else, its cause, and is an indication of something else.

What do we think of "setting" as art—of verisimilitude? The context and its artificiality makes this into theater, and our sense of our own presence is heightened

When I first entered this room, it was quiet—it was only the next day that a voice cried for help from behind the small door. It was disturbing, and added a bit of black humor to the piece. But in bringing the event into the present—we understand what has happened and now we see its sinister intent—the voice becomes a sort of punchline—it all adds up to being trapped in the closet. I felt it made too much sense of it all, locked the space into a certain reading, when I much preferred playing Sherlock.

**Oliver Beck (JMU)**

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Put two things together and some sort of relationship forms. Beck's largest piece, "Piece No. 1" consists of 45 panels of varying sizes, arranged with careful linear wall space in between each. These paintings are mainly on wood, but also tin, plastic and a car door, and contain a lot of "style"—such as constructivism, the comic book, and graphic design.

All together, there are suggested relations, but it often feels like just a hodge-podge of whatever the artist felt like making that day. The car door offers one reading, that of

traveling, an absorption of the world through looking out the moving window. There's a trip through art history—constructivism, landscape, souvenirs, symbols—guns, cans, the endangered human being. It reminds me of clip art: a variety of illustrations in a limited range of styles—pick and choose. The most pronounced difference is a painting of an atomic bomb explosion—an image with an overpowering meaning and a stereotype of the fragility of man.

There is much joy in this work, Beck obviously loves to paint and draw. The use of tape as paint (the application of color), the engraving of line into the wood seem to be extending traditional vocabularies. But the technique, form, and concept don't seem to sit well together in these works and the strongest elements are left bare as technique only.

Carved lines in wood could engage in the breakdown of surface and flatness of a panel, announce its objectness; or transform something ephemeral like a doodle into permanence, written in stone, thereby recalling its initial temporary nature. Wood and its pattern, decoration, fields of color—does it matter here whether its subject is a thinking man or a tin can? It doesn't. And this gives the work a generic quality. Without the conversation among its relationships, we are left with arbitrariness.

### **Andrew Bennett (JMU)**

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How do we judge a quality of mark—lightness or force of hand, the operations of gesture: the residue of an action, of contact between things. There is control, lack of control, the familiarity and at the same time strangeness of our own bodies. How does the body move and what traces does it leave? My hand was here.

Bennett's scribbles are of sharp angles, then softened with smudges—the finger dulls the mechanical point; there is repetition and movement. His marks become architecture—constructed spaces. In the small white cube of his exhibition, we are given three scales: 2 head-sized plaster panels, a wall, and slightly marked graph paper labeled "Continents."

Scale and density are the problems of this work. The smaller works are interesting for the fields of smokey space and markings it presents; and while the wall offers the possibility of this experience of field. It is instead a web of tread marks to drive us across the wall. We can't really enter either of these.

The pretty marks seem to say "I exist," but I can't engage in this work beyond just admiring some fancy doodling.

### **Dave Bixter (JMU)**

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Bixter's work is engaged with the bodily perception of space and shape in abstraction—it depends upon the creation of illusion with minimal means. He uses geometrical three dimensional forms with primary colors and white to play tricks on the eyes. Where the edges of color meet the edges of white simultaneous volume and flatness is produced.

The most dramatic work entails walking down a dark corridor—space encroaches onto the body without sight, we are unsure of our steps. Relief then comes with the restoration of sight: a window, an illuminated diorama of exaggerated perspective, another corridor, of immaterial thread, an illustration of a constructed perception of space.

The most interesting aspects of this work are the play between the optical and the body, and this is fairly straightforward. Is the subtle drama worth it? There is a buildup to the punchline—ours senses are shifted and then restored in a fairly quick amount of time. The use of color seems to be about some sort of purity, or blankness.

### **Matthew Dolan (JMU)**

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Stepping into Dolan's space is like entering the fantasy world of a semi-inept inventor, and the ineptness is what is endearing. His machines, plans and models are all hand-drawn, hand-written, made of cardboard. In one sense he is leveling high-technology into the handmade, taken from the point of view of a pre-adolescent boy inventing machines without the constraints of practical engineering. It is exactly this uselessness which is important to the work.

Central to his laboratory is a cardboard machine which fills and dominates the space, The Drawing Machine: The Homme System and the No Circle System. This is a sample from Jack O' the Clock Machinery, Ltd, producer of the generic machine—an arcade video game-like box—(video games: the machines where fantasy worlds are promised) which, although out of order, it seems to spit out its calculations into a trash bin

The work brings out some points of experience around the machine—technology can often be baffling, we really don't see what it going on under its outer box. Dolan's work alludes to this hiddenness of equipment. One drawing alludes to Klempean's chess player, a machine that traveled around and astounded Europe, defeating anyone it played in chess. Was it a mechanical marvel or a hoax? Or like Dolan's machines, a generic box from which something is produced by a hidden operator inside?

There is a possibility of critique of our relationship to and dream of technology, of meaningless manufacture, of the idea of progress itself in this room. The pathos and befuddlement dominates this work and that persona dulls its potential of critique of systems while maintaining gadget love.

### **Andy Eden (WIRRAL)**

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Abstract expressionism epitomizes painting's domain of surface and color and gesture. What can it say today? We have seen Pollack and de Kooning, Twombly and Gorky (not to mention more recent neo-expressionists). Does painting necessarily recall its history? Must it a painting answer to it?

Eden's paintings are all those things we can expect from abstract expressionism: fields of color and space, squiggles of gesture, drips, and thick brushstrokes. As paintings, they seem to be sincerely about those issues, without recognition of developments of art

since the 1950s. Why is this a problem? The autonomy of the paintings can only be judged on taste. They remain securely in the artist's own subjectivity, it isn't really engaging with anything in the world—certainly not an awareness of its own history.

There are two versions of space in Eden's work: an atmospheric biomorphic soup, and mapping of space. The map-like pieces—"Collaboration of More than One Thought," and "My White Room" seem like ariel views, spreading out along a shallow surface. The other works use drips and circular forms to produce murky, thick space and bright points of focus.

The process of making, the building up of layers, covering over, explore interiority and surface. Some brushstrokes are sloppy, they are just filling in space. The central problem is conveying a subjective experience in a manner beyond mere virtuosity.

### **Gareth Houghton (JMU)**

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Houghton is playing with the methods of the media and the power of symbols in order to critique the war with Iraq. The flag is central to his interventions, and Houghton incorporates both the British and American flags. Often the differences between the two are negligible

War photography has the ability to deeply affect us, as did the image from the Vietnam War of girl, naked, running down the street in anguish. Other times, images are met with indifference, as seems to be the case with those from our aggressions with Iraq. Houghton selected various journalistic photographs and replaces certain figures with the flag. The flag becomes figure—a person becomes anonymous, inscribed into nationalism, or else the nation becomes a human figure acting upon the world.

The photographs themselves are not neutral, and Houghton's interventions heighten this awareness. They are dramatic, displaying strong human emotions—the mother in pieta pose, the strong contrast of soldier and dead bodies, people looking in on death, the politician looking out.

What does the flag mean—a fabricated symbol from top down, a symbol of nationalism as militancy; its meaning—pride of country, patriotism—colors of blue, red, white are not grass-roots agreements but power displayed to its own people and to those of another country.

In another room, Houghton displays flag paintings—flag dripping blood in various ways, in one, a decay of wormy texture could suggest death, but seems more decorative here. The tension between decoration and symbol is the struggle of these paintings, and they fail to transform the symbol of the flag into critique. The dripping blood also tends to get heavy-handed.

Another series of works use collage to produce funny one-liners. The image of Saddam Hussein in the electric chair lacks sharpness- the connection between the US assassination of a country's leader and of its own criminals brings up the morality of state murder, (crime, killing internally versus killing externally) but here, with Saddam's head large, like a baby—seems to say just that we have him to death and doesn't really critique that or analyze the mentality that justifies such an act.

Houghton is attempting to engage in the life or death issues of the day. Going to war is no light matter, and this work is only beginning to scratch the surface of understanding the structures of our society that enable such actions to be taken.

### **Liz Kearney (JMU)**

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I think Kearney is trying to present us with ideas of spaces--important spaces occupied by life--, and with the giving of pleasure, and is somehow about children; but what about these things isn't always clear.

The installation is like a television studio for a children's show taking place in the kitchen. The space also resembles an office, with clean lines and perpendiculars not usually associated with a cozy, worked-in space. The kitchen is a quintessential social space, the space of the feminine. Along one wall is a long shelf with 33 jars of jam, some emptied. The label depicts a Chronicles of Narnia-type Queen, jam tart her crown. The interior has been created in red and greens, slightly evocative of Christmas, but more so foregrounding the color of jam and its compliment. In all, it feels like the kind of space Edward Scissorhands would occupy.

The two performances within this space draw the strongest comparisons. Both are enacted anonymously (at least, when I was there, the artist wasn't performing in the present, although she does bake tarts in the installation at times) and are about sharing a gift. The looped video playing on the television on the counter shows a woman with her head cut off, dancing to tango-esque classical music. The dance is with an enchanted skirt, which sometimes dances itself. At times, the body is a toreador, graceful and playful; at other times we see Marilyn Monroe from "the Seven Year Itch," her skirt flying up. The video hovers between a private performance of joy and a burlesque display. The other performance is of baking jam tarts, which the artists does in the space, but mostly it is the plate of tarts left on the table and its ingredients tucked away on shelves that show us the performance. Both are done anonymously and for the viewer. The tarts are a simple pleasure offered, that dance is as well. That both are displayed through the absence of its maker focuses it to the act itself.

The anonymity of both the space and the actions within it are disturbing while at the same time welcoming gestures are made. It is an unsentimental space tackling many issues of sentiment. The jam and tarts beckons a sense of childhood. The jam jar Queen and the video imply a sexuality, sexualizing the mother and perhaps also the child. The undercurrents of the piece are suggesting a more complex understanding of childhood, one with a dark side and a sexual aspect. The feminine figure of Mother /Marilyn/Queen by giving us Turkish delight, and also ways to grow up.

What isn't clear about this piece? The space itself—the design of the kitchen can overpower the acts within it. The work doesn't really take on the passage of time and repetition suggested by the emptying jam jars and looping of the dance. The act of giving is more of offering, and I cannot tell if this is an attitude of unselfishness or indifference. Whether we take it or not depends on how active we wish to interact, one could easily walk away without accepting the gift.

### **Evonne Keeler (JMU)**

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Keeler's work is trying to display the body and something about sexuality, using industrial materials and forms—rope for hair, copper wire as life form, and most literally, a manufactured bottle of a male torso. Her choices are often barely transformed readymades. While they do suggest the body, they fail to evoke it.

While Minimalist works were able to conjure the body through the industrial vessel, it was Eva Hesse who seemed to most directly do so. The uncanniness of Hesse's work was its bodily presence, its fragility, of flesh and vessels from material transformed through unnatural processes.

The pieces in Keeler's show tended to be linear—lines pulled and thickened to make an exaggeration of the body without a presence. . The work illustrates its title, "Soft and Tender, Young and Lovely," the name for a row of stretched nylons with thin legs and knees; or "Bear it in Mind," a scale weighing the twine-hair stand-in for the head. The industrial wins out over the body, the forms stay manufactured. Perhaps this is what Keeler is trying to get at, but the work is unable to transform the literal

### **Peter Marsh (WIRRAL)**

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Marsh's three works share a sense of monumentality and of marking. The most straightforward monument is "Hope #1," a baptismal font of welded steel. Its base has three sides, each with different Christian symbols welded into its surface. "Hope #2", a large wall relief of layered steel, contains many of the same symbols, Greek letters and hieroglyphs—the chalice, host, hand, the cross. This language is added as a caption—an explanation written right onto the work rather than accompanying it. They also carry the weight of the work's meaning. In the artist's statement, Marsh declares that this work is made to right the failure of art to address religious themes in any way other than shock.

There is a dialogue between "Hope 1" and "Hope 2"—the second seems to be made from the remnants from #1, a disorderly response to the order of the Baptismal font, where symbols are arranged to illustrate, or for the intention of meaning; #2 dives into the arbitrariness of the sign. Both pieces use the cut out as a form and surface, in #1 the gridded ovals of metal form a flame, while they take on chaotic pattern in the wall relief.

All of Marsh's work share surfaces that are marked with scars, cutting, and burning. The text itself doesn't illuminate. The religious symbols fix meaning while those undecipherable become decoration, without any structural purpose. This is the problem of the work—its elements are selected with purpose, but then arranged to become meaningless. The source of the text is from the Bible, about hope, but one would never know this by looking at the work.

### **Susan Massey (JMU)**

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Two poles of Massey's work "Welcome to the Little Bronx" three canvases on which smoothly painted image of a the same house are attached to a metal grid; and "Wig

Wam Manor” chaotic mix of the brushstroke, color and the rectangle—show a struggle to come to terms with abstract painting.

One group of paintings evoke landscape and dwelling places (including a burning house), another group are expressionistic color fields, with layering of different blocks of color. There is a sense of assembly in the work which invites relationships to be created by the viewer. The paintings speak to one another in different ways—hard and soft edges, the figure of the house, the movement around a rectangle.

The weaknesses of the work are its potential. There is a struggle with what painting does / can do, the work isn’t always sure of its purpose. The house is such a strong archetype, as is the large brushstroke or the layered drip. These signs anchor the work and allow the artist to tentatively explore the task of painting.

### **Lisa Milward (WIRRAL)**

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Lisa Milward’s work is on the verge of breaking out of institutional demands for an object. One piece cries out to be a public art monument, while the other is a celebration of the street. They are confined by their scale and location in the gallery.

They both employ cutting, the removal of material and inner illumination, as well as the car itself. The car and car door take the role of canvas in these works, and I am not entirely sure it is needed, despite being so central to the making. “Maestro Self Portrait” is a car pulled apart, driving down the wall, which has been vandalized with glitter and decoration, but not with enough excess. The actions upon the car recall the street, as if this work was a cleaned up version of a stripped down, abandoned car.

The second piece, “Open Doors” seems to be a public sculpture inside. Three car doors are rotated sideways and attached to create a revolving door, one in which a chaos of marks produce something in between hieroglyphics and lace. These are placed on a triangular pedestal in which grass is growing. It is a monument to urban camouflage.

The work is the strongest in its engagement with marking as destruction. “Open Doors” is highly controlled, while the marks of Maestro Self Portrait seem at time to be just messing around, decoration without design. The scrappiness of the work—the use of car—loses itself to becoming important objects. Milward should feel she has permission to stop being tied to the object and go make work on the street.

### **Robbie Ross (JMU)**

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The American critic Clement Greenberg designated kitsch as that which mimics the effects of aesthetic experience without its underlying cause. There is an ease with kitsch that Greenberg was against, we somehow had to work for a true experience, to expand our experience of ourselves, not reassure and reaffirm it.

Velvet Elvis paintings are kitsch par excellence, a sentimental figure emerges in neon colors from a lush surface. One could say the same thing of Ross’s paintings. The paintings, abstract splatters which look like the cosmos or a zygote, recall mythical

creation, an effect of awe rooted in sentimentality for some universal and those mysteries of life. His choice of colors is similar to those of a velvet Elvis: fluorescent whites, orange-reds and blues. And, of course, they are painted on velvet, a glittery sheen, radiance darkness.

Special effects amaze us, there is a fascination in seeing the spectacular, and the realm of the spectacle is dominated by a series of effects. These paintings are not spectacular; they strive for the effect of aesthetic pleasure, but not in any way pleasurable.

### **Angelica Smith (WIRRAL)**

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Each is of Smith's paintings of flowers are well-designed, and the design of the painting dominates its subject. While the work is conducted in paint, it more strongly references to digital image—pixels and abstractions; line and color; layering. The work has a scientific attitude—intense observation, anatomical illustration and different systems of representation.

Each painting expands upon one flower in three different spaces. There is a realistically painted segment of the plant, a cross-section in separated colors, and a fluid line drawing based on the overall plant form, all carried out on a flat, pastel color field. The images move from observation to calculation to tattoo.

The enchantment with flowers is destroyed by the overpowering look of paintings. While the artist's statement is about the association of flower to security, intensification of the senses, and childhood; none of this is expressed in the paintings themselves. There is a conflict of emotion to rationality—the control of space seems to neutralize its referent, and the flowers remain decorative and are unable to be more than a pattern for applying color and creating shapes. The techniques of the artist become instrumentality: operating upon its subject without concern to its specificities.

### **Helen Sutton (JMU)**

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The everyday is what escapes, Blanchot writes—it is that area of life which is ungraspable. If written into the newspaper, for example, it becomes something else, an object. And yet this ungraspability is what is libratory, it is where "real" life happens, experienced but unnoticed. This is a call to art as well—an area of life not co-opted, or at least directly controlled, by power, it is perhaps life / experience at its most humble, an area of experience where there is the possibility for art and life to come together.

But to examine the everyday—to attempt to grasp it, alters it. This is its difficulty. Helen Sutton's capture, photographs--snapshots, really--and recording of activities are both systematic and not. How to select, organize the information of the everyday? The routines, the hanging out, the objects of the mundane; once displayed into some sort of order tells us what? That Sutton goes up and down the stairs many times, to her bedroom, to the toilet; that she cleans her teeth and puts on her makeup. She speaks with friends—we don't always know of what, she straightens, goes out for a drink, watches TV, likes beans and toast, makes monkeys, gets distracted. These things are



the repetition in the mundane drift of life, and noticeable differences become amplified—sameness is always has difference.

Sutton is confronted with an admittedly difficult problem, of representing the unrepresentable. The weakness of this work is in finding the shape or form of analysis. Once marked, what about the everyday is there? Sutton focuses on bodily compulsions, cleaning and eating, through the course of a week and a month of Sundays. She stays within a diary format whose only structure is chronology. The drift of the everyday offers more than regulated time, it may even be created due to it. The work is barely touching on these questions.

### **Andrew Swift (JMU)**

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Swift is an excellent tourist—he collects the symbols—logos, images, which seem like they could tell us something but don't. His experience is one of surface, and he is unabashedly enthusiastic about his collection of souvenirs. Susan Sontag wrote "Photography implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it. But this is the opposite of understanding, which starts from *not* accepting the world as it looks."

The use of silkscreen, repetition, and images from pop culture call up the ghost of Andy Warhol. But many of Warhol's works managed to both celebrate and critique American culture with a cool neutrality—our need for sensationalism (disaster series, dead celebrities), the image world. Many of Swift's pieces use images from Las Vegas—the land of Baudrillard, the proliferation of signs and detachment of signs from its reflection of reality. We enter into its arbitrary nature.

Tourism is an experience of the world, and perhaps I am accusing Swift of lack of authenticity, because it doesn't seem to matter that he took a trip to the United States. It is not that I ask for the real, but some reflection upon the system in which Swift works. Vegas is transforming itself to a "family-friendly" place; the mythology of its place—of gambling and prostitutes—are now mementos of that mythology, as seen in Swifts use casino chips and burlesque theater signs. From safety, he can take a walk on the wide side.

What is tourism and its consumption of place and history—what is the relationship of consumerism to experience, what is desire or pleasure? These are good questions, that aren't even considered here. My problem with the work is it tells us nothing—it is caught up in the look of the logos and is uncritical even in its celebration-- the glitter Yoda and Yogi are the closest to emphasis of anything, to sparklize that which is already sparkling, is that which glitters gold?

### **Michelle Topping (JMU)**

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There is a piece of dirt in Turner's eye, and this is good. I doubt that Topping feels her work is a deconstruction of Turner or of painting itself. Her work seems to come from a genuine love of landscape (you can love something and destroy it as well). But the most interesting reading of her work is that of leveling, of destroying the lofty atmospheres and

disembodiment of Painting (Art). Fields of soft colors are interrupted by spots, splatters, dirt – the ground and the sky are dueling in these paintings.

Painting's history in the twentieth century focused on its opticality, on the eye itself, detached from the vertical body. The spots and dimensional drips in Toppings work bring foreground the horizontal and visible holes that comment on the nature of the visual, like spots on the retina. Our feet are on the ground while our heads are in the air.

This grounding is most literal in "Panning" a painting in beige and sand, full of entrails and wormy tracings. Optical spots in "Heinz" are ketchup thrown onto a perfect sky.

### **Gareth Woollam (JMU)**

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Woollam is deeply engaged with the facts of isolation and connection. We travel from island to island in a sea of information. The act of reading is within the nature of the work and our experience with it, it is a place where community can be formed. The figure of the island contained, bounded, shaped; it can be self-contained or enter into a larger geography (context). The three main sections of the installation are "utopia," "splice," and "L18." Throughout each, there is an act of analysis, the extracting in isolation to examine and then joined up for comparison. The role of place is a foundation for study.

Utopia is powerful still in an acknowledged failure of this dream. Woollam contacted 300 businesses, inviting a response to Thomas Moore's "Utopia." He received less than 20 responses, and these are displayed in the room. The failure of response is amplified through its marker of an image of Moore's island. Along the wall is a grid of 300 spaces, written responses are posted and the island image is a place holder for the letter sent but not acknowledged. In addition, a table holds a small group of plants, a ceramic castle, and a group of drawings by school-age children from a teacher who responded to Woollam's call by introducing a lesson on utopia and having the children draw a utopian school.

Next to this is a computer for "Simogatchi," and the connection to the promise of computing and fantasy within computer games is a smart one. Moore's island is created using SimCity, but it requires our care. Does the SimCity suggest our utopias are in the realm of the digital or mock it by making it comic and unreal?

L18 reveals the arbitrariness of boundaries. It takes the designated borders of a postal code for demarcating an island and then proceeds on somewhat systematic but still arbitrary study of the place. Woollam has collected traces of human activity through cultural products—books, pictures, music, each with its own methodology for selection and display.

"I Travel Quite Across the Island" digresses from collecting approaches; it is a journey through the place via filmic plot. Two video monitors facing opposite directions make filmic references to Dirty Harry, racing from phone booth to phone booth; and the split screen of "Pillow Talk," where during the telephone call we see both people on the line interacting. The film recreates the simultaneity of two places into a single space. Woollam keeps the separation of space intact. The viewer must be in one place or the other, be aware of the connection but unable to see both. One screen shows a video of a man driving through the neighborhood in a car, occasionally getting out to answer a

phone booth. The other screen shows a woman in an apartment, going about daily tasks, but occasionally making the phone call. The video touches on the distance and disconnect of the telephone (especially with mobile phones), interior and exterior, multiple interiors, one still, one moving, another that of the phone booth; and command and control (like the army headquarters issuing battlefield instructions).

The texts of place are legible but the quality of its information is best about the connection, not the place. We may look for specificity to define a place. The readings here ask how we can explore and place and not know anything; or, conversely, how to shape and make a collection tell us something (that is or isn't there).

The last segment of this installation is the island of SPLICE, a group of artists working together in various ways, mostly discursive, to forms ways of supporting artistic practice through collectivism. The inclusion of this work critiques the isolation of a particular artistic practice and celebrates the benefits of expanding the concept of artists as an active member of a community. Woollam's practice can be distant but strives for connection. "Utopia" and "L18" are produced through study from afar. SPLICE is study connected with people rather than of study of them.