



Title

Edinburgh Art Festival

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Article DOI**Url**

<https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/reviews/reviews/edinburgh-art-festival>

ISSN

2631-5661

Cite as

Dominic Paterson: 'Edinburgh Art Festival', *Burlington Contemporary* (3rd September 2019),

<https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/reviews/reviews/edinburgh-art-festival>

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Cover image:

Edinburgh Art Festival

by Dominic Paterson • 03.09.2019

'Where now? Who now? When now?' With these words, Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* (1953) opens by throwing its location, its subject and its present tense into question, in pointed defiance of storytelling convention.¹ These matters hardly get resolved in the eddying, sometimes muddy streams of consciousness that constitute the novel that follows, a landmark in the twentieth century's dismantling of 'proper' literature. Navigating the panoply of exhibitions and events presented under the banner of the Edinburgh Art Festival (EAF), one finds oneself asking similar questions, and encountering similar difficulties in gathering all that can be experienced into a straightforward narrative. Fittingly, perhaps, *The Unnamable* lends this year's festival a motto of sorts: 'I can't go on, I'll go on'. This phrase appears, courtesy of Alfredo Jaar, as a neon sign above West College Street [FIG.1](#), on sandwich boards worn by performers in the city's thronging weekend streets [FIG.2](#) and on tote bags for sale at festival venues.

Jaar's *I Can't Go On, I'll Go On* is one of five commissions that, under the rubric of 'Stories for an Uncertain World', constitute the core of EAF's 2019 programme. The festival's director, Sorcha Carey, gives an eloquent and detailed account of this theme and of the specific commissions that explore it, in a booklet that serves as a guide to the festival. There she cites Jaar's account of our epoch as 'a time of absolute chaos and confusion, where the collapse of ideologies and traditional politics is amplified by a dazzling array of technological developments; an era of alternative realities, otherwise known as the post-truth moment'.²



Fig. 1 | Can't Go On, I'll Go On, by Alfredo Jaar. Neon sign (Edinburgh Art Festival Commission; photograph Keith Hunter).

Carey notes that in response to such a diagnosis, and the urgent question Jaar distils from it ('how do we act in the world today?'), her commissioned artists 'all draw on narrative and fiction' in order to 'reflect on the uncertainty of the present moment'.³ If 'uncertain' seems a wildly optimistic description of our current collective predicaments, Carey's approach is nonetheless welcome because it poses the difficult question of how art might function in what seems to be interminable crisis. Although artifice and fabulation are surely precarious means of navigating a world already shaped by 'alternative facts' and other fabrications, EAF offers plenty of evidence that such tactics do indeed offer a vital approach to making art. Its main thesis rings true.



Fig. 2 | I Can't Go On, I'll Go On, by Alfredo Jaar. 2019. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Murdo MacLeod; exh. Edinburgh Art Festival).

Commissioning, however, is an inevitably uncertain process. Jaar has made some of the most incisive, moving and consequential 'political' art of the past four decades. Who better to reckon with our times than the artist who so starkly exposed the political stakes of everyday life by posing the fraught query 'Are you happy?' to his compatriots living through Chile's military dictatorship in the early 1980s? And yet, somehow, Jaar's work for Edinburgh does not quite come off. The Beckett quote, without the several doubt-filled clauses that precede it in its original context, strikes a jarringly stoic or consolatory note. 'Going on' seems far more equivocal in the original text, and indeed in our own political moment, than it does here as piece of neon signage. What are we going on towards? By what compulsion? In whose name? When will this unnamed (unnameable?) situation become intolerable, something with which we can't go on? Is going on itself a form of failure?

It is not that Jaar's work cannot accommodate such complexities, but that its emphatic iteration as an all-caps slogan crowds them out. Beckett's *Unnamable* runs on a profusion of commas that create an always uncertain syntax, at once continuous and fractured. In its worldly existence, if not in its title, Jaar's work drops the comma and loses something important as a result. It understates rupture and stresses continuance, where Beckett holds them in a balance that feels more resonant with our times, as with his. Where artistic and linguistic strategies evince uncertainty, they draw closer to the world we inhabit.



Fig. 3 Installation view of *Nathan Coley: The Future is Inside Us, It's Not Somewhere Else*, at Parliament Hall, Edinburgh (Edinburgh Art Festival Commission; photograph Keith Hunter).

Nathan Coley, another of the commissioned artists, also borrows texts 'from the world' for his new work *The Future is Inside Us, It's not Somewhere Else*, presented in Parliament Hall, home to Scotland's supreme courts **FIG.3**. (The title is itself lifted from a Radiohead lyric that avows an uncharacteristically definitive optimism). In the work, Coley continues his longstanding interrogation of the ways power and authority take shape in sites, structures and speech acts. Here he has appropriated a piece of nineteenth-century interior décor still in production for a global luxury market, namely Zuber & Cie's 1834 wallpaper *Les Vues d'Amerique du Nord* **FIG.4**.



Fig. 4 Research image for *The Future is Inside Us, It's Not Somewhere Else* by Nathan Coley. 2019. (Courtesy of the artist)

This remarkable representation of America as projected through twinned colonial and utopian fantasies has adorned the Diplomatic Room in the White House since the Kennedys were in residence. Fragmentary sequences from the larger panorama are turned into lightboxes, with equally fragmentary phrases cut out from their surface. They are uncredited, but some sources might be discerned, such as Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) for 'YOU BETTER NOT NEVER TELL NOBODY BUT GOD' FIG.5. The works displace other paintings presumably more 'fitting' to the context, and Coley's texts puncture the Arcadian dream of the wallpaper's iconography, but the most significant intervention here is simply that by which the artist invites the viewer into the Hall itself. To stand within it is to wonder at both the strangeness of the institutions which claim to embody and wield power, and to suspect that power may be moving through other conduits less easy to access or locate, whether offshore, online or beyond the theatrical public face of politics today.



Fig. 5 Installation view of *Nathan Coley: The Future is Inside Us, It's Not Somewhere Else*, at Parliament Hall, Edinburgh (Edinburgh Art Festival Commission; photograph Keith Hunter).

Subtle issues of power and resistance inform Corin Sworn's commissioned work too, albeit in a more quotidian register. *Habits of Assembly* **FIG.6**, her installation at Edinburgh College of Art, incorporates film, sculpture and sound, and continues an exploration of forms of domestic labour and self-management that has marked recent works, such as the performance *Polarity Boxing* (2017) and exhibition *Work House* (2018). The structural elements of the work manifest a steely precision and control that is shaken by the images and words that are channelled through it.

A poetic text read by Sworn and her co-author Colin Herd devolves into a perverse to-do list of injunctions to self-improvement: 'My health app says I should feed the newspaper and read the birds. It says I should check the conductor's ticket, fix my dentist's teeth and consider my doctor's pains'.



Fig. 6 Installation view of *Corin Sworn: Habits of Assembly* at Edinburgh College of Art. (Edinburgh Art Festival Commission; photograph Keith Hunter).

The two film elements in the work feature choreography borne both of collaborative improvisation and research into historical forms of domesticated Taylorism. Under Sworn's guidance, the performers recast the 'ordinary movement' of avant-garde dance of the 1960s as a kind of mimesis of the corporeal regimes of late capitalism **Fig.7**. Its vocabularies seem drawn equally from routines of 'self-care', such as Tai Chi, and fatigued maintenance work, so much picking up and tidying away. If *Habits of Assembly* is informed by Sworn's typically attentive reading of critics such as Arlie Russell Hochschild and Barbara Ehrenreich, who have detailed new forms of labour, it also suggests that she is letting uncertainty play an increasingly important role in her work. The results are sometimes difficult to read, but rewardingly so.



Fig. 7 Installation view of *Corin Sworn: Habits of Assembly* at Edinburgh College of Art. (Edinburgh Art Festival Commission; photograph Keith Hunter).

The same might be said for Sriwhana Spong's commissioned installation *castle-crystal*, which occupies two sites with a film installation and a suite of sculptures **FIG.8**. Its references are more esoteric than Sworn's, turning on a sixteenth-century mystic text by Teresa of Ávila. Its consequent hermeticism kept the contemporary world and its travails relatively far from view, but it is compelling enough on its own terms.

At Collective, two strong works are shown. *James Richards: Migratory Motor Complex* (26th July–13th October 2019) features the artist's work that debuted at the 2017 Venice Biennale, but its migration to the dome on Calton Hill is a happy and still timely one **FIG.9**. Its fractured, meticulously assembled sound collage flits and skips across an array of speakers; spontaneity, hesitancy, desire and other putatively human traits are transposed into a machinic universe of glitches and algorithms. It sounds and feels very much of a piece with the 'uncertain world' of 2019.



Fig. 8 Installation view of *Sriwhana Spong: Castle-crystal* at St Bernard's Wall. (Edinburgh Art Festival Commission; photograph Keith Hunter).

In *Helen McCrorie: If play is neither inside nor outside, where is it?* (13th July–6th October 2019) FIG.10, also at Collective, her carefully crafted film benefits from remarkable sound design. Its images of pre-school children playing in a partially abandoned military base in Perthshire is like a strange inversion of Dennis Potter's *Blue Remembered Hills* (1979): here the children take the place of adults, who are nowhere to be seen. The creative re-use of the

base as a context for open play, and the ambient dread produced by that site present an ambiguous vision of the futures we may be harbouring inside us.

Among several offerings at ECA, meanwhile, was a further facet of EAF's curated programme, the suite of 'Platform' presentations by emerging artists. Here Kate Bush joined Beckett and Thom Yorke among the festival's muses, as the inspiration for Harry Maberly's witty, bathetic tributes FIG.11 to her videos for *Wuthering Heights* (1978) and *Babooshka* (1980). The work of the four younger artists featured was eclectic, except in what seemed a shared eschewal of good form and gravitas as the keys in which contemporary art might best resound.



Fig. 9 *Migratory Motor Complex*, by James Richards. Six-channel audio installation. 2017. (Copyright James Richards; photograph Tom Nolan; Collective, Edinburgh).

Grayson Perry's *Julie Cope's Grand Tour* (25th July–2nd November 2019), a Craft Council Touring exhibition presented at Dovecot Studios as part of this year's festival, was animated by a similar spirit FIG.12. The show is built around the display of two large tapestries originally made for Perry's *House for Essex*, his contribution to the Living Architecture project,⁴ made in collaboration with FAT Architecture, who also designed the exhibition. Owen Hatherley's memorable characterisation of that building – 'St Basil's meeting Stanley Spencer meeting Abigail's Party' – intimates some heretical, satirical vernacular fun is to be had at the house itself.⁵ While the tapestries are worth the price of admission, an awkward exhibition design, overly didactic interactive elements, and the sense of being amid maquettes for a larger project flatten out Perry's irreverent sensibility.



Fig. 10 Still of *If play is neither inside nor outside, where is it?* by Helen McCrorie. 2019. Video. (Image courtesy of the artist; exh. Collective, Edinburgh).

For this reviewer, three exhibitions stood out within the 2019 festival, seeming to be most of the moment. At the National Galleries of Scotland, Bridget Riley's stellar retrospective reaches from the 1940s to the present, with scarcely a glimmer of the epochal events going on beyond Riley's studio walls over that time detectable. It is tempting to call the work timeless, as its Apollonian self-possession within the neo-classical galleries seems to urge. But really it chimes with its own temporal logic, one borne of hours spent in the studio and the gallery, where Riley's tireless invention, testing and observation go to work. An outlier here in thematic terms, it tells the story of her work beautifully and with conviction, with works both new and old reading as thoroughly contemporary.⁶



Fig. 11 *A Kate Bush Story: It's me, I'm Cathy!*, by Harry Maberly. 2019. Video projection (Courtesy the artist and Edinburgh Art Festival; photograph Sally Jubb Photography; exh. Edinburgh College of Art).

Rosalind Nashashibi's two-part film (another of Carey's commissions) at Modern One is a wandering, exploratory work with uncertainty woven into its very fabric **FIG.13**. It is predicated on the Ursula Le Guin story *The Shobies' Story*, in which a small group embarks on 'a new form of space travel that uses non-linear time', only to discover it shatters their capacity for shared experience and communication. Narrative fiction – the capacity to retell – provides the possibility of collective recognition on Le Guin's account. Nashashibi's film, over some forty-five minutes and not without its longuers, looks candidly at the artist, her friends and family in real-world situations, where they first discuss Le Guin's fable and then seem to be cast as its protagonists, receiving an induction into the life-threatening consequences of interstellar travel.



Fig. 12 *A Perfect Match*, by Grayson Perry. 2015. Tapestry, 290 by 343 cm. (Crafts Council Collection; © Grayson Perry; Dovecot, Edinburgh).

To speak of sequence in this film is perhaps misleading: beautifully, weirdly, it conjures up both non-linear and narrative modes from the start. It breaks up documentary and sci-fi conventions, but pieces them back together in an entirely new way as it contemplates a future beyond recognition. In an insightful text on the work Quinn Latimer notes that:

‘much travel is actually forced, it is from. It is predicated on what is left behind – both people and place and the lives they might have borne. This kind of travel articulates what was left; it suggests the lives we might have led and, possibly, the choices (and lack thereof) to come’.⁷



Fig. 13 Film still of *Part One*, by Rosalind Nashashibi. 2018 (Courtesy of the artist; exh. Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Modern One).

In imagining an escape from linear time, and from the contemporary world, Nashashibi illuminates, rather than escapes, both. Her work gives 'going on' its proper ambiguity.



Fig. 14 *Muted Situation #22: Muted Tchaikovsky's 5th*, by Samson Young. 2018. Video and 12 channels sound installation, 45 mins. (Courtesy the artist, exh. Edinburgh College of Art).

In *Samson Young: Real Music* (24th July–5th October 2019) at Talbot Rice Gallery, the Hong Kong artist and composer Samson Young presents a sceptical take on cultural authenticity that holds particular relevance amid the increasingly fervent protests in the

City-State. The exhibition's four subtly linked rooms each turn on a savvy use of music. In one Young has made a high-tech digital instrument-cum-sculpture that plays 'impossible' sounds (such as a bugle played by a dragon's breath) through an array of speakers. Another addresses certain myths about ancient Chinese musical forms through linked video works. In another, a set of historical Western artefacts points to the construction of a dubious canon of Asian culture. Most powerfully – with intimations of suppression that become ever more insistent— we meet an orchestra playing a 'muted' version of Tchaikovsky's 5th symphony so that only inadvertent sounds remain **FIG.14**. Razor-sharp, playfully iconoclastic and immaculately installed, Young's work is a revelation.

The events taking place in Hong Kong are yet to be narrated, and we do not know how they will end. Once upon a time, Hannah Arendt wrote about the predicament faced by those who had taken part in the French Resistance – Beckett, of course, was among their number. Unable simply to go on, to tolerate 'the puppet-like antics of knaves or fools,' they found themselves, by their actions, constituting a public realm that had vanished elsewhere.⁸ Inevitably, Arendt suggests, the end of the war led to the loss of this treasured moment of freedom and collectivity. It was replaced by a return to merely going on with life. Significantly, she argues, the treasure shared by Resistance fighters was not named, and could not be passed on as part of a continuous tradition. 'The point of the matter is', she wrote, 'that the "completion", to which every enacted event must have in the minds of those who then are to tell the story and to convey its meaning, eluded them [. . .] without the articulation accomplished by remembrance, there was simply no story left that could be told'.⁹ In the absence of action, and without completion in a still uncertain world, stories can't go on, but somehow they do. The best of EAF 2019 embodied this precarious condition; only time will tell which go on to represent our uncertain world to its future, if there is one.

Exhibition details Edinburgh Art Festival
Various locations, Edinburgh
25th July–25th August 2019

Footnotes

- 1** S. Beckett: *The Beckett Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (Picador 1979), p.267.
- 2** Alfredo Jaar, cited in Carey, 'We All Tell Stories,' in *Stories for an Uncertain World*, Edinburgh Art Festival, 2019, p.9.
- 3** *Ibid.*, p.21.
- 4** See <https://www.living-architecture.co.uk/>, accessed 3rd September 2019.
- 5** O. Hatherley: 'Grayson Perry's "House for Essex"', *Architects Journal* (2015), available at <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/>, accessed 3rd September 2019.
- 6** Reviewed by Anna Campbell in the September issue of *The Burlington Magazine*, pp.750–53.
- 7** Q. Latimer: 'No time or nothing less than time: Rosalind Nashashibi's recent continuums of kinship and displacement', *Flash Art* (2019), available at <https://flash---art.com>, accessed 3rd September 2019.
- 8** H. Arendt: 'The gap between past and future', in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, London 2006, p.1.
- 9** *Ibid.*, p.6.

THE
BURLINGTON
MAGAZINE

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ISSN 2631-5661

The Burlington Magazine
14-16 Duke's Road, London WC1H 9SZ