Quite mundane but also disastrous: a dialogue with Alistair Debling

By Phin Jennings

Commissioned by 'a space' arts, Alistair Debling's exhibition RAFTS at God's House Tower charts a number of overlapping stories, taking place across various geographies and temporalities. It zooms in and out, navigating between personal stories and events taking place on what he describes as "a planetary ecosystem scale." It's worth remembering, as you are dropped into and plucked out of them, that these realities are all unfolding on the surface of the same planet – our planet. It is all real.

Whilst preparing the exhibition, Debling worked closely with Dr Gordon Inglis, a palaeo-climatologist at the University of Southampton, who specialises in how the Earth's climate may have functioned 56 million years ago. He also ran a series of workshops at Rose Road, a charity providing care and respite services for young people with complex disabilities and their families.

The conversation below scratches the surface of the various interconnected places – real and imagined – that informed the exhibition. It serves as an attempt to unpick some of the rhymes, shared meanings and analogies that exist between the show's many subjects. Naturally, it leaves many stones unturned. Perhaps it's best thought of as an incomplete map of an endlessly complex territory that seems to unfold in all directions.

PJ: The main God's House Tower space contains a lot of overlapping sound and images, drawn by you from different sources. Perhaps a good starting point would be to unpick them. Who is the voice giving instructions, and what process are we seeing on those screens?

AD: You're listening to McKenzie Bentley, who is a lab technician at the School of Ocean and Earth Sciences at the University of Southampton. She's taking us through a series of geochemical processes – solvent extraction, column chromatography, gas chromatography, mass spectrometry – that the lab uses to analyse geological samples. Within those samples – for example, a piece of seabed sediment dating back 56 million years – the lab is looking for molecular fossils: tiny particles preserved much like the larger, visible fossils a palaeontologist might study.

Based on which molecules they find fossilized in a given sample, the lab is able to build up a picture of what the climate looked like in the past and how things like temperature, sea level, weather patterns and plant life were affected by higher concentrations of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

PJ: There's also what looks like found footage of ecological disaster – where does this come from?

AD: There is found footage: aerial photography of disastrous flooding events. But there's also footage from NOCS, the National Oceanography Centre in Southampton, where Gordon's lab is based, and footage from my time at Rose Road.

PJ: What's the connection between the footage of McKenzie's work and the disastrous flooding events?

AD: The highly technical and very tiny molecular processes you watch happening in the lab are attempts to understand what happens at a massive scale – a planetary ecosystem scale – when atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations increase over time. So, in a way, the found footage of recent climate catastrophes represents the real world stakes of the lab's research.

PJ: And then, surrounding it all, is this fragmented lab space that seems to have gone through some form of natural devastation. Where is the exhibition set?

AD: Geographically speaking, the exhibition is set exactly where it is, in God's House Tower. Temporally, it's set somewhere else: a potential climate future in which there's a new sea level running throughout the gallery, above head height when you're in the project space below. The exhibition is a response to an open call, which invited artists to bring Gordon's research into the gallery. I took that directive quite literally, bringing architectural elements from his lab across the road into the gallery space. So it's a surrealist sea, made of the blue office carpet tiles found throughout NOCS, on which pieces of the lab's walls are floating: the rafts from the show's title.

PJ: How did it come together?

AD: A huge proportion of the installation is recycled material, largely from within five miles of the gallery, found on Facebook marketplace. Given the exhibition's themes, and just as a challenge to myself, I wanted to see whether it's possible to make large-scale installations that aren't materially (and therefore carbon-) intensive.

PJ: So, slightly paradoxically, the installation doesn't look markedly environmentally friendly precisely because it is – because it's using these discarded materials?

AD: There's plenty of greenwashing in art. You might see a large exhibition that has the aesthetics of ecology, that looks and feels "organic", but is in fact quite material-intensive. Whilst 1000 plastic carpet tiles don't scream sustainability,

when they come from an office up the road that was stripped out and would otherwise be in a skip, maybe we need to change our assumptions about what sustainable materials look like.

PJ: As the videos show, the work done in Dr Gordon Inglis' lab by McKenzie is incredibly complex. The processes feel fairly inaccessible to people without specialist knowledge. Do you think of the show as an attempt to translate that work, or are you fine with it remaining somewhat unintelligible?

AD: I think it's a bit of both. I imagine that the upstairs space might feel quite overwhelming. You have a huge wave looming overhead, a continuous stream of hard-to-parse information and impossible-to-follow instructions. There's the ambivalent mise-en-scène: a feeling of something quite mundane but also disastrous. But when you descend below the water level and enter the project space, there's somewhere you can sit and spend time with a more narrative-driven film. That's where you might start to understand a bit more about what Gordon and his lab are working on and how the fragmented elements upstairs might relate to one another.

A key piece of information from Gordon's research, something he really wanted to communicate with the exhibition, is that what we're seeing in the last few decades of human-driven climate change is more rapid and intense than anything that's happened in the Earth's history. So, regardless of how much someone wants to get into the detail of the science, hopefully, the urgency of that message still comes across.

PJ: I read that the question this show wants to pose is: 'What if climate change were reframed as an access and care issue?' – The words 'access' and 'care' take on multiple meanings in the show. Could you talk me through some of them?

AD: I started with two basic questions: how can people access climate research and why should they care about it?

From there, I expanded those terms to ask how the climate crisis might specifically affect people with access needs and people who are carers. In the workshops at Rose Road, lots of things came up that I'd never thought of: how increased temperatures and humidity could make it difficult for people with limited respiratory function to breathe, for example; the importance of keeping certain medications cool; how even a small amount of surface flood water could interfere with electronic equipment and motorised wheelchairs. What many think of as minor fluctuations can have serious consequences.

At a more abstract level, I was thinking about access and care as strategies that might be applied back to the climate crisis. When you're a carer or support worker, or someone with complex access needs, you're likely to have a lot of

experience of facing an extremely complex problem without being overwhelmed or giving up, even when there is no “perfect solution”. What could we learn from those experiences when it comes to tackling the climate crisis? Because it seems like whatever we’re doing currently isn’t working.

PJ: Double-meanings and wordplay come up a few times in the exhibition. Often, I’m left thinking about how idioms and euphemisms relate to actual reality. For example, there’s a point in the film shown in the downstairs space where we hear Gladys, your late mother’s carer, remembering about speaking about politics with her – ‘trying to put the world right’ – whilst watching this apocalyptic-looking footage of some object being submerged under a choppy ocean.

AD: I’m generally drawn to these linguistic overlaps, where two people from completely different fields or backgrounds might use the same language to describe different phenomena. On one hand, you can look at these as moments where we encounter the limits of language; like there simply isn’t enough unique terminology to describe the world precisely. But, personally, I find that these are moments full of potential, where two seemingly distinct people or ideas can be brought together through a shared linguistic root.

PJ: How did you find working with Gladys? It must have been quite intense – I’m also interested in the way that including her as a voice implicates you personally in the work somehow; you’re no longer a detached observer or documenter.

AD: It was definitely an intense interview. It was emotional conducting it, it was emotional editing it and it was emotional viewing it, seeing it out in the world. Though I knew it was important, I procrastinated a lot. We only got into the room together a week before the exhibition. I could feel my own resistance to facing that conversation but I’m really glad it’s in there. One of the great difficulties of combatting climate change is probably how hard it is to comprehend loss at the scale of whole ecosystems collapsing. I hope that my personal experience of grief, which is, in a way, its own blend of catastrophe and deep sea excavation, could be a starting place for accessing a collective, ecological grief.

I think all my work - perhaps all art - ends up being autobiographical to some extent. It reflects who I am and what I’m going through, simply because I happened to be the person making it. But this is the first time I’ve intentionally included something overtly autobiographical in my work. As I was struggling with how I’d get my own story – the story of losing my mum – into the exhibition, I realised that certain objects that had been created in the workshops had a kind of vulnerable quality to them, and could be used sequentially through the film to tell that story. A chair, a hoist, a bed: even though they weren’t created specifically for me or about me, they had some emotional resonance.

PJ: What else that is visible in the exhibition came up during the creative workshops that you ran at Rose Road?

AD: The items I just mentioned were part of a maquette, a model raft, filled with objects designed by service users and support workers. The idea was to create an accessible raft, where someone could spend a prolonged time at sea with everything they needed. There's a hoist, a ramp, sensory toys, books, DVDs, snacks, crisps. That maquette is exhibited in the gallery itself, but also features in the film as a raft at sea, filmed from above. Elements from the maquette also made their way into the installation at full scale.

I also distributed participants' drawings and written responses to data from Gordon's labs among scientific papers upstairs. There's a sort of mixing in of different kinds of knowledge production. I was interested in who is considered an expert and whose voice is heard. Those questions are subtly reinforced in the film downstairs, where different voices often enter without a formal introduction. There isn't a hierarchy established between the different forms of knowledge that each speaker brings to the film.

PJ: A thread that runs through a number of the different perspectives in the film is difficulty with communication. There's a heartbreaking moment when Andy, a volunteer at Rose Road describes being frustrated about his friends sometimes being unable to understand him: 'They say to me: "Yes, I do understand" but, really, do you? Do they understand? No.' – At what point in the production of the film did that become a theme?

AD: In a way, it was built in from the beginning. The premise of the open call was to communicate Gordon's research to a larger audience. Over the course of the workshops at Rose Road, working in the lab and doing interviews, that instruction to communicate developed into a theme within the project. It becomes about what it means to listen and understand, and how we communicate without words.

That could apply to the work that Gordon does – communing with the past, in a way, through these molecular fossils, parsing a narrative from a sea of data – but it equally applies to how a support worker might communicate with someone non-verbal at Rose Road. What are the signals, what are the signs that we can pick up on?

Communication isn't easy, so the feeling of dejection – of not being listened to – is also present in the show. From Andy's perspective, as you mention, but also from the perspective of someone like McKenzie, from the climate science community, who feels the world isn't listening to or understanding what they're trying to communicate.

PJ: Towards the end of the film, Andy asks: 'What would you do to the climate if you was in charge of the world,' adding 'and we only got two minutes.' It's an absurd, poignant question that functions like a joke in the middle of a serious conversation. To finish, I'd love to hear your answer.

AD: I can't see humans' outsized impact on the climate being solved by us interfering even more through spurious geoengineering schemes, for example. For me, it's not about what we should do to the climate, but how we, collectively, become better participants in the Earth's systems. So, if I only had two minutes, I'd take them to reframe the question in that way, before Elon Musk has a chance to send mirrors into orbit to reflect the sun's rays away from the planet's surface.

About Phin Jennings

Phin Jennings writes about art and culture for The Guardian, The Art Newspaper, Ocula and the Financial Times. He lives in London.

About Alistair Debling

Alistair Debling makes films, photographs, performances, meals and installations. His work investigates diverse fields, from queer nightlife and ecology to militarism, agriculture and architecture.

Through sustained engagement with a particular community, he likes to discover unlikely connections between things: what does a nuclear power station have in common with a disco ball? A dairy cow with a canonised saint? A gay bar with a wild elephant? Recent projects have been commissioned and presented by Art Gene, Barrow-in-Furness; Jwllrs, Morecambe; the Grundy Gallery, Blackpool; Grizedale Arts, Cumbria. Recent screenings include HOME, Manchester; Providenza, Corsica; Copenhagen Architecture Festival, Denmark; Atelier WG, Netherlands.

About the Exhibition

RAFTS by Alistair Debling is a new exhibition commissioned by 'a space' arts for God's House Tower. The exhibition draws together data-driven climate research from Dr. Gordon Inglis at the University of Southampton and people-driven research from creative workshops with Rose Road to ask: what if climate change were reframed as an access and care issue? The resulting multimedia installation will flood the main gallery space at GHT, offering new strategies for staying afloat in the face of disaster.

Find out more here: https://godshousetower.org.uk/eventer/rafts-by-alistair-debling/