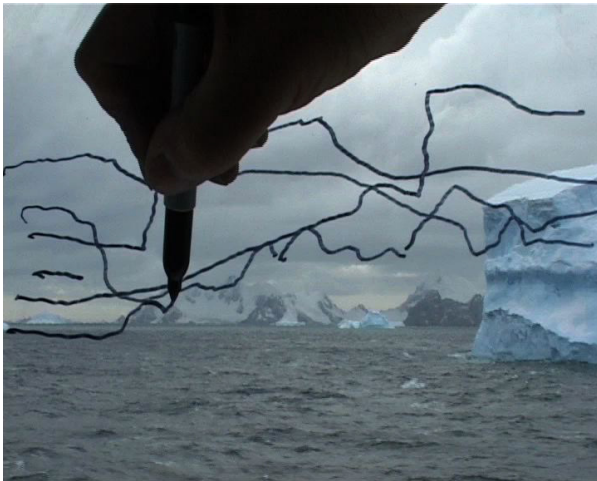




Neville Gabie *Myself and Others*
by Moira Jeffrey

Moira Jeffrey is a writer and journalist based in Glasgow. She is currently art critic for the Scotsman newspaper and has written extensively on visual arts for the specialist and general press.



Neville Gabie *Wide Eyed and Legless* video 2009

*No man is an island,
Entire of itself,
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.*

— John Donne

An island supposes other islands
— Édouard Glissant

Lines

A boat leaves port. It slides out past the landmarks, the cranes and docks and teetering towers and out into the indeterminate ocean. A kite flies, perilously, in the white light of the Antarctic. A man walks through a Bristol building site where – amongst 2000 construction workers, the din of drills, cement mixers and 59 languages – he hears a single voice raised in song. In the scrubland of the Northern Cape, South Africa, a block of ice melts in the sun.

Can we draw a line between, through or around any of these events? What would the line look like?

Islands

In the last years of his life the Martinican poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant began to imagine a museum of the culture of the Americas. It would consist not of a single building – or even a complex of buildings – but of a series of islands.

The museum as an archipelago would be a museum without a centre or a periphery. It would be a museum that rejected lines: a museum whose version of history didn't chart linear chronologies. Glissant didn't believe in the straight line: the line of political boundaries, the line of conquest and the terrible history of the middle passage. He watched a man's serpentine footsteps as he crossed a beach and thought of new ways to describe territory. In a world of exiles, he chose what he called 'errantry'.

'One who is errant (who is no longer traveller, discoverer or conqueror) strives to know the totality of the world yet already knows he will never accomplish this – and knows this is precisely where the threatened beauty of the world arises.'

People

Without lines how do we orientate ourselves? Through song, language, food and story. Through the repetitive actions that make skills. Through memory.

Fishermen often passed down their best routes and fishing grounds not through lines on maps but through lines that were defined orally and visually. These are called transit bearings. Unlike landmarks, which are single fixed points, transit bearings record the alignment between different objects. They are meaningful only in relation to movement at sea and in relation to one another.

Buildings

Antarctica is an island. Antarctica is a continent. But it is not a single sovereign territory. Antarctica is what is called a condominium. A condominium is a territory that has no sovereignty of its own. The functions of sovereignty are shared by other sovereign states.

A condominium can also mean a building whose parts are separately owned. Often a condominium has a board that takes decisions for its mutual benefit or maintenance. A condominium is a paradox: it might be a model for co-operation or a vision of isolation. Is it in some ways just a miniature model of the capitalist city? Little islands of privately owned solitude and rarely-shared points of mutual access.

Workshop

Neville Gabie trained as a sculptor at the Royal College of Art. He knows the rules of the workshop. He is intimate with the processes of pouring and casting, carving and constructing. As a young man he makes sculptures by stealth. He hires a skip to sit on a busy street, steals the waste materials from building sites. He builds kilns of wood. He confuses the categories of materials: between what is natural and what is manufactured, between the fuel and the fired brick, between the vessel and the contents.

Making fascinates him. Increasingly he works with people in communities undergoing change — a Liverpool tower block due to be demolished, a vast city centre building site in Bristol, a rural community in the Highlands of Scotland building a rowing boat. He sees that it is in the act of making that people make sense of each other.

The artist watches a delicious pot of goat curry stirred in a Caribbean kitchen in St Paul's, Bristol, by a chef known only as Chef. It is served by a shop fitter to his colleagues in the shell of a building that will become a department store in the Cabot Circus development.

He records the blue paint stirred in a remote workshop that will adorn a beautiful, handmade boat.

It is created by amateurs under the tutelage of a craftsman who is also a master fiddle player.

In the classic formulation of modern art, the avant-garde artist is always trying to collapse the difference between art and life. When art was sacred in purpose it was made by groups of people and received collectively. Then, later, it was made by individuals and consumed by them alone. The workshop was replaced by the studio and the church replaced by the home.

The avant-garde artist might bring art and life together in a number of ways. By confusing the categories of activity regarded as art and those understood as life. Or by looking at other means of making, the way that the Bauhaus modelled itself on the medieval cathedral workshop. Or the artist might do this alone, by cracking open the absurdity of the world by actions that are themselves absurd. Standing for eight hours on a block of ice, spending four months on a trip to the Antarctic to fly a kite or making a drawing that has no beginning and no end and certainly no purpose.

Richard Sennett in his book *The Craftsman* tells us that it is in craft in its widest sense — in skills, in a dedication to learning and making — that we might save ourselves from the ills of our age. But he also tells us that the workshop is the site of the unsolvable conflict between autonomy and authority.

People/Buildings

With the workers of Bristol's Cabot Circus, Neville Gabie creates a choral work in 18 languages. Each individual song is transcribed from the words sung by a construction worker on the site. When the *Cabot Circus Cantata* is performed it takes place in the concrete heart of the new cathedral of our age, the shopping mall. The *cantata* is a musical form that forms a perfect pivot point between religious and secular art. It can be written for a choir in worship or for the collective human voice performing as a secular instrument. The word *cantata* is a doing word: it simply means sung.

The artist goes to South Africa, a country he left for England as a young man, which he might call his home. In Richmond, in the Northern Cape, the artist meets Yappi, a local man who knocks on his door most days. They talk. Sometimes the artist goes with Yappi to buy him food, but he thinks it would be better if they can have a more equal exchange.

He films Yappi talking, but he is unsure of his own motivations, of the nature of his results. If he were to use his power as an artist to draw a line round Yappi, what would that mean?

So he makes a film of the film. He stands on a chair, holding a heavy monitor, as Yappi talks on the screen. Yappi is ungraspable. The artist makes a kite with a camera that will provide an aerial view of Richmond, but the image is vertiginous and unsteady, not complete. When he tries to lift that film as it plays on the monitor he cannot carry it either. Instead, he films a plastic bag caught in the breeze.

One day the artist rolls a big block of ice. As it moves it gathers the local dust to it. It is cloaked in earth. He stands upon it. After eight hours in the sun the grimy cube has only partially melted, but its surface is pristine once more.

Has the ice been depleted by its displacement or has it returned to some original form? What do we call the watery trace that the ice has left behind? What do we call the dust that has been shed in the melt and become mud? It will soon become dust again in the wind and sun.

Lines/Islands

The artist travels to Antarctica to visit the Halley Research Station where he will try to fly a kite on the Brunt Ice Shelf. On the journey he spends hours on the bridge of the ship. Using a black marker pen he tries to trace the view through the glass by drawing on the windscreen. As the ship moves each drawing becomes confused and redundant. The artist cannot transcribe the world as a series of views. He can only describe the sensation of movement, of exile or arrival. There is no fixed point. He cannot draw a line around it.

In the Olympic Park, in 2012, they are building a new world, an island territory in the east end of London. Neville Gabie sees what is underneath. The park is built over a studio he worked in as a very young man.

He befriends the bus drivers who traverse the site, taking the construction workers to where they are needed. He films Semra Yusuf as she swims 1200m

in the Olympic Pool, the length of her daily drive taking workers from the gates of the site to the Aquatics centre. She is a very good distance swimmer. It has taken her years of solitary practice.

Semra is alone. But, as she swims, she thinks of her happy early childhood on the island of Cyprus, her love for her grandparents, for the beach and for the sea. She swims to forget the shocking brutality of her later childhood and adolescence in London.

She swims in strong, confident lines, but as she moves through the Olympic pool she leaves gentle ripples behind her. They move out in a vast undulating arc until they reach the farthest boundary of the pool edge and must stop or bounce back.

People/Buildings/Islands/Lines

What is an island? For the boat builders of Coigach, in the Highlands of Scotland, the road to the peninsula where they live is an afterthought. For thousands of years the approach was from the coast. Many of the community are incomers, there are many differences between them all, but their houses all face the sea. Their peninsular world is an island in all but name.

John Donne's famous religious meditation suggested that to be an island was a position of isolation. It was on the continental shelf that man should understand his true connectedness. For Glissant the island can become an image of relation rather than isolation, of fragments rather than totality. Seeing the whole archipelago rather than the solitary island is a refusal to retreat behind a line.

In the gallery Neville Gabie has drawn a series of lines. They begin by tracing the known territory of the room, but through repetition this original orientation is lost. The lines waver, hesitate and fail. His errant hand refuses to adhere to the task.

On the front page:

Neville Gabie *Semra* 2015 video

NEVILLE GABIE *Myself and Others*
18 September - 25 October 2015

DANIELLE ARNAUD
123 Kennington Road
London SE11 6SF
Tel +44 (0) 20 7735 8292
www.daniellearnaud.com