

Introduction, Andrew Parkinson (Curator, Pier Arts Centre), Susan Christie (Independent Curator)

AP Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen and welcome to The Pier Arts Centre. This is the second part of the morning's events. So, we're delighted to have Neville Gabie and Moira Jeffrey who are going to talk a little bit about the exhibition and some of the works, and provide some of the background to his work. There will be a chance to view the exhibition - and we will put the film *Afloat* back on - and I'm sure there will be an opportunity to ask questions. But, first of all we are going to introduce Susan Christie. When Susan first approached us with the notion of bringing an exhibition of Neville's work we jumped at the chance - it was a great opportunity and we're grateful to Susan for that. So, I will invite Susan just to say a little introduction and give a little bit of background to *Afloat*. Thank you.

SC Thank you, Andrew. So, my name's Susan Christie and I'm a curator based on the Black Isle; and, I thought it would be handy just to say a little bit about how I first met Neville. This is a fantastic opportunity to see a much broader range of Neville's work, not just the one piece that we have commissioned, which is *Afloat* - which is being shown in this space. And, I'd like to say a really warm thank you to The Pier team - to Andrew, and to Carol, Isla, Kari, Brandon, and the rest of the gang - because it's just fantastic to be here. It feels quite special and a very key moment for us.

So, first of all, a really, really warm thank you to everybody. Just to go back a wee moment in time, just to explain where this all began, we were involved in a programme back in 2009 - a big programme of projects in the Inverness area called 'Reimagining the Centre'. And, as part of that series of works we were coordinating a conference called the **X**, and we invited Neville to be the keynote speaker at that conference, and he spoke in St. Andrews Cathedral, in Inverness - which is just a wonderful space to listen and focus in on a very broad range of Neville's work. And, that made such a powerful impact on everybody there, that it was kind of planted in our consciousness that we wanted to find the right series of ingredients and circumstances to work in the future. And, I think it was four years later that we were working on a body of projects under a kind of 'roaming' theme, and it seemed to us there was a particular community over on the west coast in Coigach, where it's a very small place, around 250 people; but, in that one community there's lots of different elements that seem to speak about lots of other places. So, issues like wanting to retain young people in the community, how do you deal with sustainable employment; and, what do you do about the community assets in that place; so, there's lots of different kinds of things to delve into. And, we approached Neville about coming to work with us, so there really was a very open spirit, and an open brief, which is something that we were very keen to support. So, that piece of work - which we didn't know what it was going to be - ended up being *Afloat*, which is the film, that's kind of the heart of the show here. And, that particular piece of work has involved lots and lots of different people which I'm sure Neville and Moira will touch on, but we've taken that work to a number of different places; very, very different situations and context, including where there's been predominantly sort of rowers in the audience, and this is a very different audience again. As part of that series of events and journeys, we have been working with Moira. And, Moira has been a wonderful, additional part of the gang to help bring different audiences together, and really sort of delve into some of the things and issues around the work. Moira has also produced a very insightful piece of writing that's included in the catalogue that accompanies the show here. So, I really wanted to say, thank you very much to Moira for coming on the roadshow - a very unexpected roadshow! So, it

feels quite elliptical to be in Orkney which is obviously a perfect, in some ways, kind of ending for this. I'm just going to pass on to Moira and Neville to take things forward. Thank you.

MJ Good afternoon everybody (it's officially afternoon!). So, my name's Moira Jeffrey, I'm a writer; it's an absolute thrill for me to be at The Pier today with Neville. Neville is one of the most significant artists to have emerged from the UK in the last kind of 20-30 years, particularly in relation to collaboration and participation - in working with other people. But, Neville also has his roots in sculpture and I think it's a fantastic moment, after having looked at this particular project, *Afloat* - which is very much I think about community - to have a look at what Neville does in a really kind of rounded way. And, I think our approach for the chat is sort of, simply a kind of an 'imaginary' walk around the show, and the different works in it.

So, before I start, I thought I could maybe just do a sort of show of hands thing - so has everyone had the chance to see the exhibition? (Most of you). Are there any coastal rowers in the audience? We discovered when we went to Ainstler, to the Fisheries Museum, it was packed with coastal rowers who were trying to pick up clues about how the Coigach team had become world champions! (Laughter). Are there artists in the audience? (Fantastic). And, anybody who has encountered Neville's work before? So, people who might have seen other works that he's done before. That's really just helpful so we know what the ballpark is.

This is really a conversation - I know I'm doing a lot of the talking at the moment - but, it really is a conversation, so please do feel free if you want to interject. But, also at the end there will be a chance to ask Neville some questions, and hopefully a bit of time for informal chat afterwards.

So, I'm very aware it's beautifully sunny outside as well! I've had a lovely, luxurious morning, drinking coffee, chatting to friends, watching a spectacular performance. But, this man here has been hauling chalk around! Did everyone see the performance? (Most of us). Thank you, Neville - an amazing thing to do, and such an amazing to do in public. So, I think we'll walk around to that point. So, I wondered if we could start in this room, and I wanted to ask you about *Afloat*.

When you went to Coigach, you were a - I was going to say a stranger in town - but a stranger in a place that certainly isn't a town. You've got lots of experience of working in very diverse communities: a housing estate in Liverpool, an Antarctic research station. How do you approach meeting a new community, evolving a piece of work, and involving a community?

NG I think the absolute basis of that is building up a relationship of trust. So, they need to know who you are, what you're doing there, what you might bring. And, I think that could be through anything. So, it's not really the art that comes first at all, but conversation and building up a relationship. And, I think, obviously I was born in South Africa - I grew up there - so, I'm a stranger here anyway; and, I think part of my attraction or fascination with different community or community groups is trying to understand my own relationship to those in a way. So, in parts it's also kind of a personal journey but it's also about how to build up a relationship of trust. And, I think it means that very often projects unfold over a really quite extended bit of time; because you might spend 6 months, a year, going backwards and forwards before you do anything. But, that's been my way of unlocking things. Other artists might approach things differently.

MJ And, what struck you about the Coigach community when you started to work there?

NG I mean, I think it's an absolutely extraordinary place, an extraordinary community, and a very resilient community; and, it's you know, it's quite isolated; it's a 'mend and make-do' culture - everyone can literally do a bit of everything. Um..., there is quite a mix of people so there are incomers as well as local people there, and it was how all of those things worked - how that little community functioned that fascinated me; and, actually the skiff, the building of it and the rowing of it, seemed to be that 'one moment' where everyone could bring their own individual skill, or expertise, you know to this one collective effort if you like. And that was really what fascinated me about it. So, this little community, I think, 'god I'd love to be part of a little community like that'; but, also I think it terrifies me! I mean it's so different to the experience of being more itinerant. So, it's those things that I was really trying to think about.

MJ And could you tell us a little bit about the skiff, about the building of the skiff, and what you saw and understood?

NG Well, I think when we first got there they'd already built one skiff, and I remember they took us out, they took me and Joan out in the skiff, and I just thought the conversations seemed to, it seemed to enliven a lot of people when they were talking about it; and, it might be their relationship to the skiff, having built it, or having rowed in it; and, then the other thing that was really absolutely noticeable were their 15, 16, 17 year olds who were all excited about it, but also people in their 60s who were getting involved. So, I thought you know, I thought that was amazing. And, you know the former primary school teacher Lesley was in the skiff with kids who had been her primary school students, I guess. But, those sorts of barriers which you would expect, just completely broke down the moment that it was in the water, and that really appealed to me. So, I said I wanted to do a film which followed the whole journey - from building a skiff to then rowing it. So the team in Coigach did a bit of fundraising, raised the money to build a second skiff, and then the journey was really - the film - was watching it start from bare boards in a shed in the middle of nowhere, to actually, then finally, magically winning the World Championships.

MJ It was so convenient!

NG Yes, it worked absolutely perfectly for me!

MJ So, something happens I think when I watch the film; something happens that I see reflected in this bigger exhibition, which is you start I think making a film about a very specific community, and then you begin to be fascinated by not just the way that they sort of work together, but by the very fact of 'working'. And, the film focuses a lot I think on the sort of processes of 'making', the kinds of ideas of 'craftsmanship', and I wondered if you could talk a little bit about that?

NG Well, I guess I studied sculpture - and I love making things - and so, I was fascinated by building the boat; and, it was a slightly strange experience for me to be watching or filming other people doing it when actually I wanted to be on the other side - pushing the plane and painting it. So, I think I had to - because I'm not a filmmaker - I had to approach it from a language which I understood. And, I understand the business of working with stuff. So, it was very clear to me that it needed to be a film

which had that kind of tactile quality; that idea of a relationship between a person and a tool, and a material. And, I think also the other thing is, it's a slight aside, but I remember before I started making the film, speaking to a filmmaker telling him what I wanted to do. And, he said, 'well, there's a real flaw in what you're proposing Neville because there isn't a character'. And, I thought how wrong he was because actually the skiff *is* the character; so, I just thought that has to be the focus. So, the camera was either attached on the skiff physically – I mean, I think it *became* the character throughout the film.

MJ Because, there's a fantastic sort of pivotal moment in the film...

NG There is.

MJ Isn't there, with the turning of the boat. When the boat is turned, which is this community effort, one of the things I love is the floral cushions on the bottom of the boat. The boat is supported by somebody's old sofa!

NG Yes!

MJ And, you know almost every shot there's a dog, or there's you know a toddler complaining in the background. But, suddenly when the boat is turned over it becomes an animate thing.

NG Yeh.

MJ And, you begin to see the world from the 'boat's-eye-view' – which is very, very beautiful – and, then you see the boat in the landscape. It's an extraordinary landscape there. I wondered, as an artist, how you manage not to just be completely seduced by the landscape, and how you deal with that? Because, it's so overwhelming. You have Stac Polly in the background – it's extraordinary.

NG It's a very powerful, and you know very beautiful landscape. But, I think I should say a little bit about how I first arrived in Achiltibuie. So, Susan said, 'oh, we've got this little place you need to come and visit and see if you want to work there'. So, we met Susan in Inverness and we drove to Achiltibuie and it was January I think, but anyway, we drove in the dark and we arrived in darkness; and, we had no sense of what this place was at all; and, you know in the morning it revealed itself. And, I think there was a process of the land – the landscape – revealing itself as I went on return trips; and, I think again, that was something that I thought was really critical to build into this film. Um, it's a different piece of work, but when I went to Antarctica, I deliberately chose to go to a place where there was no beautiful landscape because I didn't want to be seduced by that. So yes, I think the landscape is there – and it's stunning – but, I felt that I needed to really keep the focus on...

MJ On the people within the landscape?

NG Yes, absolutely. But, I think the people and the landscape, there's a synergy between the two isn't there...

MJ That's what I was going to ask. To what extent do you think from your travels, and from these kinds of pieces of work; and, just by the very fact that we're sitting in this very particular kind of place, with this very particular of view from the gallery and context; how does landscape and environment, how does that shape people?

NG I mean, I think it has a huge impact. Again, for me, there's certain places and landscapes which I feel absolutely drawn to and I know when I get off the plane in South Africa - I know I'm home. I haven't lived there for a long time, but there's something about the smell, the dust, the air, that I just know I'm there. But, again in Achiltibuie, it was really interesting because one of the people who features very much in the film, *Ally Beag*, who you know was in his 70s, but very much part of the building; we were building this skiff in a funny little shed which was 50 yards from the house in which he had been born; so, he'd lived in Achnahaird, right there - he'd perhaps gone away for periods of time - but, there was this rootedness there which I thought was really enviable in some ways. But, then there are other people who had come to that landscape and found a place for them where it wasn't their kind of home, and I think it's kind of *how* we deal with that which constantly fascinates me - I'm not sure I have an answer to it, but it's something I'm always asking myself...

MJ Yes, I mean I think it's something in the world that is, and as it has been for a long, long time, that we have to find ways of connecting with place that not everybody has that kind of privilege of generations of belonging - it just isn't the facts of migration; you know, it wasn't the facts in 10th century here in the Norse era. So, I think that's very, very interesting, about how we make links, how we make our lived lives meaningful. And, it strikes me - and, in some ways that's the theme of my essay - that one of the ways we might do that is by 'doing' and 'making'.

NG Yeh, absolutely.

MJ There's this idea that I've written about when thinking about your work, and it relates very much to *Afloat*, is this idea of what I call the 'second sailing'. And, this is - it sounds ridiculous - it's from Socrates. But, you know it's this idea that in a particular moment in Socrates' philosophy he has a big 'sea change' - that's a bad metaphor isn't it! But, a big change of mind, and in some translations of the writing it's described as a second voyage; but, in some it uses this very specific term called the 'second sailing' - and, the second sailing is when the wind drops and you have to pick up the oars and do it yourself. And, to me, that seemed one of the marvellous things about the film, where people talk about how different it is going somewhere under your own steam.

NG Yes, absolutely - it is, very much so. And, that immersion in a landscape under your own steam I think, too.

MJ So, in a great 'segway' - I'm thinking about steam, and about exhalation - I wonder if you could tell us about the project *Collective Breath*?

NG Yeh. Well, the project we had was a different journey I was invited to be in - to show work - but, also commissioned to make a new piece of work for *WOMAD Music Festival*. So, there you're presented with 30000 people, in a field, for 4 days - so how do you even begin to even think about that!

MJ So, what is the particular emphasis? Can you tell people a little bit about *WOMAD*?

NG Well, *WOMAD* is a kind of international music festival, so the idea is that it brings musicians from right across the globe, and it's that idea of sharing this international language of music; but, they have also supported quite a lot of arts activities over the years. So, they have an artist team who commission - well, they have previously 'showed' work, that was the first time they had commissioned a piece of work - but, it's very much part of that whole ethos and thinking. So, I was really fascinated by what I might do, how I might interact; the notion of people playing music, singing. And, at the same time I was doing that, I had been doing a residency at Cabot Institute which is an interdisciplinary department looking at climate change - people from all sorts of disciplines - and, we would often sit as a group, just discussing the anthropocene, air, fire, or whatever. But, there was one time we were talking about 'air' funny enough, there was a woman from the English department who played the flute, and she was talking about this instrument. And, she was saying the instrument *isn't* the flute - actually, it's about a column of air that starts in the pit of your stomach, which rises through your body and ends up at the tip of this instrument. And, I thought that was a really beautiful metaphor. So, when she was thinking, and we were talking about breath like that, I thought well actually it would be interesting to see if I could create that sound - but *collectively*. So, the idea was to collect the breath of 1111 people in individual bags; so, I got a pharmaceutical company to make these 3 litre bags.

MJ I always love the idea that at a music festival it wouldn't be the cleanest breath you'd ever come across! (Laughter)

NG No, no, no - there was plenty of alcohol in it!

MJ Yes, it would be alcohol tainted - probably people hadn't brushed their teeth for a couple of nights!

NG Well, that's why I thought they needed to have their own little bag!

NG So, I had a team of people who diligently collected the breath from 1111 people, and once we had all the breath it was then put into the pressurised tank - which is here. And, at the same time I asked people to think about where they'd like this collective breath to be released. So, the suggestions in their complete form are on the wall; and, then I made this very, very strange instrument and I used the instrument to play the sound. So, the audio you hear in there is the breath of all these people, but played through that very strange thing that I made.

MJ Maybe, a future as 'specialist instrument maker' might not be the (pause)... It's not the most sutoris of musical instruments! (Laughter) But, it also does sound like the sound of a ship's horn, doesn't it?

NG It does, actually. And, in terms of showing it, I couldn't think of a more perfect location than here in The Pier where there's a language overlap between the instrument and what's happening in the dock just beyond.

MJ And, one of the things I really like about the way it's displayed in this gallery is that you can see it as kind of elements - you can see the way that it's kind of a constructed thing when you look at it against the language of the dock and what's going on out there; that it's not kind of magical or instinctual, it's actually quite hard-won and 'made'.

NG And, I think for me it was also important to show it in parts. It had served its purpose – it had ‘been’, it had ‘done’.

MJ Why do you do that – why do you hand-over your power as an artist to other people? You know, you could make an instrument, you could make a noise, or you could make an immediate choice about where the work should be released?

NG I kind of like the democracy of that; and, I kind of see my role as an artist in many instances as being the kind of catalyst - the glue in the middle of something – and, I think it was also a way of teasing-out people’s thinking about place, landscape... In fact, looking at the poster now – it was 2014, even politics – it was *WOMAD* music festival, it was 2 years ago; a lot of the suggestions speak absolutely about a moment in time. So, I think, I guess I see my role as being that kind of glue – that catalyst – and, it’s about trying to give voice to others; and, I think that’s been key through lots of the works.

MJ And, we have a very particular example of that in the set of works that are just out here – which is the collaboration between yourself and your wife Joan Gabie who’s an artist. Quite an extraordinary thing – you were apart for what, 95 days?

NG Yeh, it was a little longer but...

MJ On a trip to Antarctica.

NG I had to decompress Joan! (Laughter)

MJ And, this was Joan’s suggestion?

NG It was – very much Joan’s idea. So, I was going off to Antarctica with the British Antarctic Survey; we had to do this whole induction, and one of the things that became absolutely clear at the induction, was they said that there are all sorts of problems around band-width, and communicating with family – which were practical, but also emotional. So, they said very often you know, someone’s on a base for 3 months and they get an email from their wife saying, ‘I’ve left you, I’ve met someone else’, and it can really you know cause huge problems – lots of psychological problems. So, there was all this thing that actually if there’s bad news, it has to go through the base commander. So, we were having this discussion about how we’d communicate and what we might do. And, Joan suggested well, ‘I’d quite like you just to write just a line about what you’re seeing – what you’re experiencing each day’. And, you (Joan) were going to do a drawing – either in response to imagining what I was doing, or what you (Joan) were experiencing back home on your own with the kids. Um, so that’s really, that was the beginning of it. I’m not a writer – I’ve never kept a diary – although, I did get carried away at times! (Laughter)

MJ Did you get all ‘lyrical’?

NG Yeh - I think Antarctica often does that to you! But, then when we came back, Joan had a whole body of drawings which of course I’d never seen in advance; and, it stayed there for a long time, I think not knowing quite what we might do with it – and also, me feeling very anxious about putting that diary in any kind of public domain.

MJ Yes, Joan you get your say on this one!

NG You do!

MJ What was it like receiving these elliptical messages every day?

JG Well, I wasn't actually completely alone - I did have my son with me. But, he was much more monosyllabic on the sofa, and he was you know saying to me, what you doing mum? Um, yes - it was very powerful actually, because I expected just a 'one-liner', and actually going through the book you can see that there's pages and pages; and some of it's really lyrical, and some of it's really down to earth - some of what he was doing was actually quite boring really, you know, to be honest. So, it's got a whole flavour of what it's like to be on the ice cap.

MJ And, then this took on a different historical context when you first showed the work?

NG Yeh - I think, it was 2012 I think...

JG Well, I was actually having a small show on my own - I was having to look, to sort of 'knock' the work into place, and we had a phone call from Cheltenham.

NG Yes. Cheltenham Museum and Art Gallery have a strong Antarctic connection because Edward Wilson who went to the Pole with Scott is from Cheltenham; so, they have a lot of his letters, a lot of his paintings - he was a very good artist. And, they asked us to make a piece of work in response to their collection.

JG Actually, they just wanted a piece of work from Neville. They said, we know you've been to Antarctica, and we just need to fill that slot...

MJ But, I guess it's this notion that writing home has a very long history, doesn't it?

NG It did.

JG It was really lovely that Neville said, 'well, actually we've got a much better project', which would be much more suited for the family archive - it would slot-in so much better and have a wider appeal, so...

NG I think it was partly because when we went to have a look in the archive we found a telegram sent by Edward Wilson's wife - from New Zealand back to the UK. She went to meet him expecting him to have travelled from Antarctica back to New Zealand, but he hadn't got on the boat. She'd got there, and all the news she'd had from Antarctica was that they were getting on exceedingly well - and it's actually in the little book - and, so she'd sent this telegram back to the UK, but the telegram was actually sent to the UK 3 months after he had already died in the tent with Scott. And, it was this idea of 'slippage' in terms of communication, and his letter to her - in the tent - and, her telegram almost became the framework for the piece of work that we did.

MJ And, when you look at the work now, does it tell you about kind of 'closeness', or does it tell you about 'distance'?

NG You'll definitely have to ask our sons about that, or Joan?

MJ That's kind of a light question to be thinking about - it's pausing on your marriage in front of dozens of strangers! (Laughter)

JG Definitely, both I think. And, I still think they're very strange drawings to look at, for me. But, they're quite powerful and quite difficult, actually. And quite different from my ordinary drawings.

NG I was quite shocked when I came back!

JG I was shocked by what Neville was saying, and he was shocked by the real sort of real ferocity of them - but they seem very bouncy, as obviously I've selected quite cheerful ones, and some funny little screwed-up ones too!

MJ But, it seems to me it's about, it's just about this question of *how* do you reach people, and...

JG And, how you import a landscape...

MJ Yeh.

JG And, how do you import that landscape to another person who's never seen it? That's what my outset was - to actually understand a landscape; I was deliberately not going to research, or sit in front of a screen and look at an iceberg - it was actually thinking, well what would an iceberg be like? So, it would just be a total imagined thing. So, that was the whole thing that I wanted to do, and import *my* experience back to Neville by scanning the image and sending it back to him. And, in a way, it became an enigmatic thing to think, well what's that about? Why's she drawn that?

MJ It's a very extreme place to go. What was that experience like - the ice shelf - when you made it to the Brabant ice shelf?

NG It's actually just on the Weddell sea, so it's where Shackleton got stuck in the ice for all those years; so, Halley is the most southerly British base; and, it is absolutely flat, and white for 360 degrees around you. There is *no* life. I mean, if you see a skewer, that's like an event, you know - you drag everyone to the window to look! And, it's a small base. So, I think, we did a lot before we went; we spent a lot of time in Cambridge meeting the team, being prepared to go, and I think that was absolutely fine. But, what they never did was prepare you for coming back...

MJ Right...

NG And, that was an incredibly difficult - I struggled a lot - actually, and, I think...

JG You just wanted to go back didn't you?

NG I think, when you are in this tiny little community of people, and your needs are met - there's a chef who's cooking food, you're told to eat 6000 calories a day to keep warm; you don't think about bills, or cars, or kids; then, you know, you do become strangely institutionalised; and actually, readjusting was really quite difficult.

MJ And, you went with again, it was quite an extreme task - it was kind of the idea of flying a kite?

NG Well, it's again, when you apply to the British Survey, you - unfortunately, they don't do it anymore, it's a great shame - but, it's the most extraordinary application for an artist; because, as an artist applying to a residency you'll send an image, and you'd imagine you'd go for an interview and meet the people; but, it's exactly as something you would do for a science commission. You write your proposal, you send it there, they read the brief, and they say 'yes' that's worthwhile investigating, or, no it's not. So, there's no kind of interaction or interface, and there's very little actually in the way of images looked at. But, I wanted to propose doing something ridiculously ephemeral - having to make this huge

journey to do it – so, I proposed going to Antarctica to fly a kite in the landscape, and actually to film using a kite. But, that was my methodology.

MJ And, this element of your practice is one that we've got reflected in the room with the series of films – these kind of small but enormous acts, this kind of strange... you were talking about the difference – kind of in proportion – between the ephemeral and the enormous effort to get there; and, that's reflected in a number of these works and films. I'm still worrying about you on the desks – chopping down! I find that film really hard when Neville disappears off the bottom of the screen, you know, and waiting – is he alright! What drives these funny little – that sounds disparaging – but, they are often quite small gestures that involve a paradoxical effort?

NG There's a few things. I mean, in part, it's a way of me trying to understand again my landscape, or the relationship to the place in which I find myself in. But, it's also thinking about, you know, our own ephemeral lives in relation to stuff and material. So, I think that's really a lot of what really underpins the work; and in a way, those films have been a curious return back to sculpture for me. So, I used to make lots of things – much less so now – but, I think I almost lost faith in the object. But, these little films are a way back into understanding my own relationship to a space or a place – through 'stuff', through materiality. So, that kind of physical engagement with the landscape or with the material is really tied up together.

MG I think, initially when I looked at the work with Neville standing on the enormous ice, I think initially I'd seen that as something about sort of endurance, but recently I've become really interested in the block of ice itself, you know – what does it mean? What's the stuff that clings to it, and what happens you know when it falls away? And, it seems to me that you're talking a little bit about how we get attached to places, or places get attached to us – the kind of emotional sort of traction somehow between a person and a place...

NG Yes – what we leave behind, what those traces might be. So, yeh – I think it was an endurance. It was 8 hours of standing in boiling hot heat! And, me imagining this block completely vanishing, and me landing back on the ground. But, it didn't quite happen in that sort of way. But, it's all about that – about pushing it through that landscape; it picking up the dirt and the dust; standing on it; that disappearing along – almost carrying *you* back into the earth somehow. So, I think...

MJ And, we've been very lucky this morning to have seen a fantastic example of that kind of work in the flesh – is that the first time you've made a drawing like that as a performance?

NG It actually is!

MJ It's a historical moment people!

NG It is. I mean, I think yeh, it is – but, I felt in the context of the show it was a really important thing to do because somehow I felt it needed something more visceral, more physical in the context of the space; bring that materiality back in, in a way which you can sort of loose on a monitor really, in a way.

MJ Can you tell us about the chalk. Why is the chalk your medium there?

NG Well, I can give you a long story about that!

MJ Yes - good!

NG It goes back to being at the Cabot Institute in Bristol - with these climate change scientists - and just being invited to be around, and to watch them, and to talk to them. And, I spent - I mean, there's so much research, it's just so diverse, there's so many extraordinary, interesting people that I felt most of the time completely overruled by that experience. But, I got absolutely fascinated by mathematicians - first climate modelling mathematicians, but then pure mathematicians - which I realise is as crazy as being an artist really! So, I met these mathematicians and I just said I would like to really kind of film how you work. And, there was a couple, but there was one in particular - who was a very eccentric man. But, in his office he had blackboards all the way around. You'd imagine people dealing with quite sophisticated maths would use a laptop, or would you know, use something. But, no it was chalk and a board - 3 boards - and, a rubber; and he was just working. It was a very, again very immediate, very physical - he was just putting it on, he was rubbing it off - and he's telling me that he's trying to write an equation to measure and define infinity. And, I'm thinking, OK! That's interesting!

MJ That makes holding a big block of chalk look like an easy thing!

NG But, in a language that was also completely impenetrable to me - not being a mathematician - and, I'm thinking gosh, I'm thinking... And, he's doing this measuring of infinity with this natural material which is made up of calcified remains of you know, from eons ago. And, there was something about him doing these equations, and rubbing it, and the dust of millions of years scattering onto the floor, which just kind of fascinated me. And, I thought, well how would I approach that? And, that was really the beginnings of me starting a relationship with chalk, and then with oil, and then with ice - but, in that kind of way. *My* kind of connection to materiality.

MJ And, one of the key materials, throughout the exhibition, is of course water...

NG Well, it has become - but, I think again that's hugely influenced by where we are. I mean, I think the fantastic thing about The Pier art gallery is exactly where it's located, and the fact that each space is really very, very different, you know from the other; and, has a different relationship to the outside - whether it's little porthole windows in the old gallery, or this really big picture window looking out over the harbour, it's quite a particular place. And, I started to think about, well actually, you need to think about the work in terms of 'the space', and the place; and what has those connections between the inside and the outside. And, I think that influenced the work a lot. But, it wasn't until I put the work up that I realised that actually water is in virtually every piece of work - there's only one where it's not and that's chopping up furniture, and I thought that kind of, yeh... So, it's partly incidental and partly deliberate.

(Questions)

MJ Well, as we are talking about The Pier itself and kind of where we are – I would now like to open it up to everybody. So, does anybody have a question for Neville? I'm sure you do – anybody who saw that performance would have lots of questions!

Audience Member:

Where does that lump of chalk come from, and why did you choose that particular lump of chalk?

NG It comes from a quarry called Soulborn Quarry, which is on the Downs – the Hampshire Downs – which we, I went to originally 3 or 4 years ago to get this one piece. And, it's just an extraordinary man who runs it - he owns this little quarry and digs it; and, I think I've done a lot of work with chalk, in different forms, but em, I think it's in part, I'm fascinated by that place. I'm kind of building up the courage to ask if I can actually go and make a piece of work in his quarry – which I haven't quite done yet. But, again I think it's that whole historical thing of this sedimentary, sort of calcified material which you know connects us to millennia, which fascinates me – and there it is, it's on your hand, you can rub it then it vanishes into the floor. So, that's what kicked it off. In relation to the performance, I'm showing it with another piece of work – it was a commission again which Joan and I did together, which was working with another natural pigment called Bideford Black – which is a young coal. So, it was used for its carbon content for making tyres, for making mascara apparently, for paint, umm... and it's...

MG On the bottom of boats...

NG ... on the bottom of boats. But, it's no longer mined, and there is a seam of it – if you go to where that's filmed in Bideford there's a vertical seam of it which comes out on the cliff face, on the beach. And, it's like a kind of a clay, I mean it's very... And, so we did quite a lot of work with that, and the last piece of work I did was just washing it off and letting it disperse into the ocean; and, I think in the context of that work I wanted to play – well, obviously it was the black and the white – but, the notion of these materials which we handled which we handled for a moment, but then dispersed, and separated...

MG Any more questions – yes.

Audience Member:

*I'm struggling to believe you that water is incidental in your work. So, the people who theorise lots of things that you've talked about like materiality, and traces, and rootedness... they're all really dismissive of water – they all treat water as something 'different', it doesn't have traces, it's not interesting in the same way. And, one thing I like about your work is that water becomes so central – so, to me, watching *Alloat*, the water is as much a character as the skiff is. I was wondering if you could say any more about how water fits in to how you treat the materiality of 'making'?*

NG And, I think actually, also – and, that's a very good point - that the one work which we haven't talked about is *Semra*, swimming the length in the pool. And, I mean she was quite an amazing woman anyway, but, filming her swimming in this vast, 50 metre Olympic pool – before the Olympics happened – completely empty. And, you know that kind of repetitiveness – of the swimming of the lengths backwards and forwards; the hard work of it; again, the idea of you know imbibing, but also the idea of leaving a trace, a memory somehow in that space.

MJ She makes a drawing doesn't she?

NG She makes a drawing – absolutely does. It seemed really important, so I think yes - there's water in many, many forms, and I think it is quite key; and, I guess one of the things you have with an exhibition like this is the opportunity to bring bits of work which were - or might never be - seen together in a space. And, really to have that moment for oneself as artist to almost re-evaluate those connections. So, in that way it's really been a fantastic opportunity and useful for me to really look at those connections and think about them some more.

MJ Any more?

Audience Member:

Can I just ask what, 'the jacket' - the formality of what you were wearing to do the performance - why was that...?

NG Hmm, yeh... (Laughter). Hmm. That's a good question. Yes, uh yeh... (Laughter). No, I'm just trying to think how best to answer this...

JG It's the only time you get to wear a suit now! (Laughter)

NG It is!

Audience Member:

I found it really interesting because it was all part of a participational work, and then, very symbolically removing it at the end... was that the intention, and the tie?

NG I never wear a suit, I never wear a tie. But, I think there was something about... It actually funnily enough started at the Olympics, after I finished my residency at the Olympic park, which was – I mean it was an amazing opportunity – but, it was also something which I left feeling extraordinarily jaded about to be perfectly honest; about the whole Olympics, and that whole you know, 'thing' coming in, planting itself, going out, and what does that do; and, so much of the Olympics was sold, certainly in London, as being a place for the people of the East-end of London, and about community; and, actually the reality of it when you spend that amount of time there is incredibly corporate – it's not about people at all. The first I had to get *Semra* to swim in that pool, you wouldn't believe. So, I did a piece of work, after I finished my residency, where I invited anybody to write a suggestion about the furthest place away from the Olympics I could go for the opening ceremony. And, we had about 100 different suggestions, and I – a bit like *WOMAD* – invited a team of 6 people to then select the place that I should go to. And, I began – the place that was selected was actually Paris, which didn't win the Olympics – to go and see what happened to that space instead. And, they asked me specifically to walk from Stratford to St. Pancras, to catch the train; and, I felt if I was going to do this, I needed, I wanted to do something which made me feel more corporate if you like – so I wanted to wear that notion of 'the business suit', or a suit like that, so it became from that moment kind of something that I did. Then, next I was working in this one particular place in South Africa – and, it's a very impoverished place, community – and, again it was bit like really placing myself in something so outside of that; by how I dressed, how I related myself to that landscape. And, it's become part of that legacy. But, I don't know if I can give you any more of a specific answer than that.

MJ And, the suit will go home and get washed – is that what happens next?

NG No, that's going to stay here now!

MJ Is it going to stay there?

NG That's it - it's part of the show!

MJ Great - it looks fantastic hanging on the chair.

NG It needs to stay.

MJ Neville, thank you so much. This exhibition is called *toandFRO* and I think this notion of to and fro exists in so many different ways in the work. It's in the way you work with communities, talking and listening; it's in that very specific work *Emailing Antarctica*; and, my goodness it was there this morning as you were *hauling* that bit of chalk around! I've 'to'd' and 'fro'd' with Neville over the work for a few years now - and it's been such a treat and such a privilege to think about it - but, now to see it in this context, and to see the way in which *Alfoat*, which kind of anchored the exhibition, speaks to everything else - it's a lovely show. Many congratulations. Thanks to The Pier for having us. And, I think - are you able to hang around for a few minutes to speak if people would like to speak?

NG I would like to say one final thing. I think The Pier must have done it by magic, but, as I've been assembling the exhibition all week, there's been one little boat parked in the harbour outside which has been rising and falling with the tide, and it's called *Endeavour*. And, I just think if The Pier had made anything happen, it's that! So, thank you!

MJ Well, thank you very much. Thank you so much for coming, and thank you Neville.