The Thought of Stuff
Curated by Leila Galloway and Andy Price at the RBS galleries

Jonathan Callan
Adam Gillam
Wayne Lucas
Jack Strange
Esmeralda Valencia
Alison Wilding

Exhibition
20 May–11 June 2010
Wednesday to Friday (or by appointment)
11am–4.30pm

Performed Talk
Elizabeth Rosser ‘Stuffed Pepper’
Saturday 29 May • 6.30pm
The Shipwright’s Palace,
Watergate Street, Deptford SE8

Exhibition jointly supported by the RBS and De Montfort University, Leicester
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The Thought of Stuff is an exhibition at the Royal British Society of Sculptors that combines work by Alison Wilding, Esmeralda Valencia, Jack Strange, Wayne Lucas, Adam Gillam and Jonathan Callan, with a performed talk by Elizabeth Rosser at the Shipwright’s Palace in Deptford. These seven diverse practices share a commitment to something that might be identified with sculpture – an intimate confrontation with materiality in generating new becomings.

The notion that culture has quite recently made a turn away from language – at least an idea of language that sought to prefix everything – and is rooting once again in all those places of alarm and enchantment that actually support its possibility – the body, stuff, performance, making – has been widely mooted. So widely that to present a show that might be a special ordeal that tempers a great deal of interesting sculpture.

Culture might be dreamt into turning its leviathan head to ponder again baser things than flitting signs of attention – would imply. Artists do not pull levers complicated and inflected than a mere turn – or shift of attention – in order to turn heads or force eyes this way or that; neither of these implies the strengthening of interest or engagement.

Culture might be dreamt into turning its leviathan head to ponder again baser things than flitting signs of attention. To learn through practice is no longer ordinary. With more knowing about and less knowing how, with art materials; places that often feel strangely uncoupled from the world and antagonistic to quickness or suddenness of movement – because to slow down, to exclude, to filter, is possibly to think. The artists presented here are from different stages of their careers, different generations – perhaps another way of slowing down. Some are highly experienced and well established; others emergent, one is a student. All distinctively engage with the synaptic juncture of thinking and making, thought and stuff, and evidence the persistent relevance of this site, albeit scarred by cliché and troubled by romance, in the development of contemporary sculpture.

The show inaugurates a long-term project, hosted by mittencrab – a new venture conceived by Andy Price and Leila Galloway – that seeks to promote a refreshed dialogue, unconstrained by formal framing, about materiality and art in the 21st century.

The unfolding of work in the open region of the world is the realm of performativity where logic of practice, not rationality, operates.

Making-Do in Dyson’s Graveyard
by Chris Mazeika

The Thought of Stuff
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In a modern technocratic society, few people know how to build a shelter for themselves, least of all possess the know-how to build a house. In affluent, we have embraced the poverty of forgetting how to grow our own food, even how to cook it, and the clothes we wear; we could not make it. This is not an attempt at forging an apocalyptic vision, nor a plea for a return to the craft of heimat werk1, but a call to pause for consideration that even from the very point of our coming into the world, the moment of our first drawn breath is now a process that teeters precariously between the polarities of a technologically Caesarian incision or the labours of a drug-free birth. The process of natural or assisted birth is fetishised by one party or another and not entirely without resonance to the question of whether an artist materializes their own work, with their handling beyond manifesting the concept, so that its an interaction of artist’s body and artist’s material that informs and transforms the artistic process.

With birth, death and disease becoming increasingly technologically medical, and with our most basic needs of shelter, food and clothing now invisibly met, we are placed further out of this body as more and more of our most basic needs are manufactured by distant, absent hands, out of sight and out of this mind beyond our reach. This is our habitus. To make has become extraordinary.

We are distinguished by a distinct absence of making, a dearth of familiarity with technique and yet surrounded by a surfeit of technology. Manufacture or material practice, a making with hands, has been pulled beyond our grasp, so that our collective hands have been free from making for more than a generation.

With more knowing about and less knowing how, tacit knowledge diminishes. Where intimacies were once forged by knowledge of proximate tools and materiality, intimacies and appearances now presence in an instant. The body, becoming less tacitly articulate becomes yet more removed from social spatial presence. Social networking sites, now increasingly engaged within public and therefore social spheres, further reduce actual presence in space and constrain relational life.

To learn through practice is no longer ordinary. When Susan Schwartz states that those who learn through the body experience knowledge differently, the difference she is referring to is primarily one of a sensed, felt response. For those who learn through the body, through physical practice, the corporeal,
kinetic, sensory engagement with the world emerges paramount to the conceptual or thought response. Hands-free technologies leave our hands free and keen to reach out for things. When this reach-out turns to throw-out, the distance obliterates the objects and our relationship to the objects and each other even further. Objects return to the unknown distance of their origin. As exposure to the means of making and of production in general disappear so the bodily construct of production disappears also. Redundant processes lead to redundant places, within and beyond the body.

As we daily submit to becoming homo technologicus, what becomes of homo faber, homo ludens and homo aestheticus? Participation in the act of future archaeology. Buried with these objects is the practical knowledge of our intimacy with know-how. Perhaps this is apocalyptic after all?

Wave after wave of unwanted objects without provenance become land-fill, profligate beyond their first site of holding, placed, they lie buried as a curatorial act of future archaeology. Buried with these objects is the practical knowledge of our intimacy with know-how. Perhaps this is apocalyptic after all?

We are no longer entitled to the immediacy of the ‘figurative’ or the ‘material’ or the ‘tacit’. Everything that we experience is now buried within the de-structured ‘digital’ — it is no longer possible to experience the object as an entity, to experience the object as anything other than as a piece of data. What happened to the production of the object as a result of the ‘digital’?

In Madurai, South India, making is seen, heard, smelt, felt, and tasted to the extent that moments of saturation, immersion in the sounds, smells, rhythms achieve near ecstatic proportions. The sounds of all things imaginable being made. The rhythmic strains resound off time, space, materiality, attention, effort, deliberation, such an intensification achieves a quality close to divination, absorption at least, immersion in a thoroughly mindful forgetfulness. These are the dynamics of relational aesthetics felt through the immaterial culture, focussing on the immateriality of the work (as verb) of art. A state of consecration, one of noli me tangere, don’t touch me, must hold fast for the perpetual intimacies offered and demanded of the work to achieve their consummation.

Where nothing lasts, familiarities, intimacies and the immaterial world they participate in are jeopardized. As exposure to the means of making and of production in general disappear so the bodily construct of production disappears also. Redundant processes lead to redundant places, within and beyond the body.

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In Madurai, South India, making is seen, heard, smelt, felt, and tasted to the extent that moments of saturation, immersion in the sounds, smells, rhythms achieve near ecstatic proportions. The approach to Sri Menakshi temple is a cacophony of the sounds of all things imaginable being made. Around the temple compound, sewing machines whir, hammers strike on metal, wood is being sawn and carved, all manner of materials are undergoing transformation. These rhythmic strains resound off the stone walls, the sound defining space as aural, echoing as much as visual. Inside the temple compound women throw ghee and light lamps for the goddess, uttering mantric verses. There appears to be little rupture here between the world of making outside the temple and the world of making, of devotion, that takes place within. A correspondence of gestures is manifest. The generative and regenerative principle in art as in ritual is one that belongs to actuality, to the sensory episteme. Art appeals to a system dependent on the senses and not primarily on thinking, thought.

The sensory episteme, the ways in which our senses lead us to knowing, is a knowing that is outside of and marginal to meaning achieved via a summation of signals, or signs.4 ‘...not bodies employed to make sense, but a sense that gives and divides bodies. No longer the semiological, symptomatological, mythological and phenomenological pillaging of bodies, but thought and writing delivered, devoted to bodies. The writing of a corpus as a dividing of bodies, sharing their being-bodies, but not signifying it. But a sense open, as “sensory” senses are — or rather, opened by their opening, exposing their being-extended — a significance, itself spacing of spacing.” (Nancy/Rand 2008b:63)

Beyond the visual field of art, we feel space and what occupies space with the whole body. For instance, shape may be perceived as sound. Does a square sound different to a circle? Through interval, repetition, we sense harmony and dissonance. The visual, aural, olfactory, tact and gustatory are supported by a visceral response and constitute emotional responses. These performative dynamics depend on engagement with, and immaterial exchange through, the five senses — a bodily response free from the ideational, and without recourse whatsoever to the tyranny of semiotics that has determined so much aesthetic theory.

Chris Mazelka

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4 See Bolt 2004:117 on the problem with semiotics.
Presenting the mundane and the miraculous as interchangeable, Esmeralda Valencia’s work shows a concern for moments of climax or action – moments that could be ascribed the status of ‘an event’. A brass band might accompany the artist on her daily rounds, or a pantomime cat toy with wood. Diverse materials – from lottery tickets to cakes – combine with plain wooden structures – diagrams, supports or rationales? Objects, taking on a role comparable to that of props in film or theatre, become the evidence of – or instructions for – an often absurd situation. Apparently objective presentations – a graph? – a lecture? – seem to revel in eccentric obscurity inside their own visibility. In prompting such scenarios, Valencia explores an underlying conflict between the desire to attract attention and the impulse to avoid being seen.

Esmeralda Valencia was born in Gothenburg, Sweden in 1983. She studied at the Slade School of Fine Art, London between 2003 and 2007. Since graduating she has taken part in shows in Gothenburg, Stockholm and London. She is currently in her second year of postgraduate study at the Royal Academy of Arts.

Group shows/ Performances
2010 Red Mansion Art Prize, Rochelle School, London
Premiums, Interim show, Royal Academy, London
Collaborative performance with Julia Calver
2008 9 From Slade, Fullersta Bio Konsthall, Stockholm
Frizzante, 176 Gallery, London
Collaborative performance with Julia Calver
The Spring Salon, Liljevalchs Museum of Art, Stockholm
Daily Thoughts, Daily Errands Performance with Mölndal Parade Orchestra, Gothenburg
2007 Floating A public art exhibition in and around the central canal, Gothenburg

Esmeralda Valencia

Reindeer Fluctuation
2009 Mixed media
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist
Jonathan Callan’s work is driven by a fascination with materiality. Often accumulative in process, the works confront the endless interiority of objects, which may be why the book has often been returned to: “Most of us will assume that a book is a culturally significant vehicle, the words being of far more importance than the fact that the object itself is a layered thing made of ink, binding and glue. I attempt to reverse this assumption, using the book as an armature, as the platform for a series of investigations into the physicality of those things which can only be shown.”

Jonathan Callan was born in 1961 in Manchester, graduated from Goldsmiths College in 1984, and completed post-graduate study at The Slade School of Fine Art in 1990. He now lives and works in London.

Selected exhibitions

2010 John Michael Kohler Arts Centre, Wisconsin
2009 Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery New York (with Jason Tomme)
 I Can’t Tell You Why, Grusenmeyer Gallery, Deurle, Belgium
2008 Access Denied, Kudlek van der Grinten Galerie, Cologne
2007 The Library of Past Choices, Grusenmeyer Gallery, Deurle, Belgium
2006 New Works, Galerie Martin Kudlek, Cologne
2004 BearSpace, London
Surface, (with Reinhard Dubravac), Galerie Martin Kudlek, Cologne
2003 Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York
2001 Zwemmer Art, London
2000 Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York
1999 L’Oeil de Poisson, Montreal
1998 Hales Gallery, London
1997 Entwistle Gallery, London
1996 Hammer Gallery, London
1995 Grand Central Art, Los Angeles
1994 Hales Gallery, London
1993 I’wol de Poisson, Montreal
1992 L’Oeil de Poisson, Montreal

Jonathan Callan

Hammer
2009
Metal and silicone rubber
19 x 30 x 18cm
Courtesy of the artist
Adam Gillam’s structures seem to oscillate almost weightlessly, between the poles of logic and intuition, finding their form in those unstable spaces where sense is about to be made or unmade: “They function much as songs or stories—read aloud in a space that was formerly empty, creating something out of nothing” (Melissa Gronlund, 2007). The scatty pragmatics and spontaneous sleights of improvisation or performance are settled in these pieces like makeshift thoughts, provisional agreements presented as both subject and working material.

Adam Gillam was born in 1970 and studied Fine Art at Liverpool John Moores University and the Royal Academy of Arts, graduating in 1997. He lives and works in London.

Selected exhibitions

2009 (Z)Art curated by Jan Hoet, ABTArt Gallery, Stuttgart Reconstructing the old house, The Nunnery, London and Ruskin Gallery, Cambridge Cortez Arrives, Herbert Read Gallery Adam Gillam and Sara Mackillop, MOT International, London Brussels Biennial 1, show me, don’t tell me Witte de With, Rotterdam

2008 LISTE 08 Basel with KLERKX Art Rotterdam, Netherlands with KLERKX

2007–8 I am definitely coming for longer if I come again KLERKX, Milan Art is a cupboard Keith Talent Gallery, London Artissima, Turin with KLERKX


2005 For and From, Metropole Gallery, Folkstone The Greatest Detective Story Never Told, Keith Talent Gallery, London

2004 Doubtful Pleasures, APT Gallery, Deptford, London Co curator Bad Touch, Beaker Gallery, Florida Eating At Another’s Table, Metropole Gallery, Folkestone, Kent

2003 Bad Touch, Rose Museum, Boston, USA With Pleasure…, IOTA Gallery, Ramsgate


Adam Gillam

Untitled 2010
Carbon fibre pole, exposure blanket, gaffer tape 182 x 92cm Image courtesy of the artist
Wayne Lucas’ practice blurs the activities of painting and sculpture: restless and obsessive accretions of materials, often sourced from secondhand markets, build objects where feral surfaces crawl over and morph into un-nameable forms. The result is a provocation that filters remnants of personal experience into playful assemblages that question normative oppositions like body and mind, image and object.

Born in 1965, Wayne Lucas studied at Middlesex Polytechnic, London, and L’Ecole de Beaux Arts, Poitiers, France, graduating in 1989. Since then he has lived and worked in Rome, Italy, and Holland, and is now based in London.

Selected exhibitions

2010  Prognostic, Bridewell, APT Gallery, London (curated)
2009  Jerwood Drawing Prize Shortlist, London
2008  Group Show, APT Gallery, London
Group Show, No.3 Gallery, London
2007  Group Show, Salthouse, Norwich
Underbelly, Group Show, London
2005  Prague Biennale
Group Show, Hed Quarters, Brighton
Frankfurt Art Fair
2004  Hales Gallery, London
Zurich Art Fair
2003  Frankfurt Art Fair
James Coleman Gallery, London
Art Now, London Art Fair
2002  Group Show, James Coleman Gallery, London
Group Show, Clapham Art Gallery, London
Berlin Art Fair
Coomes Contemporary, London
1999  Riverside Galleries, London
Hacks Gallery, Bath
1990  Il Specchio, L’Attico, Rome
1989  L’Ecole De Beaux Arts, Poitiers, France

Self portrait with mango 2009
Buttons on photograph 45 x 33cm
Photos: Jill Lechner
The apparently commonplace lies at the core of Jack Strange’s practice. His output encompasses sculpture, videos, works on paper and photographs, and playfully draws on a demotic vocabulary that cuts across high and low, culture and nature. A laptop might be forced open by a wedge of fat, or a flapping plastic bag snagged like a strip of skin. His juxtapositions and misappropriations seem to render the mundane insecure by subtly raising the anxiety level of stuff until it begins to slink round corners.

Jack Strange was born in 1984 in Brighton. He studied at Northbrook College, Sussex and then the Slade School of Fine Art, London, graduating in 2007.

Selected Exhibitions

2010  Profusion, Beacon Art Projects, Calke Abbey, Derbyshire (forthcoming)  
A Stranger’s Window, Nottingham Castle Museum & Art Gallery, Nottingham
2009  Emily, Callum, John, Grace, Elizabeth, Paul, Frieze Art Fair, London  
Pete And Repeat, 176, London  
Just Around The Corner, Caja Madrid, Madrid  
Ventriloquist, Timothy Taylor Gallery, London
2008  Wallowing, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York  
Seeing The Light, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York  
Fuck You Human, Maribel Lopez Gallery, Berlin  
New Mourning, Meet Waradise, New York  
Past Forward, 176, London
2007  The Stupidest Thing Alive, Most, Nottingham  
Remember A Future Past, Royal College of Art, London  
Took My Hands Off Your Eyes Too Soon, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York  
I Can’t Think of Anything, Galerie Martin Kunke, Cologne

Fat laptop  
2009  
Computer and lard  
Image courtesy of Dirk Lackmann, Maribel Lopez Gallery, Berlin
Alison Wilding’s practice probes the vexed, oblique spaces between subject and object, often using unsettling, but precisely assembled combinations of forms and materials that allude to the potentiality of language, but then evade its grasp.

An important and influential contributor to contemporary sculpture since the late 1970s, she was born in 1948 in Blackburn, Lancashire, studied at Nottingham College of Art from 1967 to 1968, Ravensbourne College of Art and Design, Bromley, Kent from 1968 to 1971 and subsequently at the Royal College of Art, London from 1971 to 1973.

Wilding’s first major solo exhibition was held at the Serpentine Gallery, London in 1985. Projects, her first international solo show, was held at the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1987. A retrospective exhibition, Alison Wilding: Immersion – Sculpture from Ten Years, was held at the Tate Gallery, Liverpool in 1991. She has since exhibited extensively throughout the world in solo and group shows.

Wilding was nominated for the Turner Prize in 1992 and received a Henry Moore Fellowship for The British School at Rome in 1998. Her public sculpture commissions include the installation of Ambit, River Wear, Sunderland, in 1999. Alison Wilding was elected RA in 1999 and lives and works in London.

Selected exhibitions
2008 Karsten Schubert, London
2006 Rupert Wace Ancient Art, London
North House Gallery, Manningtree, Essex
2005 Betty Cunningham Gallery, New York
2000-1 Henry Moore Foundation Studio, Dean Clough, Halifax
2000 New Art Centre, Roche Court, Wiltshire
1998-9 Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, Sunderland
1998 Arttranspennine ‘88: Chapel of St John the Evangelist, Skipton Castle, Skipton, Yorkshire
Robert Miller Gallery, New York
1997 The Orangery, New Art Centre, Roche Court, Wiltshire
Abbot Hall Museum and Art Gallery, Kendal
1996 Musée des Beaux-Arts et Dentelles de Calais, Calais
1991 Tate Gallery, Liverpool
Henry Moore Sculpture Trust Studio, Dean Clough, Halifax

Public collections
Arts Council of Great Britain, British Council, Tate Britain, FRAC Pays de la Loire (France), Art Gallery of New South Wales (Australia), Scottish National Gallery, Musée de Beaux Arts, Calais (France), Graves Art Gallery, Sheffield, Leeds City Art Gallery, Henry Moore Institute, Abbot Hall Art Gallery and Museum, Kendal.
I see the dressing up box.

It is full, primed for play, surprise, giggles and pleasure. For one devotee and the box, a glorious matter of unconstrained release, the stuff of dreams. For two or more, a negotiation that runs or halts. Running, a creative provocation, the flying chance of accelerated realisation. Two as one. Three, four, five and more as one. Strong. The halt, no spark, no symbiosis. The peppering of mismatch through (un)acknowledged difference. Antinomies. Separation.

I see the dressing up box.

It is full of stuff. Of beasts and birds and beatitudes. Of ingenious making, of thoughts and thanks, sense and feeling. The extraordinary in the ordinary. Liquid words.

I see the dressing. I see the box.

Between and beyond, if you will, look. There are precious interstices. Sanctums. Reminders to check slippage in perceptions and language. Mating games, a delicate art. One state and another. One place and another. One love and another.

I see the dressing up box.

It is full.

ELIZABETH ROSSER

Playing with prose has made an increasing appearance alongside Rosser’s practice of sculpture/site-specific sculpture. In the run-up to an exhibition, musings, travelling observations, hints of this and that, flights of fancy and imagination take to the page to companion the physical bodies savoured and sung into existence. Rosser has an abiding love of malleability in the play of stuff, and pleasure in the act of fusion. Contact and conversation, the around and about, the maybe(s) and what-ifs, the dering-dos of possibility are bedrock in the game.

A Fellowship in 1995 at the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, provided space for another turning point from which Rosser’s first performed talk, Epiglottis, emerged. This was presented at the Ugly Edge Conference (HMI) in 1998, using script, objects and humour. Developed subsequently in the art school arena, Rosser’s talks increasingly offer a process of improvisation with objects and audience interaction, to deliver prompts, laughter and potential.

Rosser was born in the UK in 1949 and now lives in Essex. She graduated in 1972 with a BSc in Applied Psychology, UWIST. In 1976 she was awarded an MLitt in Social Psychology, University of Oxford. Changing perspective, in 1982 she obtained a BA in Fine Art Sculpture from Central School of Art & Design, and in 1985 an MA in Sculpture, Royal College of Art.

Selected Exhibitions

2005  Les Merveilles du Monde, Museum of Fine Art, Dunkirk, France
There is no more Butter, STATION, Bristol
2002  Going Continental, Heiligenkreuzer Hof, Vienna, Austria
2000  SubwaySpecial, site-specific, Aldwych Station, London with catalogue publication including new texts, 2002
1999  Sublime: The Darkness and the Light, Hayward Gallery, National Touring Exhibition, (Arts Council Collection) to 10 UK venues. Divers Memories, M.O.S.T. (Museum of Site), New Territories, China
1995  Joo’ Palace of Culture & Science, Warsaw, Poland & symposium, Gronioko, Poland
1992  Smears of Privacy & Fiction, site-specific, Pitt-Rivers Museum, Oxford
1990  Unturned Ark, site-specific Pitt-Rivers Museum, Oxford

Public Collections

LtTd IV. Arts Council Collection, 1987
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The Shipwright’s Palace, SE8
Photo courtesy Chris Mazeika and William Richards