

## UNFOLDED INTERVIEW

KEL GLAISTER AND SIMON HORSBURGH IN  
CONVERSATION WITH TAMISIN GREEN  
AND ALEX MARTINIS ROE



(top) **Simon Horsburgh** *Still*, 2007. Plastic bag, monofilament, silver screen. Installation detail Conical Inc., Melbourne. Image courtesy the artist  
(above) **Kel Glaister** *These endless days*, 2008. Rugs. Image courtesy the artist. Image credit: Amy Marjoram

**Alex Martinis Roe:**

Kel, in *Floats Like a Brick Doesn't* (Bus Gallery, 2007), you suspended a concrete brick using wire rope and turnbuckles. This brick held a ruler vertical as if it rested on a plinth. Nearby a copy of this brick made of frozen paint was wedged into a temporary, moveable wall. A chain attached to the roof was threaded through one of the holes in the brick. As it melted, the audience waited in suspense for the inevitable: for the chain to succumb to the force of gravity, break through the weakening ice brick and crash into the wall opposite. This relationship between the 'real' brick and the ice brick is one that clearly implicates the material of representation in a criticism of the original form of image-making; painting. The frozen paint shows us in reverse the process of representing a brick using acrylic paint. Melting our sense of order, this work challenges the stability of representation in a temporal way. Can you comment on the role of entropy in representation and also on the use of the ruler to illustrate the solidity of the real brick?

**Kel Glaister:**

Those works were called *Immovable object* and *Irresistible force*, which are the two component parts in opposition in one of the common configurations of the omnipotence or irresistible force paradox, a thought experiment without any possible outcome in reality. And the titles are a blatant lie—the object is moving, the force is being resisted. A lot of my works are based around a paradox or logical misstep of some sort. That show was about gravity in a broad sense, about objects in some kind of tension or under pressure, and an attempt to escape that inescapable pressure. Part of the reasoning to use ice as a material is that it implicates the audience; that ice doesn't melt just 'because', it melts because it has been taken out of the freezer and into the gallery (thanks Newton). By extension, it melts because it is being looked at. Watching the object disintegrate is in fact what causes the disintegration.

The cinderblock cast in ice and paint, then, is an object that cannot sustain its shape or state under the conditions of the gallery—an object doomed to fail at being an object. So I think the ice produces a tense experience; there is the tension between what the object appears to be and what it is, there's the tension that comes from the inevitable demise of the thing, and all that is set against the process of melting, which can be quite compelling to watch. And the use of paint to make up the object is related to representation and painting, as it produces a painted residue, where the melting of the brick disperses itself entropically, in what almost amounts to a parody of painting.

The real cinderblock, on the other hand, was slung up with various rulers, all of them under various forces that contorted them, forces applied made them *unable*, and ridiculous. I guess in a literal way the solidity of the real brick was forced in opposition to the rulers—which measure and define, but only theoretically—or to produce a theoretical model of a brick, if you know what I mean. And again, it was a tense relationship. The wire was taut and the brick swayed a little as you walked past it.

**Tamsin Green:**

Simon, in your exhibition *Forthcoming and Untitled* (Conical Inc, 2007), a real bag was suspended in space, seemingly frozen mid-flutter. Once the audience came into line with the screen they experienced this object as an image. I can't help but be reminded of the dominant role played by the cinema screen in our experience of beauty. Indeed, there is a very strong reference here to the film *American Beauty*. I wonder if this is a celebration or derision of representation? Would you prefer us to go out and experience the beauty of plastic bags in the real world?

**Simon Horsburgh:**

The work you are referring to is titled *Still*. I think both examples you describe are a celebration of incongruous beauty. But from my perspective, whether that beauty is experienced via the cinema or elsewhere is neither here nor there. As you suggest, the screen's capacity to convey an image is important, and collapsing the object/image binary along a particular sightline is significant, but the portability of that particular screen should not be overlooked. For me it becomes more about moments and encounters and yeah, the reality of things—be they plastic bags or silver screens. I've seen a lot of plastic bags that *weren't* in *American Beauty*.

I think it's imperative to respect the particular nature of found materials, otherwise there is no point using them. Obviously I'm interested in them for their transformative potential, but they come with a history, sometimes a function, so it's never a case of ramming ideas into them. *Still* draws heavily on the reality of plastic bags. We are having a moment of stillness with an object that is almost never quiet and still—especially when it is inflated and airborne. I also consider *Still* as being part of an installation. The proximity of the bag to another work in the show, *Squash*, was also important. *Squash* is a work made from a mangled galvanised rubbish bin. It is approximately the same scale as the inflated bag and the two forms share similar surface contours. On another sightline, the bag floated like a shade or a dream above the bin

(it was interesting to read about Kel's two bricks). So in response to your question, I'm certainly more interested in the nature of things. I'm acutely aware that I am working in a context and a tradition, but given the choice, I'll take 'frozen mid-flutter' over 'cinematic representations of beauty' every time.

**Alex:**

Simon, *T-Bird* (Studio 12 at Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces, 2006) seems to be about air space as a diagrammatic plane. The delicate balance that holds the ski perpendicular to the fluorescent tube, itself balanced on one end, seems to echo a discourse around symbolism of the vertical and the horizontal. Theosophy was a huge influence on Mondrian: the vertical lines he painted were symbolic of the masculine and the horizontal of the feminine. This reduction of the binary separation of sexuality to a series of directional lines is perhaps indicative of the extent to which sexual innuendo is abstracted culturally. When we look at the *T-bird* do we see a symbol of the über cool phallus, inhabiting a risky position, yet maintaining control over the feminine that threatens its perilous attempt at significance?

**Simon:**

The suggestion of the diagrammatic is insightful, because it defines the role of the form as a descriptive device, which is exactly how it functioned. It described the airflow; it spoke to gravity and tension. However, I think the level of abstraction you describe is problematic—it sounds like you're looking at an image. To reduce the work to vertical and horizontal lines is to ignore the importance of the transverse axis in the work. The balance was achieved not only by finding the point along the horizontal, but also by locating it across the depth. The depth, albeit narrow, was vital to the tension in the work. The flatness of the stringer, it teetered and twisted and quivered. Adrien Allen is one of the more cerebral people I know, and he told me that it hit him in the guts before it hit him in the head. He felt it before he thought it. There was tremendous tension in the work. It was very physical. To be honest, knowing the work the way I do, I'm finding it very hard to get on board with the Mondrian thing. I don't know, I think if you're immersed in particular literature or politics, you're going to draw certain conclusions. I always consider my work to be a departure point, but I wouldn't have thought that a burned-out fluoro tube, held erect by artificial means was an expression of an über cool phallus. Dan Flavin maybe? What is the 'über cool phallus' Alex?

**Tamsin:**

Kel, in your work *Sitting on a power sander* (Linden, 2008) there seems to be, quite literally, a reference to sexual satisfaction. The housewife's parallel would be sitting on the washing machine. I am tempted, however, to see this work as a response to the history of sculpture and architecture. The fundamental of the plank of wood supports nothing in this work, except your expelled desire. There is, therefore, no verticality to this sculpture, instead your desire to make has left an impression—a depression even, on a fallen phallus, and this depression sinks into the architecture of the galley. Is this reading of your work too literal? Or is the piece intentionally literal: poking fun at commonplace renditions of the phallus within the history of sculpture and architecture?

**Kel:**

I don't think that's too literal, and I find it quite difficult to discuss some of my works, the ones that have a joke as part of their machine. A joke explained is a joke ruined. There is always something fleeting about the experience of a joke that's hard to dissect without stuffing it up. The thing is, you'll either get those points or you won't, and no amount of explanation is going to resurrect the joke.

I can talk about how the work developed though. The departure point for that work was floor pieces by Andre, combined with a certain distrust of evidence of process in sculpture as a measure of veracity or worth. I won't lie; part of the reason for making this work was an adolescent impulse to call Andre or Serra a wanker. But I had to implicate myself too I guess (another aspect of using jokes—they don't really work if you're on the outside pissing in).

Again a number of references get all tied up and twisted together—pleasure in making, process based sculpture, masturbation/wankers, and a simple interaction of materials. The work takes what is, in fact, a fucking stupid joke, and wraps it around references to modernist sculpture and questions about why it is we make things. I guess for me it's not about renditions of the phallus *per se*, but about pervasive ideas around sculpture that are often heroic and male, and about taking that on with humour.

**Alex:**

Kel, sometimes you use rhetorical filmic tropes in your work. For example, you made dead bodies wrapped in Persian rugs for your show *These endless days* (Blindside, 2008). This work reads as a paradox because the 'dead bodies' are entwined as though

engaged in coitus. Quite apart from the fact that they have apparently been murdered, their genitals are separated by carpet. I can't help but see a literal correlation between this work and the loss of ego during orgasm, otherwise called 'the little death'. Is this an intentional reference, or was your aim with the work to more broadly question how believable sex and death scenes are in film? The work could also be seen as a presentation of what we find entertaining: sex, death and the forbidden. How do you respond to that assertion?

**Kel:**

The use of a filmic type of image is about using images that are common knowledge or accessible via pop-culture, so shared. I didn't aim to debate representations in film really, for me it was a matter of using those images—the sex scene, the cliché of corpses transported in rugs—to set up my own allegorical narrative or scene.

Although I know a lot of people don't see the death thing in this work. It doesn't matter—the figures certainly look asphyxiated at least. And yes, making a work that's literally about sex *and* death is a jokey kind of nod, both in the direction of what it is that entertains, and also what's considered big and important (a category which generally doesn't include dirty jokes about the production of meaning).

And there is something really appealing about the *petite mort* pun. Most of what I found interesting personally about the absurdist situation of corpses fucking each other was an attempt to set up an allegorical relationship between the narrative of the work and the relationship between artist, the work and audience. That there is a constant attempt at perfect communication—at filling the gaps between those three things—but you might as well be having sex from behind a rug, while you're both dead.

I guess like most of my works, *These endless days* picks up some stuff and throws it at all the other stuff. Wrap an absurd or overly literal proposition, often a joke or a trick, around a broad question like why make work? why communicate? And there really isn't an answer proposed. Maybe I'll get around to that one day.

**Alex:**

Simon, as part of *Forthcoming and Untitled*, there appeared to be an area of negative condensation on one of the windows. This piece recalled the final breath of life as has often been recorded on film.



**Simon Horsburgh** *T-Bird*, 2006. Fluorescent tube, plywood surfboard stringer, 2000 x 1200 mm. Image courtesy the artist

**Kel Glaister** *Sitting on a power sander* (detail), 2008. Wood. Image courtesy the artist



**Kel Glaister** *Immovable object*, 2007. Acrylic paint, ice, chain, plasterboard, wood. Image courtesy the artist

**Simon Horsburgh** *Thaw* (Detail), 2007. Hand-ground glass, oil, existing gallery window, 600 x 600 mm (Thaw pane). Image courtesy the artist

I'm thinking here of those moments when someone is trapped inside a vehicle and their dying breath is witnessed visually on the window. This work sets off a series of familiar narratives for me running through the show. For example, the condensation becomes a companion piece to the smashed windscreen and the smashed windscreen becomes a companion piece to the exploded car part. Do you see popular interest in these kinds of narratives as connected to our fear and curiosity about the body and its mortality?

**Simon:**

It's fascinating to think that we are getting to similar places via different routes. The shared experience you refer to via filmic tropes is something that I'm attempting to access with material juxtapositions—the reality of plastic bags again. That was a very personal show. Battered and mangled. That's how I was feeling. The piece on the window was a bit of a problem. It was entitled *Thaw*, and it was very difficult to maintain. I had ground the texture out of the frosted gallery windows, in the manner of clearing a spy hole on a frosty pane. The condensation you describe was oil, which was necessary to render the patch transparent. I did my best to revive the work everyday, but unfortunately not everybody got to experience it the way I had intended. Your reading is interesting, given the modified version of the piece you encountered, but my intention for the work was kind of the opposite. For me it wasn't the last gasp, it was a hopeful piece. The show closed on the first day of spring, and I was interested in the idea of the thaw and its various permutations. I blocked all of the windows that weren't frosted, so that little patch became the only clear aperture.

I'm excited to hear the way you moved from one work to another, and how the momentum gathered. My intention for the work was that it be experienced both in individual moments, and as a larger composition—perhaps like a film. I haven't really answered your question... I'm not sure about popular interest, but I suspect that on some level, this would be the case. The physicality to which you allude is really important in my work. I'm not terribly interested in narrative, but what we understand and by extension, do not understand about our body and its relationships with the things in the world informs much of what I do. You know, that windscreen wasn't smashed.

**Alex:**

Kel, you often search out specific items to manipulate as artworks, but then occasionally you find objects by chance that are loaded

with discourse in a way that then directs an artwork into being. For example, for your recent work *Diagram* shown at Kings ARI (2007), you used a set of magnets that were shaped like arrows that you found in a hardware store. These objects were ideal for your practice as the material nature of these objects affected all the components of the sculpture physically. Shaped as descriptors of direction, these arrow-magnets signify the directional force that they perform. We see here a collapsing of the distinction between the signifier and the signified. Objects that contain linguistic communication via their materiality seem to be a recurring event in your installations. What is it that this collapse achieves?

**Kel:**

Well, it's inevitable that sometimes objects or materials provide the direction for a work, rather than being at the constant mercy of concepts. And in the case of *Diagram*, that's ridiculously literally so. Welding magnets happen to be shaped like arrows, and steel bars happen to be shaped like lines.

I guess it's not so much that it achieves anything; it's more of a proposition to be tested. That is, can you make a diagram of it, can you assemble a collection of objects that represent the forces they exert. Can you make materials be the objects they are while simultaneously functioning as an image or representation (based in shared visual language) of their relationship to each other, gravity, the world? Not really, but it's fun to try.

Moreover, what happens when logic or language collapses under its own weight? In that sense, it's a thought-experiment in materials I guess, it's not necessary that something be proved or disproved. That would put a break in the loop, in the circular logic that makes the thing possible. And that collapse is not really a sustainable position, it's more momentary. Once it has been experienced, the tension almost dissipates. Like the way paradox should bring the entire system of logic crashing down in a heap, but it doesn't; and inflicting a collapse of signifier and signified should be a big problem for the functioning of language, but it isn't.

**Alex:**

Simon, finding objects that have been altered by their urban history is a mode of research you undertake frequently in your practice. *Westerly* (2006), your sculpture of a squashed shopping trolley, wedged between a column and a wall at West Space, is a perfect example of your work with found objects. Installed so as

to recall the way that debris is 'strained' in storm water drains, this work brings the decay and waste of our contemporary lives into a space that is usually reserved for clean, new creativity. Am I right in tracing this shopping trolley's journey from the supermarket, to the vacant lot where it was used for fun by teenagers and then on to a storm-water drain? What do these histories tell us? Are the natural and cultural forces, which rolled the trolley to the place where you found it, paralleled in the alterations you made to it in order to make it an artwork?



**Simon Horsburgh** *Westerly*, 2006. Steel supermarket trolley, plywood, plastic milk crate, rubber thong, broken umbrella, steel, fluorescent light, West Space: Gallery 1, dimensions variable.

**Simon:**

Yeah. Your description of debris being strained in storm water drains is very evocative. These histories are a departure point I guess, or a means by which to activate the transformation of the space itself. That shared awareness makes it possible for a mangled trolley to be wedged head high, between a column and a wall. I guess these histories lend plausibility to the construct. They make it possible to make the next leap in engaging with the work, or imagining the work. So in the case of the work in point, you have constructed a narrative around a single object, right down to the assumption that teenagers were to blame. The trolley and the other elements were only aspects of the work. You have implicated a powerful elemental dynamic in your narrative—your stormwater drain. This work draws heavily on those associations.

For me, the question that might come after 'what is this stuff?' is 'where is this stuff?' It's not in a stormwater drain, it's in a gallery space. So what's next? This was a site-specific installation. It was about Gallery 1 at West Space as much as anything. It was an attempt to activate the dynamic of the room. The through-space, the visual 'snags', the lack of light, the movement and energy required to negotiate this space. So the natural forces are very much paralleled in the structure of the installation. Decay and waste, clean or dirty stuff is not as important to me. It had to be a certain kind of stuff to evoke the histories that you are talking about. A tide line, litter trap, an 'aftermath' kind of expression. It wasn't an attempt to defile a gallery space. I feel that despite the 'low' nature of that debris in the world, when it's installed in a gallery, it is as clean and new as any creativity.

**Tamsin:**

Kel, in your Dominoes work *Untitled (every fucking time)* (2007) the structural function of Dominoes—a gentlemanly game devised to stimulate the mind between meetings, and enforce the basic principles of numeracy—is perverted to transmit a pessimistic slogan, 'every fucking time'. In the same show the video work *Snowden* showed a dismembered music box writhing on a school table. Snowden is one of the more tragic characters in *Catch 22*; the absurdist classic where any attempt at protest against the horror of war (life) are rendered futile. Can the celebration of futility be a form of protest in itself?

**Kel:**

The work is like a sustainment of the moment of futility I guess; video used to sustain an impossibly continuous failure. It came out of observing a found object (the music box with a bent part) and then pointing a camera at it. The music box reminded me of a bug dying, and the use of video allows that to be a constant routine. I guess that's why I called the work *Snowden*. Snowden is barely a character, more of an endlessly deferred event. Snowden is dying throughout *Catch-22*, periodically resurrected to die a little more, and occasionally have a funeral, but never to really *be dead*.

I'm not sure if these works are celebration or protest, or both or neither. *Untitled (every fucking time)* was one of my first videos, and an exercise in looping. As I said, there are lots of paradoxes inherent in the works, the lure of video was that it allowed me to construct a logical loop that's on a loop. And to jam together this protest that comes out of desperation ('every fucking time...') with a playfulness. It is pessimistic, about getting stuck butting

up against the impossibilities of making work, I think, that every fucking time you try and communicate something it gets caught up in material concerns, or unintended insinuations. But then it's a playful example of that, one that situates itself firmly inside those concerns around materials and medium in a satirical way.

**Tamsin:**

Simon, in the exhibition *Doubt* (Conical Inc, 2006) I was drawn to the broken globe. This object for illumination has also had its cultural purpose perverted, it's been smashed, and therefore rendered useless. Despite this violence there is a very calm aesthetic to the work. The lights of the room still refract and reflect beautifully in their fallen comrade. Likewise, the umbrella work has been destroyed by its function; to shield us from weather. Instead it has now become an anatomical drawing of itself. Do you, therefore, hope to be able to salvage something of value from what you protest against?

**Simon:**

I think that with regards to found objects, the assigned cultural reading or value is going to be perverted from the moment you put the 'thing' in a gallery space. I find the objection or protest angle problematic because I see the 'things' that I exhibit as works of art. I don't perceive that a particular methodology or medium is in opposition to art-making. I guess it comes down to where you think art resides. There's no denying what is implicit in the material structure of these things: lightbulbs are delicate and shiny; busted umbrellas are tonal and linear. The histories, the concrete moments, the images evoked in the transformation, these are all active elements in the work. Aesthetic value changes when an object is reconfigured, but that's the whole point. I'm interested in the tipping point.

**Alex & Tamsin:**

Do either of you have a question you would like to direct to us, regarding our interpretations of your practices, or any other subject?

**Kel:**

Answering these has been an interesting process—it's a curious kind of interview where the questions you have provided are not attached to name, and there is no necessity to answer them chronologically either. I found myself, as you have, adopting a conversational tone when writing, as though stuck in an idea of what an interview should be (although I know your questions

came out of an actual conversation). Or to put it another way, these questions read almost as a script, without the inevitable generative chitchat of a face-to-face interview. I find the title *Unfolded interview* quite apt too, as this had left me with the image of the children's toy of folded paper with numbers and questions—each route ending abruptly. Do you think this process is successful, as far as these things can be judged?

The conversations you two had to come up with these questions are probably much more interesting than any answers we could provide. While answering them, I was left mentally correcting spelling and grammatical errors and feeling bad about all my jokes, as no one was around to laugh at them. Do you think that Simon and I providing answers to your questions was, in the end, an improvement on the document you had written—given that there is a certain authority attributed to a person answering a question, which is not necessarily deserved.

**Kel Glaister** *Untitled (every fucking time)*, 2007.  
Digital video (exhibited at Victoria Park Gallery as part of *Nothing rhymes with failure*). Image courtesy the artist

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**Tamsin Green is a Melbourne based artist, writer, curator and sailing advocate.**

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**Simon Horsburgh is a lighthouse keeper.**

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