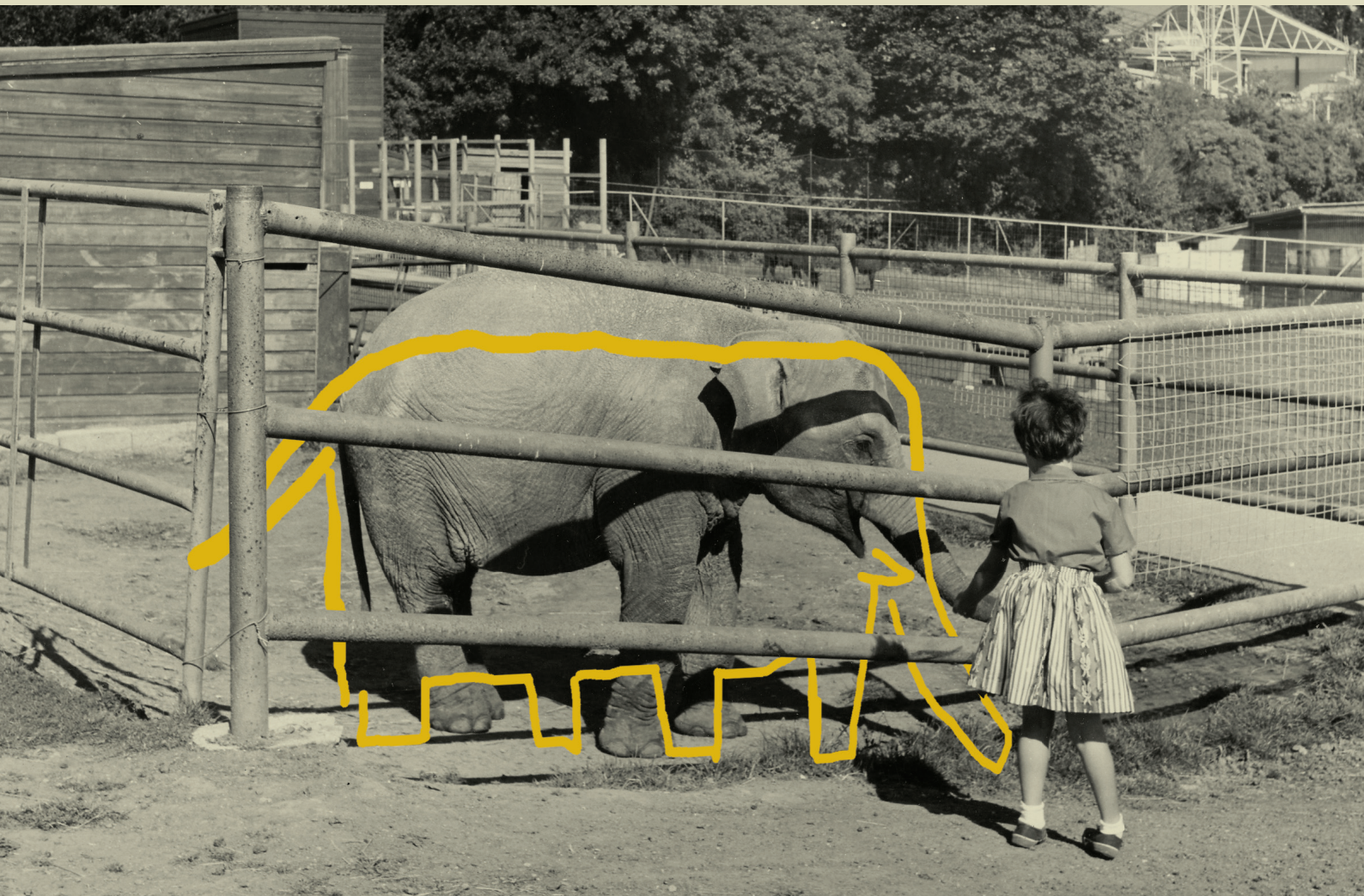


TACTILE CHANGE

“*Tactile Change* is the product of Matthew Raw’s deep immersion in our workspace and his creative interaction with the progressive continuum of our learning community – with Plymouth College of Art and the school we founded in Millbay, the Plymouth School of Creative Arts. It is powerfully oriented towards the horizon and, with the looming prospect of Brexit, invites us to dwell upon themes of migration, place-making and border controls that feel more than ever significant to the future of our city and the international dimension of our work. I’m delighted that Matthew Raw has chosen to respond to our past and present in this way.”

PROFESSOR ANDREW BREWERTON,
PRINCIPAL OF PLYMOUTH COLLEGE OF ART





In *Tactile Change*, Matthew Raw discusses the societal challenges increasingly faced in a culture rife with seismic changes in outlook and behaviour. The project developed from research into a zoo once housed in Plymouth's Central Park. Taking the character of a travelling elephant as his starting point, Matthew wrote a short story for children, later inviting pupils from Plymouth School of Creative Arts to create their own elephant illustrations in response. The elephant is used to raise questions about journeying, migration, transience and containment within a pre and post Brexit landscape.

Language is explored throughout, and is emblazoned on walls, doors and ceramic prints, questioning our response to the everyday rhetoric of progress. Hands-on, labour intensive ceramic processes are present in all of the works: the artist demonstrates his commitment to making by hand as a vital creative skill and resource, fundamental to how we can understand and interact with the world. Collaboration, participation and social making have all come together to help form this body of work.

Tactile Change was commissioned by The Gallery at Plymouth College of Art in partnership with The Box, Plymouth. The project was supported using public funding from the National Lottery through Arts Council England.





1. 'ROUTEMASTER', 2019
Hand printed designs (ceramic
printing medium with black
stain) on earthenware tiles with
a clear glaze. Plywood frame.





2. 'THE LONG READ
I, II, III, IV, V', 2019
Terracotta prints taken
from hand-carved limewood
blocks. Limited edition 1/10



3. 'PROGRESS', 2019
Stoneware clay with
coloured underglaze.
Grouted on to timber
and steel frame.



Hannah Rose, Curator of *Tactile Change*
IN-CONVERSATION WITH Matthew Raw
19 JULY, 2019

H. *Can you start by telling us about the initial inspiration and research for the project and talk us through some of the key concerns of the work that have come out through the process of making the project?*

M. Your approach was for a show in a neutral gallery space, and that was a new challenge for me. It made me immediately reflect on what I wanted to discuss given the carte blanche nature of the opportunity. I was thinking about doors a lot, and what they represent. That brought up previous work I'd done about 'welcome'. Notions about entrances, and opening and closing were the initial, loose metaphors.

It was kick started with the visit to Plymouth and the trip with you and Tony Davey (the Box, Plymouth). I get inspiration from where I'm working, especially if I work with people – it's good to get an understanding of the place where they live. And I was interested to see how you presented Plymouth. The tour sparked the idea about the zoo. A place where animals came to Plymouth and remained for varying amounts of time linked back to a lot of my work about journeying, migration and transience.

H. *You often work in collaboration, or set up ways for others to participate in your projects. Why did you chose this path for this project?*

M. Incorporating working with people is something I love to do. In some respects with this project I was excited not to work with people, because you weren't stipulating that was a must. It's hard to talk about without sounding didactic and say 'hey, everyone should make', but I get a lot of feedback from people about them not making – kids, teachers who don't teach creatively, and adults who sit in front of a computer all day, come to my classes and say how therapeutic it is to do something with their hands.

Plymouth College of Art (PCA) has been on my radar for a while as a place that promotes thinking through making. And then after your approach I found out about Plymouth School of Creative Arts (PSCA), and there were too many things

that aligned for me to ignore. I'd done a lot of research during my residency at the V&A Museum about art in the curriculum, and how Primary School teachers in most schools have to choose between an hour of dance, art, drama or P.E. per week! So if the teacher isn't in to art, and a child doesn't do any at home, they have a year of creating nothing on paper!... it's a tricky time out there.

H. *We've talked before about your dissatisfaction around how the arts & specifically how hands-on/tactile making is being stripped from education in this country. Could you talk about the importance of this approach and whether or not you could go as far as saying that your desire to work with others, especially young people and those without access to, or experience of working with ceramics, is for you a political act?*

M. I've been working with young people for a long time, and giving opportunities to mess about and create something is a great. It can be quick and throw away or long and thorough. I didn't know what I was doing at the start, but then it grew into my practice and I increasingly had to deliver stuff of a certain spec. Working with 'ReachOutRCA' – a department at the Royal College of Art focussing on participatory artworks – was a big step up.

But it wasn't until you asked this question if it was a political act that I'd made that connection... I've got these concerns and sometimes make work about them, but is working with people a reaction to these concerns?... yes and no I guess. And I wonder what could happen now that you've highlighted this – are there more loops and cross overs to be had?

Working with Assemble on the Seven Sisters project ('Clay Station' for Art on the Underground) we were heading towards some quick fire workshops as part of the wider work. But due to delayed access to the kiosk, we had to change it up and ended up working with just two people intensely, instead of say 100 people. This was amazing as they were making the same thing that I/we were, and became part of the team, instead of making their own isolated work. I've just repeated this model in Essex with a project for the National Trust where there was scope within the technique for participants

to have a voice, but everyone was working towards an aesthetic that would hold hands on the overall piece.

H. *For 'Tactile Change' you have collaborated with primary and secondary pupils to make the 'elephant tiles' that feature in the exhibition, with the designs of the tiles taken directly from their drawings, inspired by the short story that you wrote and shared with them. I wonder how you think the pupils engaged with and took from the ideas behind the story and what the elephant represents in this context?*

M. First off, lots of the students didn't know anything about the zoo. With the range of ages we were faced with I couldn't write a different story for Year 4 and for Year 9, which reflected the difference in language and interests. So I decided on asking all of the pupils to be my illustrators for the story, knowing full well I was going to remove the story and leave the drawings. I think they really engaged with it. Some are very literal – an elephant carrying a log, or an elephant on a boat – but the scenario was really dynamic as they drew in different mediums and time frames directly after hearing the story. And then further down the line they came to PCA to print their illustrations, which was great. And obviously they are going to see their (finished) tiles in the gallery – I like that they are involved in the whole process.

H. *They are the generation who are living through this moment of the post-Brexit climate and social upheaval in the country, and I'm interested in how they think about the simple, powerful symbol of the elephant travelling and then contained, and how much they take on and think about what it means to them.*

M. Yes, it will be interesting to see when they're in the gallery. Due to the route that we've created, they will be told where to go. I feel at each stage they have understood it and so far they have been brilliant with the two tasks (drawing and printing) I have presented to them.

H. *The recurring theme of progress is present in all of the works in the show, with an active questioning around the positive and negative*

consequences of ideas of progress, specifically in relation to the current climate in the UK, regeneration and education. Could you talk about this in relation to the three key works in the exhibition and your practice at large?

M. Well the really tricky and interesting thing with this is I had to make a commitment x number of months ago to physically make the work, but context wise it moves all the time. We've been working on the show for over a year, and in that time, so many sizable occurrences have happened. We know that change needs to happen, but what kind of change is the question!

In regards to the doors, they have eight words including 'Progress', and I want them to be interpreted however people want – we all have our concerns and areas of interest, but the question of 'are we progressing' can touch on lots of them. The piece is called Progress, and it says progress three times on it, so people know what I'm getting at. And the physical act of pushing through some doors and then being enclosed in a pen... let's see what happens. But the words have had to remain quite fluid due to the shifting landscapes.

The elephant fence doesn't conceptually shift as much because I'm talking about something (the zoo) that happened in the 70's, but the links to today and concerns like containment and movement of people are issues that will continue to run. The other two pieces contain text and can be influenced more by what happens in the news that week.

H. *I agree to a certain extent. The context of what we're living in is changing all the time, but that is always going to be the case for any piece of art that is made in terms of how it's read. But there are direct references that you are giving in all three of the works in terms of progress. For example, the words that you have chosen for the doors, the phrases in the terracotta pieces and why the fence is designed like a maze...*

M. Overall I think as a society we are absolutely not progressing, or we aren't progressing at the rate that we should be progressing. Or we are regressing. Obviously that is in generalised terms, because if you go

into specifics, then there are things that we are making progress on. For example, when Trump makes racist accusations, instead of everyone merely saying that they agree or disagree, you've even got Boris Johnson saying that it's inexcusable, because society demands that he says that. But as everyone knows, there is shit loads of progress to be made, and there is some stuff that just beggars belief that in 2019 it can happen. You could look at equal pay, the environment, opportunities, migration... there are so many things and I wanted people to live with this piece ('Progress') and see what is says to them.

The eight words on the door; PROGRESS, RESTLESS, ORGANISED, GLOSSIER, RENEWING, ECHOECHO, STRONGER and SIDESTEP mean certain things to me, but I don't want to tell people that 'restless' means this, and 'organised' means that... I want it to remain open, especially as it's an interactive piece. Whereas the terracotta prints come from specific sources. I have my reasons for picking them and they are more direct, often critical references to what I'm thinking about. How I got to them, and what I was looking at, give more of an insight into my opinions. I have made work in the past that tells you everything that you need to know immediately. I'm more interested these days in work that is more open ended.

H. *There are clues in the work, and you are giving the audience routes into the position you might have, whilst also keeping it open. So it would be interesting to hear where you are drawing some of those references from?*

M. Some are very contemporary references, and some are quite old, that have been appropriated, or that I am appropriating for these pieces. For example the French phrase is personal because I have recently moved to France and I don't know what's going on! I keep seeing it everywhere, and after doing a bit of research I found out it was conceived during the French Revolution, but now it's been re-appropriated by 'the State' and is on all of their stuff. But where does the State come from... the revolution, but France feels very traditional and it's all super layered. It also means something different to me as a new comer, and I positioned the text at the top of the work so it reads like a list, with space to add to the list. Whereas 'Taking Back Control' is a relatively contemporary British reference. Me choosing the font comic

sans to present it, is me being angry and communicating that I think the sentiments behind it are child like. Some (of the five designs) are open, but in most cases they highlight certain things in society that I'm not happy about.

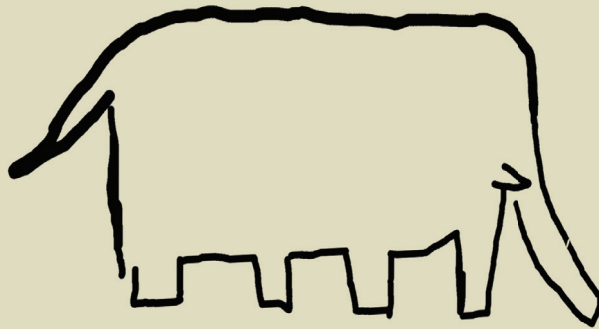
H. *I'm pleased you brought up the re-appropriation of things, because they become these sort of cultural texts that you're using and making formal decisions about how they are presented through typeface or materials and so on. That is a thread in the show and something you are doing in all three of the works.*

M. I like it when the making has to start and there are things throughout that process that will lead you in a different direction. But you've got to make a commitment otherwise nothing will get made. I like that cut-off point. It is terrifying because you have to stand by the work and explain it. Sometimes things can be explained, and lots of times I still have questions even though I'm making it. It's like I'm setting myself the challenge of being the audience.

H. *Finally, I wonder if you could talk about working with clay and ceramics as a material? How does working with this material shape and inform your practice in challenging ways?*

M. I got into clay at University. It was so immediate and quick to form, and as an impatient 19 year old, that was important. I think this fresh approach made me link it to thoughts and concerns I was having away from the studio. And this is still the case today. At the moment ceramics is exciting for me because of how tiles can be used, and what they can communicate. Everyone has some form of relationship with a tile, and I like playing with that. The same can be said of a mug or plate, but I've never been interested in making them, so I'm running with tiles. They seem to be having a bit of a renaissance recently with architects, and lots of people seem to be appreciating clay and ceramics more in general. For me it is flexible as a material as to how I can include colour, participation or function, and there is also so much global ceramic history to reference. Endless opportunities to create and explore, so moving forward I'm happy with it being an important part of my practice.

TACTILE CHANGE



AN EXHIBITION by Matthew Raw
THE GALLERY at Plymouth College of Art
20 September – 16 November 2019

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