

CHISENHALE INTERVIEWS: GHISLAINE LEUNG

CONSTITUTION

25 January – 24 March 2019

Ellen Greig: *Let's start by discussing the title of your new commission, CONSTITUTION.*

Can you talk about this term in relation to your new body of work?

Ghislaine Leung: I decided on this title over a year ago. I come from a background in Structural/Materialist film, so I am always asking what the means of production are, the means of distribution. The further you go into this, what you ultimately hit is policy: where do decisions on policy-making get made? Where does the responsibility lie? What are the structures that I need to be looking at? While there has been a rise recently in thinking about constitutional change in the UK, for me this commission has shifted to a more material understanding of constitution, questions of how and where things are constituted. What is the constituency? Who am I as a constituent? What are the constituent parts within an institution, for example? How do we understand how a policy is constituted? How do we understand how we are constituted by each other and ourselves? It throws up a much broader set of questions on practice that, for me as an artist, relate less to what a work is, but where, when and how it works. The way a work is produced and received is highly contingent on a set of interdependencies and temporal relations, that shifts, move and change around. This thinking very much informed this exhibition.

EG: *The title CONSTITUTION also relates to your ongoing research into what you have described as 'constitutional critique' in response to forms of institutional critique. When we first started discussing the Chisenhale Gallery commission you were talking about critique in terms of an exchange.*

GL: Yes, for a while now, I have been thinking about the terms of institutional critique, and what it is to practice this in the UK in relation to previous art historical movements. We all operate within institutions: industries, sectors or even families. When you are working within an institution you are, to varying degrees complicit in its terms even while against it. And there is agency in that. I came to the term constitutional, as an expansion on the terms of institutional critique within an art discourse, because I was interested in how we structure our work as well as the structures we work in more broadly.

Constitution implies the bodily and legislative, it is more than a physical structure, it is the people, the architecture, the informal labour and unwritten standards. I started thinking on the relationship between the institution and an individual as a relation between bodies; a partnership, a relationship, romantic, dysfunctional or exploitative, inclusive. I am always trying to think about operating a form of critique that can be more of an exchange. What the dynamics of those relationships are. In my work, I am often trying to understand how the moves that affect these relations are quite small, and many structural violences operate in this

way, in the surfeit of tiny gestures and cuts. Relations are proximate, intimate and open to abuse in the same way as they are open to love. So, I want to flip those moves, such exchanges are not necessarily metric or efficacious, but they are and can be felt.

EG: How does this relate to your new sound piece Kiss Magic Heart? To produce this work, you've edited recordings from three commercial radio stations and used the premise of active noise cancellation as a way to think through modes of resistance.

GL: This work underpins a lot of the relations and the structures within the show. I had been interested in thinking about acts of resistance, such as strike and withdrawal and how the politics of these terms could be expanded. Much like I wanted to find different terms for an institutional critique, I felt, in traditional terms of resistance, there was a need for a more active force. If you want to block something – whether that is a person or a policy or an idea, you put something between you and it, you refuse to continue, you isolate yourself from it. Contemporary structures of exploitation are deeply insidious, internalised and connected, so that block doesn't necessarily always work. More so, many of those resistive strategies have been entirely incorporated into highly neoliberal strategies of productivity.

I became interested in active noise cancellation technology as a way to experiment with a different kind of resistance. With active sound cancellation, you're not just blocking sound; noise is cancelled by playing back its opposite. It's mostly used in headphones, though there are many forums online that detail people trying to use it to silence their neighbours or traffic in an attempt to stop ingresses into those private spaces. In relation to this, I became interested in what would happen if you took that active cancellation out of a closed system into a commons, from headphones to speakers.

EG: You have installed the sound work on two speakers central to the wall on the left-hand-side of the gallery. What happens to the cancellation technology when you play it in an open space, such as this?

GL: When I was researching active sound cancellation, it became very clear that total cancellation of a sound in a space with speakers was not possible, there are too many variants. And I became super interested in those variants, how partial cancellation might work, and what architecture that might produce? In a closed system, like headphones, cancellation occurs because there is enough control, there is a perfect match of the noise and the opposite noise, whereas out of that closed system you introduce space and time. So, the two speakers in the space are playing a composition which has the polarity of one speaker channel inverted. In a closed system these wavelengths would align and cancel out, whereas with more space introduced odd things begin to happen. The closer the speakers are together the more they will cancel each other out, we placed them at this position because it produced the most difference in cancellation without cutting the sound entirely. So, some parts of the

audio cancel, other parts not. The sound becomes highly contingent upon the bodies of the listener and the building's structure.

The cancellation works in the space by creating pockets where frequencies are reinforced and cut, depending on where two channels of sound hit each other, hit the space and hit you as a person walking through that space. I was interested in maximising this contingency rather than removing it, letting the sound be played by the listener through the architecture of the space itself. In that way the work is actually, like a lot of my work, much more of a score than a recording. It is absolutely live and material. It is not a work that relates to fidelity in the way that most sound does. It is context contingent as opposed to site-specific.

EG: The composition of Kiss Magic Heart is very pared back; how did you get to this point in producing the composition? How does this relate to your framework of constitutional critique?

GL: What I decided was that I needed to work with very simple material. I wanted to use this kind of radio texture that is near constant as we move through public and commercial spaces. I've always loved the way sound in public spaces travels around, curls between spaces to touch you. I recorded three London radio stations, *Kiss*, *Magic* and *Heart* FM, and brought those recordings to EMPAC, The Curtis R. Priem Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, in Troy, New York, where I was in residence last October, with the idea of trying active cancellation with this material. I had initially planned to take all the sound and edit it down to the first few chords – the instantly recognisable music – and compress them, so there would be a million variants of these tiny bits of recognition to the point of illegibility. But when we were working through this at EMPAC it became evident the work was in the listening not the hearing, and that the edit, the composition of the work, was in how, as a listener, you move through the sound space. So, I decided I would use only the broadcast clock structure, not the music, from the recordings; the time segments of song, jingle, song, jingle, news, jingle. I listened to each segment to generate a sort of virtual keyboard of high and low sinusoid frequencies, alongside full spectrum pink noise, to make up further variants. The composition is one hour long, with three twenty-minute sections. It is made up of these frequencies harmonising, reinforcing and cancelling, contingent to the space and to you moving in the space.

EG: Let's talk about the space, then. You've made some adjustments to the gallery, such as glossing the walls with the work Toons, adapting the entrance of the gallery with Closer, and highlighting the doors in the gallery space, which you've titled, Flags. Can you talk about these works?

GL: These works are all very simple moves. Similarly, to the sound work, I am always trying to think of ways you can maximise or amplify contingency, how and where things rest on each other. Rather than having a revealing or concealing aspect, in my work I like to amplify,

or to adorn. In line with certain historic forms of institutional critique, I'm interested in 'the reveal' and the discourses on transparency and opacity, which tends to operate between closing the gallery and removing all the walls or showing the office. Here, there is often an attempt to take down the barriers or to block. I'm interested in somehow working out interdependencies between those maneuvers. Making those moves more obvious, exaggerating or embellishing them to the point where all those relations come into play.

So, with *Toons*, the act of glossing the walls is the opposite of what is generally required of a gallery space: that it should evenly disappear in order to better foreground the works. The glossed walls have a relationship to cartoons and caricature, which is an interesting frame for critique. When you make a caricature, you extend aspects of the thing. Gloss is a way to do that, it amplifies aspects of an extant structure and it makes you notice it. It really shows up all the imperfections of this space – all the years of repainting the gallery after each show, holes, fixings, covers. It makes the walls feel fluid, almost, like they are hanging. Similarly, with the work *Closer*, I've made the doorway and the door into the gallery space into a standard domestic size. It plays on a certain scale of structure and how that presents itself. Right at the beginning of the commission, we talked about raising the floor of the gallery to change the scale of the space to amplify the architecture of the gallery. Changing the door does this also. As you enter the building your scale sits within a certain language of architecture, and as you enter the gallery that scale shifts again. So, we've made a very small door into the space, which I love. *Flags* is the simple instruction to paint all the doors internal to the gallery space gloss black. And so again, all those hidden doors, which are usually painted white and therefore blend into the rest of the white gallery space, are brought to the fore, and brought into relation with, and as, work. Because the production of an artwork is highly dependent on those other spaces of production, such as the office for example.

Artists often think about self-contained objects being the element that you can shape, and the institution or the surroundings stay fixed, but actually I think about it the other way around. I'm interested in works that in their fixity allow you to move to them, in making these slight subtle shifts you can feel. And not only in the gallery space itself, but the contextual work around it, from the image distribution, to the text. These are small moves and large works, they operate at a scale you almost can't see.

EG: *How does this idea of scale and access relate to the series of sculptures, Parents, Children and Lovers that you have produced out of prefabricated wall panels?*

GL: I was interested in the working conditions of the exhibition and started looking at the architecture of standards and regulations. I began researching into different regulations for office and domestic institutions, for instance: art hanging standards, ceiling height measurements, standards for domestic living spaces, standards for new builds, standards for workspaces and building regulations. Originally, I had been thinking about making closed structures for this exhibition, small buildings that utilised a number of different scales,

however, through the sound work, I became more and more interested in what it was to take these supposedly closed structures and open them up, bring them into a commons, somehow. This goes back to the notion of land enclosure, as the very thing that influences how we understand profit, metrics and standard. Because when you look into the history of regulation what you actually encounter is the history of *deregulation*.

EG: *Tell me about the materials you have used to make these works?*

GL: They are prefabricated office structures that you can order and buy online. I am interested in the relationship between the ready-made and a certain non-productive attitude in making work, in making these funny work spaces, or spaces that don't have a productive function. So, the exhibition includes three sculptures that are made out of prefabricated wall panels, *Parents*, *Children* and *Lovers*. Each work is in a different set of relations, variously webbed together to the energy supply of the gallery. They are all plugged in and whatever they are powering is dependent on the gallery and dependent on each other. In the two-panel sculpture *Parents*, one is taking power from the other to run a flat-screen monitor though both have equal power supplies running from the gallery. On that screen is a tutorial on how to stuff balloons. The panel running the screen has its power sockets covered.

Children is a single unit, attempting to exit dependence on the gallery and withdraw, literally, by using a large battery generator which runs a single low power infrared heater. The generator can power this heater for approximately two or three hours before it has to be plugged into the gallery's electrical mains for 18 hours. *Lovers* is three smaller units, two of which have security lanterns on, one of which has a motion sensor and one of which has a light sensor. The motion sensor will go off whenever someone passes but the light sensor will only go on in the dark. Each of the three units is connected to the gallery power supply, with the two lanterns' units running off each other's power supplies. I always had a sense that I wanted everything in the exhibition to be contingent, to foreground its relations and its reliances.

EG: *There seems to be a tendency to return to ideas around dependency and autonomy in the exhibition? How is this relationship explored in the Bosses works, which consist of 20 pairs of large, gift-wrapped mugs that are positioned centrally to the space?*

GL: Absolutely. I feel like we are so often emotional in the workplace and so transactional in our personal lives. The works *Bosses* and *Bosses II* relate that, I mean in the absurd cartoon 'The Boss' text and in the abundance of heart covered cellophane and oversized bows, and in how the two mugs and the two works relate to each other as well. I guess it is a romantic, to me anyway, a proposal for equality and community, and in that, disagreement and agonism as well. Happily, it is one of the weirdest works in the show.

I wanted to make something that operated differently in terms of its distribution, in the life of the work. *Bosses II*, which consists of a set of two, gift-wrapped mugs, is an edition of 20 works. All the editions are shown here in full, to constitute the work *Bosses*. So, for instance, if the separate editions of *Bosses II* go into different ownerships, in order for the work *Bosses* to be shown again, those collections will need to work collectively to reconstitute it. In this way it relates a sculptural practice to that of video, where the migration of those forms still poses a specific set of questions on where a work is, not only materially but structurally and discursively.

EG: The work, Loads is installed on an iPad in space and you invite visitors to scroll through the images, much like an Instagram feed. It is compiled of hundreds of images that map a process that you've gone through during the making of this commission. A lot of those images are the stuff that you gravitate to in your everyday life – from your shopping trips, domestic life, hotel rooms and studio, through to installing this exhibition...

GL: Yes, with that work, *Loads*, I started thinking I would make a work containing all the constituent parts of the show. But, of course, what is interesting in terms of the constitution of a thing, is the question: where does that stop and start? It is impossible to say. When am I working, what constitutes work, a work? *Loads*, in a way talks to that, it is 272 closely cropped images I have edited from phone photos taken over the last two years since I moved back to the UK from Brussels. I started a practice years ago, in photography, to try to take images that weren't *for* anything and weren't *of* anything. In a way it's a series of McGuffins. The work isn't the images as much as in another kind of work, an awareness of these structures which are completely predominant and that we take for granted as being these fixed entities, and don't have to be. It's what I am trying to learn in making work, how to maintain that practice.

EG: Throughout the exhibition there is a shift from cold, hard materials to a more 'soft', colorful and often child-like aesthetic, which you seem to be drawn to. This is very well documented in Loads, for example.

GL: I am pretty keen on embellishments and adornments. I tend to work with very large-scale, cold, industrial materials, galleries included. I know there is a certain efficacy to those materials and I want to play with that in my work by introducing this other scale and temperature of elements. I'm always working with temperature in materials, their charge; hot and cold, a tepid wash, a cold end, a ham-fisted junction. It is the syntax and rhythm of writing. I want to work with a certain parity of materials, not just a set of references, but with all the textures and materials that surround me in my life.

In many ways this whole body of work is dealing with moving out of closed systems. In fact, I think the very first real time I started thinking in terms of constitution was in my re-negotiating making work again, I started thinking of my doubt, not as something to

overcome, but as constitutive, as making. For me, it is not about the elevation of materials, it is about shifting our relation to them.

Interviewed by Ellen Greig, Curator: Commissions, Chisenhale Gallery, on Wednesday 16 January 2018 at Chisenhale Gallery, London. Chisenhale Interviews, series editor, Polly Staple, Director, Chisenhale Gallery.