

Eloise Hawser's work reconfigures and repurposes commonplace materials applied in industrial processes to create sculptures and installations that subtly demonstrate the inherent mutability of everyday objects.

On occasion of her first UK institutional ICA Curator Matt Williams interviewed her about her inspiration for the exhibition and her working practice

Matt Williams Why did you decide to focus the exhibition on the cinema organ colour changer?



1

Eloise Hawser The cinema organ 'colour changer' is something I saw after looking at the great bounty of things from Lucien Nunes's collection at Elektrikonika. The mechanism would have originally been situated in a subterranean base of a cinema. Although it was illuminating the organ it would have been buried quite deeply behind shuttering. I excavated it from a heavy angled frame so you could see it in operation. When you isolated its parts you could see the movement of these misshapen CAMs like kidney beans. Originally they determined the colour cycle in the lamps. Adjoining are the steel arms that move back and forth, connected to a series of springs and weights. When I had it drawn up technically, my CAD designer, Anthony Smelling, described the arms as "Playing the machine" a bit like a harp. I do think that the components of the colour changer lend themselves to a high degree of anthropomorphism.

Lucien has a lot of more visually extraordinary items like the mercury arc rectifier. It's a transformer that was completely ubiquitous in the 50s, which converted AC to DC and glows. It has liquid mercury inside and looks like a purple pregnant octopus.

MW The colour changer basically determines the luminosity of the light using RGB colour technology which was replaced in by CMYK colour for a prolonged period of time. What makes it relevant within a contemporary context?

EH Red Green Blue mixing is now quite a standard way of achieving colour – with the combination of microscopic pixels tricking the eye to think that it is seeing a solid colour. But in the 1930s this kind of RGB mixing, which the colour changer achieved with RGB filament lamps, was rare. In this way, the colour changer went against the grain of contemporary technology, and in doing so pre-empted the standard in digital technology almost a century later.

MW When devising the exhibition was the flow of colour within the space and its meditative qualities considered. Is the use or potential of colour a key aspect of your practice?

EH The colour flow in the ceiling is determined by the machine and reflects the colour cycle that would have illuminated the organ. It's so unusual that the machine with its cams and cast iron parts can create a quite disembodied, ephemeral effect. In the 30's, an era of less integrated technology, lighting was more of a genre itself. They had these theatrical lighting displays that were controlled from a centralized console, almost like how today a DJ would mix a track. When film was black and white, the illuminated organ was almost compensatory. It's from this kind of general moment that our cinema organ colour changer exists.

MW Were the economic and social aspects of its evolution an interest as well as its technological and stylistic qualities when you were developing the exhibition?

EH What I find most interesting about the cinema organ is it replaced the whole orchestra with a single keyboard console (and organist). They called it the unit orchestra. The pipes were set into the walls of the building but so were the cymbals, drums, the whole percussion division. You have these instruments lying inert in the cavities of the building that are brought to life by a remote keyboard. As this happened, the visible parts became more decorative, elaborate. For 10 or 20 years there were competing styles of organ console surrounds. The console became this autonomous structure that looks like an illuminated art deco building. It implies a need to give it a presence that may compensate for the absence of the players in the orchestra. I think that that's a very powerful idea.

You can also trace the evolution of the cinema organ in terms of mass entertainment. At some point, it stopped being just an accompaniment and became a spectacle in its own right. The organist emerged from the bellows of the building on a hydraulic lift to play in the interval and was a personality, a celebrity. Older people now will speak of cinema organists of their era who were famous like Reginald Dixon.

2





3

MW Accompanying the colour changer mechanism in the gallery is a video work that navigates the architectural space of the Burberry Regent Street shop. It has retained the original cinema organ from when it was originally a cinema. Was it your intention to highlight the architecture and the history of the Burberry store?

EH I think we do have to look at how spaces are constructed. When I was a child, I was afraid to go to the cinema because I found them frightening, an assault on my senses. There is an interesting paradox as to how a space is constructed: either to empower or to absorb you. In a shopping experience the retailer wants you to feel empowered and able to spend money. It's a kind of alliance between the space, the consumer and the retailer. It's comforting to know that there's a cinema organ up in the rafters to throw that relationship off kilter.

If you look at a lot of the marketing material that Burberry's produce, Burberry draws on their cultural heritage as a British brand, but I think there has been a degree of reinvention of traditional values. Also Burberry has been continually reappropriated by contemporary culture and that is part of what makes Burberry such a complex brand.

I had to get special permission to film at Burberry, and I would never have got that permission if it wasn't for the ICA context. On some level all of my work deals with permission. Permission comes down to who's granted to say something and why, in what context is something accessible and why? The permission from Burberry to film the organ, the permission from Lucien to use his colour changer machine, the permission from BT cables to show the cables.

MW Were you consciously trying to suggest a relationship between the Burberry store and the ICA as historical sites of cultural engagement or simply highlight their architectural histories?



4

MW Are you referring to his specialism and understanding of the fabric of the building?

EH Well I was thinking not so much of the ICA as a cultural site, but looking more at the 'dressing' or concealment of the original features, which is relevant across both sites (Burberry and the ICA). The ICA has a suspended Barrisol ceiling. It looks permanent but it's stretched PVC, interesting enough on its own to generate multiple exhibitions. Barrisol PVC was developed for trade fair efficiency, to be thrown up in a short time frame, but now it has come to the ICA, not many people would ever notice that it is permeable, wavers and is heat sensitive. A technical salesman from the Barrisol Ltd came to look at replicating the ceiling panel. He went into the bar area, which is also all PVC, and pointed out all the tiny little slits and ruptures in the ceiling. An ideal place for Barrisol – he was in a trance thinking of all the potential business he could do.

EH Yes, but it might not be a specialism to do with the ancient architecture or ground foundations, its more to do his ability to recognise Barrisol. It might seem trivial, but if you rounded up lots of people, you would be hard pressed to find somebody who would notice that Barrisol.

MW Industrial specialisms are certainly a prevalent theme or source of inspiration within your work, past and present. You generally involve a number of collaborative partners in the production of your work for their specific knowledge. Maintaining the relationships with so many partners has a performative quality about it, is this something that you have consciously developed within your practice or is it simply a means to an end?

EH It's never just a means to an end... Ever. I'm not going for the most perfect cinema colour changer. But it can be difficult, I've been in some very tricky situations, I've had to adapt. The piece (a HGV truck scan) in *Weight of Data* at the Tate for example involved going to a counter terror trade show and basically pitching about using their imagery in an art context. They were very resistant. That's a conversation I take seriously, and it can be quite psychologically challenging. In our show, the entire exhibition is built on the back of the fact that Lucien was prepared to lend an object that nobody else has, so there's a dependency there.

MW One final question, the relationship between the church organ and the cinema is quite direct and has historically assumed a position both within architecture and society to command and manipulate audiences' emotions and belief structures. With this in mind why did you chose not to have sound in the exhibition?

EH There is sound in the exhibition, it's the sound of the motor and it's a pleasing sound. It's quite a meaningful sound as it has an odd, kind of botanic, sprinkler noise.

MW The ambient sound of the electro-mechanical workings of the colour-changer.

EH It's quite loud if there is nothing playing. Its white noise so it doesn't have the purposefulness of a sound that you would associate with a specific mechanism. But because it's the motor, to me it has the sound of continuity. It's always there and it's as if it generates everything else. The cinema organ is considered kind of impure in relation to a church organ. But why? The cinema organ has a key called the tremulant that's incredibly evocative, but in exhibition context it would have been hard to feature it, as its very seaside! Music is the white elephant in the exhibition.

1, 2, 4 Installation view, 'Eloise Hawser: Lives on Wire', ICA, 2015. Photo: Mark Blower

3 Eloise Hawser, *Solo*, 2015. HD Film shot at the Burberry, Regents Street, London. Running time: 5.36



Eloise Hawser graduated from The Ruskin School of Art, Oxford in 2007 and continued her studies at Städelschule, Frankfurt under Tobias Rehberger (2009 – 2012). Recent group exhibitions featuring Eloise Hawser include 2015 *The Weight of Data*, Tate Britain, London, UK; *Surround Audience*, Triennial, New Museum, New York, NY; 2014 *Europe, Europe*, Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, Oslo, Norway; *Don't You Know Who I Am? Art after Identity Politics*, M HKA, Antwerp, Belgium.

Educators' Gallery Tour
Wed 1 Jul, 5pm
Led by ICA Curator Matt Williams

Artist's Talk: Eloise Hawser
Wed 15 Jul, 6.30pm
In conversation with Matt Williams

Gallery Tour: Yemi Awosile
Thu 23 Jul, 6.30pm

Workshop: Membranes, muscles and machines
Sat 8 Aug, 2pm

Screening event: Wild Lines
Wed 19 Aug, 6.30pm

Friday Salon: On Skeuomorphism
Fri 21 Aug, 2pm

Performance Eloise Hawser: Er and other Conductors
Thu 27 Aug, 8pm

In collaboration with Kara Sarkodie Mensah of AERIAL and House of Lady Di, Eloise Hawser presents a newly commissioned performance that brings together human conductors, electronic machinery and instruments to generate a series of interconnected sounds and physical gestures.