SOLO is an initiative which offers a solo exhibition to an established or emerging artist. This year from an open application of over 90 artists drawn from across the UK we are delighted to have selected Andy Webster.

David Baldry, Head of Fine Art at UCS says, “SOLO, now in its third year, has become one of the high points in the gallery year at UCS. This new exhibition by Andy Webster which follows the work recently shown by Langlands & Bell, provides another memorable moment in the increasingly innovative programme of exhibitions at the Waterfront Gallery”.

Andy Webster’s Dawn Chorus continues the gallery’s dynamic programme to provide local audiences and visitors to Ipswich with the opportunity to view a diverse programme of contemporary art. His recent work has been described as emerging from practices and discourses associated with environmental issues and ecological art. Dawn Chorus’s interaction with the environment is instrumental in the unfolding of the work and is characteristic of his work. The unpredictable
interaction morphs the work from a reflective, silent installation into a vibrating, musical performance creating a unique experience for both the audience and the gallery.

Andy Webster has shown nationally and internationally, including ‘Emergencia’ Emoção Artificial, Itau Cultural, São Paulo; Demarcació de Girona del COAC, Girona, Spain. Recent projects include Crazy Tourist a response to participating in a Cape Farewell expedition to the source of the Dollis Brook. Since February 2008, he has led the project Social Cycles, which provides 41 bicycles for students and staff to use for free for the duration of their studies and employment at University College Falmouth and University of Exeter. Andy is currently a researcher for the RANE Research Group at University College Falmouth.

Our thanks to Graham Lambert and KHL Architects for their enthusiasm in supporting this exhibition; to all the artists who submitted a proposal for SOLO 2012 and to the members of the selection panel who so willingly gave their time.

Carol Gant
Arts Curator, Waterfront Gallery
University Campus Suffolk

Purposeful Purposelessness
The Art of Andy Webster

One of the most striking features of the body of work that Andy Webster has produced over the last decade is the diversity of the media and materials that he’s utilized, including: electrochemical systems; solar-powered cymbals; soap solution; decorators’ swatches; mud; coloured glycerin; DIY electronics; bicycles; a juke box; and karaoke recordings. Just as noteworthy is the absence of paint and canvas, given that he trained as a painter and gained early recognition for that work (in the mid-80s he was a Young Contemporaries prize winner). For many years we’ve collaborated together on projects ranging from making films to curating art shows. My goal in writing this essay is to provide an introduction to Webster’s art for those don’t know his work so well or are even coming across it for the first time at this exhibition. What I will show is the coherent and carefully considered practice that underlies what might initially appear as a motley collection of artworks.

Webster put away his brushes and started to explore ‘non-traditional’ media because he had
reached a creative impasse. The work he was producing had become repetitive: whatever he tried, his paintings always seemed to convey the same visual sensibility and aesthetic. He found it deeply unsatisfying that his artwork had become more about himself than about the world around him. Furthermore, painting was becoming a strain because he was continually asking himself ‘Is this piece interesting? Is it creative?’ He therefore started to look for a way to make art that would minimize the impact of his aesthetic concerns; he wanted to reduce his control over the artworks he was producing, while not relinquishing it completely [1].

The work of the composer John Cage and the artist Allan Kaprow were highly influential in helping him develop his new approach to making artworks. Both had undergone a radical shift in their own artistic practice, similar to the one that Webster was now attempting, and in their writings he found inspiration [2,3].

In 1951, two events changed the way that Cage made music. First, he visited an anechoic chamber at Harvard University, a room that is insulated from exterior sound sources. However, once inside he did not experience complete silence as he could still hear the sounds generated by his body, such as his blood circulating. This experience had a profound effect on Cage, who later wrote, "Until I die there will be sounds. And they will continue following my death. One need not fear about the future of music. But this fearlessness only follows if, at the parting of the ways, where it is realized that sounds occur whether intended or not, one turns in the direction of those he does not intend. This turning is psychological and seems at first to be a giving up of everything that belongs to humanity—for a musician, the giving up of music. This psychological turning leads to the world of nature, where, gradually or suddenly, one sees that humanity and nature, not separate, are in this world together; that nothing was lost when everything was given away. In fact, everything is gained. In musical terms, any sounds may occur in any combination and in any continuity." [4]

Having made the psychological turn of according noise the same status as musical sounds, Cage required a compositional method that would allow environmental sounds to be incorporated into his work. However, the seemingly paradoxical challenge was for this to happen without him intending it, because any sounds he intentionally selected would be done on the basis of his aesthetic concerns and treated as musical, rather than noise.

The necessary breakthrough resulted from the second significant event of 1951: Cage was given a copy of the I Ching, an ancient Chinese text used for divination. Using coins or yarrow stalks, one of 64
hexagrams is selected from the book and the associated text is read to divine the future. Cage started to use the book as a way of composing using chance, randomly selecting hexagrams and using them to determine the order of sounds and durations. In this way he could, to a large extent, remove his intentions from a composition. Cage still had to determine at the outset how the different hexagrams would map to different aspects of a composition and also decide once a piece had been produced whether it was worth performing or not. However, using chance enabled him to engage in what he called:

“a purposeful purposelessness or a purposeless play. This play, however, is an affirmation of life—not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply a way of waking up to the very life we’re living, which is so excellent once one gets one’s mind and one’s desires out of its way and lets it act of its own accord.” [4]

For Cage, “the composer resembles the maker of a camera who allows someone else to take the picture.” [4] This is most evident in his famous piece 4’33”, composed in 1952, which is a three movement work for any instrument where the performer is instructed not to play for the entire duration. However, the audience undergoes a similar experience to the one Cage had in the anechoic chamber: they become aware of sounds made by audience members (shuffles, coughs, yawns, …) and ambient sounds in the wider environment (police sirens, traffic hum, mobile phones ringing, …). The composer and performer set up the opportunity for audience members to attend to environmental sounds in a way that they would not typically do.

Allan Kaprow had initially trained as a painter but in the 1950s he started making work that broke free from the constraints of two dimensional pictures. His art became three dimensional and increased in scale: first collages, then assemblages, such as panels that could be configured in different sculptural arrangements, and finally environments where he filled large spaces with objects, such as old car tyres. Not only were his art works increasing in spatial extent, but he was constructing them from everyday materials:

“Objects of every sort are materials for the new art: paint, food, chairs, electric and neon lights, smoke, water, old socks, a dog, movies, a thousand other things which will be discovered by the present generation of artists”. [5]

In 1957, Kaprow took a course in time-based composition taught by Cage at the New School for Social Research in New York and recognized that his experimental approach to music was significant for all arts practice:
"As Cage brought the chancy and noisy world into the concert hall (following Duchamp, who did the same in the art gallery), a next step was simply to move right out into that uncertain world and forget the framing devices of concert hall, gallery, stage, and so forth. This was the theoretical foundation of the Happening …" [6].

Happenings were originated by Kaprow and involved applying chance operations to public performances that blurred traditional art genres by combining theatre, dance, poetry and visual arts. Some parts were improvised, and other elements were carefully scored, with instructions for performers and the audience. Kaprow described them as ‘essentially theater pieces, however unconventional’ [7], but there were no stages, the audience moved around and played an active participatory role, there was no story, and the experience was often unforeseen and surprising for everybody involved:

“Visitors to a Happening are now and then not sure what has taken place, when it has ended, even when things have gone ‘wrong’. For when something goes ‘wrong’, something far more “right”, more revelatory, has many times emerged. This sort of sudden near-miracle presently seems to be made more likely by chance procedures”. [7]

Over the last decade Webster has been developing an arts practice that tries to set up the conditions that lead to surprising outcomes and even ‘near-miracles’. Although his approach can be characterized as ‘purposeful purposelessness’, and inspired by Cage and Kaprow, what is distinctive is the wide range of materials that he works with, on scales ranging from the atomic to the social.

Webster initially managed to break out of his ‘creative impasse’ by turning away from his concerns with visual aesthetics and instead focusing on the process of creating artworks, initially developing a set of rules for developing a series of colour films. In ROYGBIV, Webster set himself the task of going for a walk and filming colour. Starting with red, he filmed 60 shots, each lasting for 5 seconds, of each of the seven colours of the rainbow, trying to fill the viewfinder with a single colour. From the outset he decided not to edit any of the footage. He found that working with these tight constraints was a complete release.

He made a colour film on three successive days and then projected the three films as a triptych. He imagined that the result would be a sensual immersion in colour. However, what was most evident in the large scale projection were the flaws in the shot composition and the breaks with what he intended. At one point the sound track indicates that he is walking along a stony
beach while shooting yellow when he suddenly slips and the camera points up to a blue sky and it is clear that he was focusing on a lifeguard’s flag. At another point in the film, it becomes evident that that a red shot is a car when we hear it accelerating away and Webster has difficulties zooming out so that other colours enter the frame.

The rule approach developed in ROYGBIV is also followed in Crazy Tourist, where the activity of searching for and collecting balls steers the artist’s journey on an expedition along the lost waterways of the inner city. This constraint slows the pace, guides the route taken, and produces a very particular encounter with the river and its environs, where much of the time was spent foraging through undergrowth, wading through water and exploring under bridges. These exploratory activities were intermittently punctuated by the discovery of another ball that had floated downstream and got caught in bushes or a grating.

One of the balls found on the river is used to disperse the mud in 1 gallon of river mud over 90 minutes. This piece continues until all the mud has been used up and there is a time pressure to complete the work within the duration of a football match (it went into 6 minutes extra time). A further constraint is that Webster, showing accomplished footballing skills, kicks the ball with either his left or right foot, depending on where it rebounded off the wall.

Webster also explores how different materials are able to autonomously generate form as a consequence of interacting with their environment. One way that he introduces chance and unpredictability into his work is to allow the materials in some of his artworks to be active participants in a reciprocal dialogue, rather than shaping and ordering them to conform to his aesthetic sensibility. In A liquid solution dispersed by a breath of air (multiple times) and Several weeks of radio, Webster explores how feedback from the environment – in this instance his breath or sound from various radio stations – can be used as input to steer and influence the unfolding form of materials – in the first case glycerin and in the second metallic particles. Webster has also worked at the scale of social institutions, using their structural and organisational principles as the constraints to guide the production of new work. In Social Cycles this involved setting up a cycle scheme as a response to the inertia of the bureaucratic attitudes of the institution. In an earlier work, Corporate Colour Scheme he redecorated the walls of an art college gallery each day in a colourful protest at its use as a management meeting room rather than a space to display work.

With this series of diverse and open-ended
artworks Webster demonstrates that if we stop trying to control our environment and are open to the unexpected then we may start to see the minor miracles happening all around us.

**Jon Bird**  
*Senior Research Associate*  
*UCL Interaction Centre*  
*University College London*

References:
The motors are driven in real-time by sunlight and respond to changes in the weather, in particular, cloud cover. Attached to the motors are lengths of flex, which beat out a rhythm on the cymbals when the motors are turned by the solar energy. In response to the varying feedback from the environment, *Dawn Chorus* might produce a constantly changing shimmering percussive noise or periods of complete silence.


31 cymbals, motors, solar panels, daylight and cloud.
A MINOR MIRACLE
Above and previous page:

**A minor miracle**, 2011.
13 letters shaped from salvaged wooden boards,
3500 solar lights, 35 solar panels, variable
sunlight and darkness

LED lights are charged by varying amounts of sunlight which dictates the duration of the night time’s illumination. As the daylight fades the LED’s come on to illuminate the text until eventually the lights fail and the text becomes incomprehensible. The piece is inspired by Lou Reed’s song *Strawman* in which Reed challenges the excesses and arrogance of life in America. Perhaps the only thing that will stop the dysfunctional behaviour at the root of the current ecological crisis may indeed be a minor miracle.
A performance by the artist who, by kicking a ball, disperses 1 gallon of mud to generate a temporary pattern across the surface of a wall. The aim of the work is to reconfigure Richard Long’s Avon river-mud drawings by substituting the imprint left by Long’s hand with a trace left by the more banal action of kicking a football against the wall. After 90 minutes and 6 minutes extra time, Webster was unsuccessful in his attempt to cover the entire wall with a residue of river mud.

Above and previous page:

*1 gallon of Fal river mud redistributed by foot over 90 minutes + 6 minutes extra time*, 2010.
A performance using sculptural props; one gallon of river mud, a football, and repetitive actions by the artist. DVD, duration 186 minutes.
The project has sought to avoid bureaucratic approaches associated with institutional thinking; thus there are few rules for use of the bicycles. The project runs without permission, authorisation, or sanction from the universities and seeks to avoid the use of language typically associated with cycle schemes, public relations and the rhetoric of sustainability. As a consequence, word of mouth is used to inform students and staff about the bike scheme. To date it has been used by 143 known participants and hopefully by many more in the future.

Social cycles, 2008 – ongoing.
41 hybrid bicycles free for use by students, staff and their friends for the duration of their studies or employment at University College Falmouth and the University of Exeter. Dimensions and duration variable.
A sensual taxonomy of thought, 2008.

Animation, duration 3:20 minutes

A film made by taking thumbnail sized photographs of book spines and using these as single frames in a 24fps animation. To make the work the artist photographed 3458 books in a university library. Using the library’s structural and organisational principles as the constraints to guide the production of a new work, the photographs were ordered chronologically so that the animation recreates a sequence analogous to walking down the library isles – something akin to running one’s finger along the spines of the books on the shelving.
A performance by the artist who blows air into a glycerine solution, which results in its dispersal to generate a momentary pattern. Within seconds the pattern disappears and the liquid solution is a homogenous colour once more. During fifty-one successive iterations, the artist attempts to encourage ever more complex patterns to emerge from within the solution by modulating the speed and intensity of the airflow, adjusting the viscosity of the solution and by roughening the surface of the perspex.

*A liquid solution dispersed by a breath of air (multiple times)*, 2006.
A performance using sculptural props including hele-shaw device, glycerin & the artist’s breath. DVD, duration 12 minutes.
A performance by the artist who uses a series of repetitive actions in an attempt to produce and release large-scale soap bubbles. This activity is performed one hundred and twenty nine times until the soap solution runs out. To produce and then successfully release a decent bubble, the artist’s actions and behaviour have to be continually adapted and adjusted in a reciprocal dialogue, both with the nature of the materials used and the prevailing environmental conditions such as breeze and humidity.
Sonically generated copper structures,
dimensions variable

The project uses water, copper sulphate crystals, copper wire, and electrical input to construct an elementary electrochemical device. Live audio from a radio station is converted in a variable DC current. This is fed into the solution to stimulate the production, distribution and deposition of metal particles along the edge of an electrode. Live broadcasts from a range of radio stations and audio recordings were used for the duration of one week. The result of this process is that particles stack together to form thread like structures.
Above and following page:

Crazy tourist, 2010.
Performance, searching for and collecting lost balls during an expedition to the source of Dollis Brook. An installation of found balls of variable dimensions, and DVD documentation of the performance, duration 12:05 minutes.

A performance by the artist, documented by collaborator Jon Bird, who conduct an expedition towards the source of Dollis Brook in search of lost balls that have floated down the river. The activity of searching for and collecting balls steers the journey and the accompanying discussion, as Webster moves through undergrowth, across streams and wades along waterways.
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