

Edinburgh Art Festival Commissions Programme 2019

STORIES FOR AN UNCERTAIN WORLD



2019 Commissions Programme

Founded in 2004, Edinburgh Art Festival is the visual art presentation as part of Edinburgh's August festival season, bringing together museums, galleries and artist run spaces in a citywide celebration of the very best in visual art. Alongside a rich programme of exhibitions, each year we support a small number of Scottish, UK and international artists to make new projects specifically for the festival, with an emphasis on work developed for settings beyond the gallery.

Our 2019 programme, *Stories for an Uncertain World*, brings together five artists with new projects which offer perspectives on the uncertain times we find ourselves in, poised between the disintegration of an old world order, and imagining possible futures.

Edinburgh Art Festival would like to thank the 2019 team of technicians: Thomas Aitchison, Duncan Marquiss, Keith Matheson, Stephen Murray and Chris Walker.

Cover image: Rosalind Nashashibi, *Part One: Where there is a joyous mood, there a comrade will appear to share a glass of wine* (video still), 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

Designed by James Brook, www.jamesbrook.net

WE ALL TELL STORIES

Sorcha Carey

"We never went *anywhere*," Asten said. "Rig tells stories all the time."
"We all tell stories all the time, Asten," Karth said.
– Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Shobies' Story*

Scholars have long debated the etymological relationship between 'history' and 'story' in the English language. It is intriguing but perhaps also indicative that two words that conjure such opposing associations – authoritative factual account versus personal fiction – should ultimately stem back to the same source. Story and history both have their origins in *historia*, the Ancient Greek and Latin word meaning enquiry, as well as the information that comes as a result of that enquiry.

Of course storytelling, as much as history, represents a search for knowledge, the pleasurable expression of a fundamentally human impulse to try to make sense of the world around us, or to construct or control it in ways that we can only achieve through fiction. It is perhaps no surprise then that so many religions and belief systems depend on stories, not manifestos, to communicate their central tenets. Precisely in their fiction, stories bring us closer to the truth.

Writing about *The Shobies' Story*, Ursula K. Le Guin noted that 'it's essentially a story about what stories do, or can do'. Published in 1990, *The Shobies' Story* follows a group of individuals as they come together and journey to a distant planet using a new 'faster than light' method of travel. The text provides the starting point for Rosalind Nashashibi's new two-part film, an exploration of communities and storytelling.

Nashashibi consulted the *I Ching* (an ancient Chinese divination manual) to provide the titles for the work. Introduced to the divination method by her mother when she was a child, Nashashibi has returned to it at various points in her life, but this is the first time she has used it to title a work – prompted by its connection to Le Guin's own interests (Le



This page: Rosalind Nashashibi, *Part One: Where there is a joyous mood, there a comrade will appear to share a glass of wine* (video stills), 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

Opposite: Rosalind Nashashibi, *Part Two: The moon nearly at the full. The team horse goes astray* (video stills), 2019. Courtesy of the artist.





Rosalind Nashashibi,
*Part Two: The moon
nearly at the full. The
team horse goes
astray* (video still), 2019.
Courtesy of the artist.

Guin was very influenced by the Tao and produced her own rendition of Lao Tsu's *Tao Te Ching*), and a sense that it would provide a means to 'move forward' with the work.

The process not only offered titles but also a distinct mood for each of the two parts – with the convivial playful scenes of *Part One: Where there is a joyous mood, there a comrade will appear to share a glass of wine* giving way to a growing sense of confusion and loss in *Part Two: The moon nearly at the full. The team horse goes astray*.

The film slips easily between documentary and fiction, as Nashashibi intercuts footage of herself, her children and friends whom she considers extended family, in a series of intimate and convivial settings, with impressionistic scenes of remote landscapes, and paintings by Nolde, Nashashibi and others. For Nashashibi, *The Shobie's Story* (whose opening sequence follows the characters as they build a family, adopting roles that are voluntarily assumed rather than given by birth or familial ties) and her own filmic response, offered an opportunity to incorporate her personal situation into her working processes, and to reflect on a family and community life outside of the nuclear family structure.

At the heart of *Part One* is an extended conversation between the friends about Le Guin's story, and the potential implications of 'non-linear' time for our ability to communicate, and to express or feel love:

'When linearity stops they can no longer understand each other at all.... All the work they were doing the month before when they were becoming a crew, is lost.', Nashashibi observes.

Part Two of Nashashibi's film explores and enacts the progressive disintegration and fracturing of understanding that results from travelling beyond the bounds of linear time, until finally the bonds are reasserted in the closing sequence, with the telling of a story. Stories, we realise, are critical to their sense of community.

The landscapes of Nashashibi's film are crucial in creating a strange, otherworldly quality – our brains tell us they are of this earth, and yet they seem remote, disconcerting, not quite of this world.

Nathan Coley's new work, *The Future is Inside Us, It's not Somewhere Else*, also looks to landscapes which are in some way 'other' – a collection of scenic views of North America produced by French artists in the early 19th century, and then transformed by the artisan wallpaper manufacturers Zuber & Cie, into their woodblock printed *Vues d'Amerique du Nord* first produced in 1834, and still in production today (and available to purchase from showrooms in Paris, London and Dubai). Profoundly European in their style and ideology, the landscapes offer an image of a 'new world' as viewed from the 'old world' of Europe.

Coley first became interested in the wallpapers, when he spotted them in the background of a televised press announcement from the Diplomatic Room of the White House. Further research revealed that they had been installed by Jacqueline Kennedy in the early 1960s, having been rescued from a historic home that was being demolished.

Coley is well-known for a body of work in which he sites an illuminated text in the external landscape. *The Future is Inside Us* inverts this approach, to borrow an invented landscape and bring it into the interior, in a series of 5 lightbox sculptures in which carefully selected texts and phrases speak out from Zuber's woodblock printed scenery.

Coley's site – the historic Parliament Hall – has been carefully chosen for the range of references it invokes. All that survives of Scotland's first parliament prior to the 1707 Act of Union, Parliament Hall is now home to the country's supreme courts, a space where assumptions are tested and meanings closely argued. Installed amidst an impressive collection of historic portraits of leading members of the legal establishment from the past two centuries, Coley's approach entails a deliberate act of displacement, as 5 portraits have been removed to make way for his work.

Exquisite landscapes punctured by texts taken from a range of documentary and fictional sources – 'WE ARE THE MONUMENT', 'BORN', 'LOOKING FOR LUCK', 'YOU BETTER NOT NEVER TELL NOBODY BUT GOD', 'YOU DON'T KNOW ME' – Coley's lightboxes read collectively



Above: Nathan Coley,
A Place Beyond Belief,
2012. Installation,
National Gallery of
Kosovo, Pristina
@studioNathanColey
Photo: Atdhe Mulla.



Below: Diplomatic
Reception Room, White
House, Washington D.C.
Photo: Peter Vitale.
Courtesy of White House
Historical Association.

Opposite: Nathan Coley,
studio images with Zuber
& Cie wallpapers, 2019.
Courtesy of the artist.





Opposite: Nathan Coley, *The Future is Inside Us, It's not Somewhere Else* (research image), 2019. Courtesy of the artist.

like an extended haiku, inserted amidst the august panoply of (almost exclusively) men. One text, 'LOOKING FOR LUCK', is reversed, to remind us that the words come from outside. The texts speak not only from the landscapes, but (like us) gaze into them, voices trying to place themselves within these highly emblematic settings.

Each lightbox contains its own individual dialogue between text and image, exploring ideas of utopia, identity and our relationship to place and to power. Collectively, the works remind us of the extent to which landscapes are always imaginary repositories for (im)possible futures.

Not far from Parliament Hall, festival visitors will encounter another text inscribed within the cityscape. A large neon sign announcing *I Can't Go On, I'll Go On*, shines out from the shadows of West College Street. The sign is the work of the Chilean artist, Alfredo Jaar, and borrows from the closing words of Samuel Beckett's 1953 novel, *The Unnamable*:

perhaps it's done already, perhaps they have said me already,
perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the
door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will
be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the
silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on

For Jaar, the final words 'I can't go on, I'll go on,' offer a perfect metaphor for the times in which we are living: 'A time of absolute chaos and confusion, where the collapse of ideologies and traditional politics is amplified by a dazzling array of technological developments; an era of alternative realities, otherwise known as the post-truth moment. How do we act in the world today?'

Jaar first rendered the phrase in a smaller scale neon made for his 2016 exhibition at Yorkshire Sculpture Park. Here, transferring the text from a gallery wall into the streetscape, Jaar finds a site which itself embodies the predicament expressed in the work. Edinburgh's 'Bridge of Sighs' which hosts the neon, appears to connect two buildings on either side of a narrow street; but, blocked at one end for more than a century, it too is caught between two places, a dilemma in stone.

Like Beckett's writings, Jaar's work is not without humour. Situating the work in Edinburgh in August when the entire city becomes a stage, Jaar is well aware of the theatrical reading 'I can't go on' will invoke. As part of his public intervention, the text is also carried out into the city by individual performers wearing sandwich boards.

If Beckett's novel conveys the internal narrative of a disembodied, nameless voice, always wrestling with the silence, in Jaar's appropriation, the closing words are given solid form, enacting and making visible the dilemma we all face.



Above: Alfredo Jaar, *A Logo for America*, 1987/2014. Public Intervention. Digital animation commissioned by The Public Art Fund for Spectacolor sign, Times Square, New York, April 1987. Courtesy of Times Square Alliance, New York and the artist, New York



Below: Alfredo Jaar, *I Can't Go On. I'll Go On*, 2016. Neon, 40" x 40" / 100 cm x 100 cm. Courtesy of Yorkshire Sculpture Park, West Bretton and the artist, New York.

Opposite: Alfredo Jaar, *Teach Us to Outgrow Our Madness*, 2014. Public intervention. Courtesy of the artist.





Opposite: Alfredo Jaar, *I Can't Go On. I'll Go On*, 2016/2019. Neon, digital rendering, 118" x 118" / 300 cm x 300 cm. Courtesy of Edinburgh Art Festival, Edinburgh, and the artist, New York.

Both the sign and the sandwich boards borrow from well-established visual languages of persuasion. And yet the message undercuts or disarms the customary conventions of advertising – speaking so keenly of uncertainty, of a sense of being overwhelmed, before finding within itself the strength to continue, to go on.

For Jaar, Beckett's words find echoes in an aphorism often cited by the Italian revolutionary socialist, Antonio Gramsci, who opposed the 'pessimism of the intellect to the optimism of the will.' While the sandwich boards offer a more open reading, dividing the text equally across the front and reverse of the wearer, in the neon, Jaar emphasizes the final 'I'll go on'. Rendering the letters brighter and larger than their negative counterpart, Jaar suggests that our only alternative might be 'to recognize despair and move on, with optimism.'

Jaar has noted how the extraordinary changes we are currently witnessing have been accentuated by developments in technology. Corin Sworn's recent work has been researching how shifting technologies are profoundly changing the ways in which we engage with the world. Sworn is interested in the way in which technologies intended 'to make life easier', have resulted in an increasing elision in any division between life and work; a sense in which technology has become embodied in our daily gestures, as devices become extensions of our bodies and we voluntarily adopt systems of self-surveillance.

Her new work, *Habits of Assembly*, developed collaboratively with dancers Kai-Wen Chuwang and Stephanie McMann, musician Jer Reid, and poet Colin Herd, sites a series of filmed performances within a sculptural installation developed for Edinburgh College of Art's Sculpture Court. Designed to house the college's collection of casts from the antique – including 'Smugglerius', a detailed anatomical study of a convicted smuggler, skin stripped back to reveal tendons and veins, and presented in the pose of the Dying Gaul – the space provides a resonant context for Sworn's exploration of the 'over-laboured' body.

Sworn's installation draws the viewer into a state of entanglement, closing down the normally open space into a sequence of smaller rooms. Constructed using metal struts typically concealed in non-supporting walls and dependent on other elements to hold them up, Sworn is interested to make that sense of contingency visible; the sculpture enacting the way in which we as individuals too are enmeshed in a system of contingencies and dependencies, which either underpin or impinge upon our functionality.

Contained within are a series of projections showing looping sequences of choreographed performances, developed by Sworn with her collaborators. The films incorporate a range of references to earlier practitioners who used film and light as tools to analyse movement, from



Above, right: Corin Sworn, *Habits of Assembly* (research images), 2019. Courtesy of the artist.

Opposite: Corin Sworn, *Habits of Assembly* (video stills), 2019. Courtesy of the artist.





Opposite: Corin Sworn,
Habits of Assembly
(video stills), 2019.
Courtesy of the artist.



the motion studies conducted in the 1920s by Frank and Lillian Gilbreth which sought to increase efficiency and reduce worker fatigue, to Norman McLaren's 1968 dance film *Pas de Deux*, and the seminal works of American choreographers Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown; as well as contemporary systems for motion capture and visual tracking.

The performances draw on a range of mundane gestures and movements which increasingly punctuate our daily lives – opening a laptop, swiping a screen, walking while we look at our mobile phones. Abstracted and folded inward, the movements convey a sense of tasks being undertaken on autopilot, while never being readily identifiable. At moments, the dancers are caught in a sequence of glitches and stutters, before they release themselves again into the flow. A soundtrack mixes low level background noise with Colin Herd's poetic to do list, playfully turning the world on its head to expose it as unworkable – our task today, we learn, is 'to lie on the floor until the Hoover comes to suck you up, to be crumpled in a basket until someone can be bothered to iron you.'

The architectural elements of *Habits of Assembly* are critical in engaging the viewer physically and emotionally with the ideas Sworn is seeking to explore. Sriwhana Spong's *castle-crystal* looks to an imaginary architecture to provide a space in which to explore ideas of identity and belonging.

The title references a text written by the 16th century female mystic, Teresa of Avila. *The Interior Castle* imagines a sequence of chambers constructed from crystal through which the soul progresses on its spiritual journey. Written at a time when women did not have a voice within mainstream political or social structures, Spong is interested in the way Teresa's *Interior Castle* offers a form 'through which to think, and make, and speak from' – a place, as the distorted narrative of her film recounts 'that is a place of speaking for a speaking that has no place'.

Spong's film incorporates a range of visual short-hands which reference wider cosmologies, universal and personal – the snake, for example, is one of the creatures which guards the entrance to the interior castle, but was also the subject of an earlier work by Spong, *having-seen-snake*, in which she explored the complex relationship between bodily sensation and language in the experience of fear.

castle-crystal builds connections across time and culture – in tune with the philosophy and approach of Aby Warburg, whose Mnemosyne Atlas, a visual and metaphoric encyclopaedia building constellations of symbolic images, gave conceptual form to the library in London which bears his name, and where Spong spends much of her time conducting research. Her script written for *castle-crystal* also quotes from the 12th century Javanese *Bhomāntaka* which references another imaginary architecture, a temple 'built of poetic love'. Constructing and exploring



Left: Illustration from Juan de Rojas y AUSA (1622–1685), *Representaciones de la verdad vestida, místicas, morales, y alegóricas, sobre las siete moradas de Santa Teresa de Jesus*, Bridwell Library Special Collections, Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University.

Opposite: Sriwhana Spong, *Mother*, 2019. Ceramic and MDF. Installation view, Spike Island, Bristol 2019. Courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett. Photo: Max McClure.





Opposite: Sriwhana
Spong, *castle-crystal*
(video stills), 2019.
Courtesy of the artist
and Michael Lett.



a dialogue between different cultural traditions, the narrative returns at points to a question that, as a person of dual heritage (New Zealand and Indonesia), Spong has frequently been asked herself: 'Where are you from? Yes, but where are you really from?'

In recent years, Spong has been developing a series of instruments, inspired by the Balinese gamelan tradition, where villages tune their instruments to a different pitch, lending each place a unique and distinctive sound. *castle-crystal* includes a new instrument made by Spong, a glass bell, constructed from a series of hemispheres, suspended enfolded within one another. Taking its form from Teresa's internal architecture, Spong describes the bell as a kind of 'sound diagram'.

castle-crystal creates an image that can't quite be held, a series of images in constant dialogue and negotiation with each other. It is a tension which is explored in the related sculptures Spong has made for the neo-classical architecture of St. Bernard's Well. Topped by a pineapple finial, and hosting a sculpture of the Greek goddess Hygeia with her snake, Spong found echoes in the well's architectural language and form, of her own more personal vocabulary of symbols. Skirting the base of the walls of the circular pump-room, Spong has installed a sequence of serpentine forms embossed with pineapple markings, bringing together two contradictory associations in the one image: the snake conjuring fear and suspicion, and the pineapple a symbol for welcome. The window ledges support a series of sculptural forms in which moist clay as it dries, develops its own independent form and language, pulling away from the structure which has sought to shape it.

Whether looking to the past or imagined future worlds, the projects brought together in *Stories for an Uncertain World*, all draw on narrative and fiction to provide an architecture with which to reflect on the uncertainty of the present moment. Like the unnamed character of Beckett's novella, we are carried to the threshold of a story, a story without resolution, but which gives rich form to explore the complexities of our unnameable dilemma.

"What happened?" they asked. "What happened?" And the Shobies looked at one another and said, "Well, it's quite a story..."
– Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Shobies' Story*

Artists' Biographies

Nathan Coley

Nathan Coley (b. 1967, Glasgow) lives and works in Glasgow. Selected solo exhibitions have been held at The Dick Institute, Kilmarnock (2017); Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh (2017); Kunstmuseum Magdeburg, Germany (2017); Future Perfect, Singapore (2014).

Coley has also participated in group shows at Kochi Muziris Biennale, Kerala (2018); Imperial War Museum, London (2017); Van AbbeMuseum, Eindhoven (2016); Triennale Brugge (2015); Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow (2015); Biennale of Sydney (2004, 2014); and Istanbul Biennial (2013).

In 2007, Coley was shortlisted for the Turner Prize, and his work is represented in many international public and private collections.

Alfredo Jaar

Alfredo Jaar (b. 1956, Santiago, Chile) is an artist, architect, and filmmaker who lives and works in New York. His work has been shown extensively around the world. He has participated in the Biennales of Venice (1986, 2007, 2009, 2013), Sao Paulo (1987, 1989, 2010) as well as Documenta in Kassel (1987, 2002). Important individual exhibitions include The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York (1992); Whitechapel, London; (1992); The Moderna Museet, Stockholm (1994); The Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (1992, 1998, 2007); The Museum of Contemporary Art, Rome (2005), and The Nederlands Fotomuseum, Rotterdam (2019). A Guggenheim and a MacArthur Fellow, Alfredo Jaar was awarded the Hiroshima Art Prize in 2018.

Rosalind Nashashibi

Rosalind Nashashibi (b. 1973, Croydon) lives and works in London. Exhibitions of her work have been presented at Secession, Vienna (2019); GRIMM, New York (2019); Centre Pompidou, Paris (2019); Foksal Gallery Foundation, Warsaw (2018); Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam (2018); The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL (2018); Murray Guy, New York (2016).

Nashashibi was shortlisted for the Turner Prize in 2017, represented Scotland in the 52nd Venice Biennale (2007), and her work was included in Documenta 14 (2007), Sharjah Biennial 10 (2011) and Manifesta 7 (2017). She was awarded the Paul Hamlyn Foundation Award for Artists (2014) and was shortlisted for the Northern Art Prize (2013).

Sriwhana Spong

Sriwhana Spong (b. 1979, New Zealand) lives and works in London. Solo shows include Spike Island, Bristol (2019); the Govett-Brewster Gallery, New Plymouth (2018); Pump House Gallery, London (2018); Michael Lett, Auckland (2017); daad galerie, Berlin (2016); ICA, Singapore (2016).

Spong has participated in group exhibitions at Gesso Art Space, Vienna (2018); Gertrude Contemporary, Melbourne (2018); KADIST, San Francisco (2018); Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne (2017); Adam Art Gallery, Wellington (2016). She has undertaken residencies including: Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth (2018); Gasworks, London (2016); DAAD, Berlin (2015); ISCP, New York (2008).

Corin Sworn

Corin Sworn (b. 1977, London) lives and works in Glasgow. Selected solo exhibitions have been presented at Collezione Maramotti, Reggio Emilia (2016); Oakville Galleries, Ontario (2016); Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt (2015); Whitechapel Gallery, London (2015); Langen Foundation, Neuss (2015); Inverleith House, Edinburgh (2014).

Sworn represented Scotland at The 55th Venice Biennale in 2013. She was awarded the Max Mara Art Prize for Women in 2014 and was shortlisted for the Margaret Tait Award in 2018. In 2015 she was the recipient of a Philip Leverhulme Prize.

Artists' Commissions. Credits and Acknowledgements

Nathan Coley

The Future is Inside Us, It's Not Somewhere Else, 2019

Woodblock printed wallpaper mounted on five aluminium lightboxes.

Variable dimensions | Courtesy of the artist

Parliament Hall, 11 Parliament Square, Edinburgh, EH1 1RQ

Commissioned by Edinburgh Art Festival.

Supported by the Scottish Government's Festivals Expo Fund and Baillie Gifford investment managers. With kind permission of the Lord President of the Court of Session and the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service, and additional support from Zuber & Cie.

The artist wishes to thank: Gavin Coley, Abacus Modelmakers, Zuber & Cie, Louis Guy, Dumbreck Decorators Ltd, Alien & Daughters, FX Signs Ltd, Alex Garthwaite.

Alfredo Jaar

I Can't Go On, I'll Go On, 2016/2019

Neon (3m x 3m, unique) and performance.

Courtesy of Edinburgh Art Festival, Edinburgh, and the artist, New York

West College Street, Edinburgh EH8 9YL

Commissioned by Edinburgh Art Festival.

Supported by the Scottish Government's Festivals Expo Fund, EventScotland and British Council Scotland. With additional support from David Narro Associates and kind permission of National Museums Scotland.

Rosalind Nashashibi

Part One: Where there is a joyous mood,

there a comrade will appear to share a glass of wine, 2018

Part Two: The moon nearly at the full. The team horse goes astray, 2019

Digital transfer from 16mm film | Duration: 45.28 mins

Courtesy of the artist

Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Modern One, 75 Belford Road, Edinburgh EH4 3DR

Commissioned by Edinburgh Art Festival with Foksal Art Foundation, Vienna Secession, Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, Seville and National Galleries of Scotland.

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Sriwhana Spong

castle-crystal, 2019

Mixed media installation, with 16mm transferred to HD, HD video colour, sound

Sound composition and design: Claire Duncan

Institut français d'Ecosse, West Parliament Square, Edinburgh EH1 1RF

St Bernard's Well, Water of Leith, Saunders Street, Edinburgh EH3 6TS

Commissioned by Edinburgh Art Festival with Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki.

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Corin Sworn

Habits of Assembly, 2019

Mixed media installation | Courtesy of the artist

Sculpture Court, Edinburgh College of Art, 74 Lauriston Place, Edinburgh EH3 9DF

Commissioned by Edinburgh Art Festival.

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ALFREDO JAAR
ROSALIND NASHASHIBI
SRIWHANA SPONG
CORIN SWORN

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