

Vanessa Billy

COLLECTIVE

Sustain, Sustain

11.10.14 – 21.12.14

Collective is pleased to present *Sustain, Sustain* an exhibition of new and existing works by artist Vanessa Billy.

Vanessa's sculptural works consider the social and industrial exploitation of natural resources. She is concerned with physical processes such as the extraction of raw materials, the production and use of energy and its immutable waste products, alongside more conceptual ideas of how these chain reactions can shape human thought and activity.

Vanessa incorporates a wide variety of forms and materials into her works, from mass-produced industrial goods at the end of their production cycle to hand-modelled objects and forms cast in bronze. This combination of different everyday transient materials and found objects is central to her approach.

Batteries and vitamin pills suspended in poured resin, a smoking oil drum, and a glass and straw ladder are some of the elements that come together in Vanessa's installation at Collective. These works expose the complex and contradictory relationship our society (driven by innovation and scientific research) has towards the environment.

Vanessa Billy was born in 1978 in Geneva. She is based in Zurich and has exhibited nationally and internationally. *Sustain, Sustain* is her first solo exhibition in Scotland.

Vanessa gained her BA Fine Art at Chelsea College of Art in 2001. Recent and forthcoming solo shows include Limoncello, London (2015); BolteLang, Zurich; Sommer & Kohl, Berlin; Piano Nobile, Geneva (all 2013); Kunsthaus Baselland, Basel, and Christina Wilson, Copenhagen (both 2011); Limoncello, London (2010); The Photographer's Gallery, London and BolteLang, Zurich, (both 2009), plus international group shows. Vanessa recently won the 2014 Swiss Art Award.



Vanessa Billy's *Sustain, Sustain* – Thought Through Things

Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith

A three-metre ladder made of glass leans against a wall, stray wisps of straw threaded through its hollow rungs and rails (*No Place to Fall*, 2012), while a glut of discarded light bulbs, trapped in a slender glass vessel, is buoyed by a column of muddy water (*End of days*, 2013). Meanwhile, a scattering of vitamin tablets and tiny disc-shaped batteries lay suspended in a puddle of clear resin (*Spill*, 2014) and plumes of smoke belch intermittently from a rusting oil barrel (*Empty the earth to fill the sky*, 2013). All of these recent works, scrupulously orchestrated by Vanessa Billy for her exhibition at the Collective Gallery, reflect her constructive concern with cycles of consumption and waste and the dynamics of energy and entropy. In their different, but complementary ways they underscore the obdurate materiality of the world around us and much that circulates within it, not excluding those delicate but resourceful machines-for-living we all inhabit, formed of flesh and blood. After all, ladders, light bulbs and vitamin pills have little enough in common other than their shared capacity to enhance the human body's efficiency as it goes about its business.

More often than not in Billy's work the body is invoked by such metonymic indirection, marked mostly by its absence, extensions and effects, though this is not invariably the case. Witness such surreal 'part-objects'

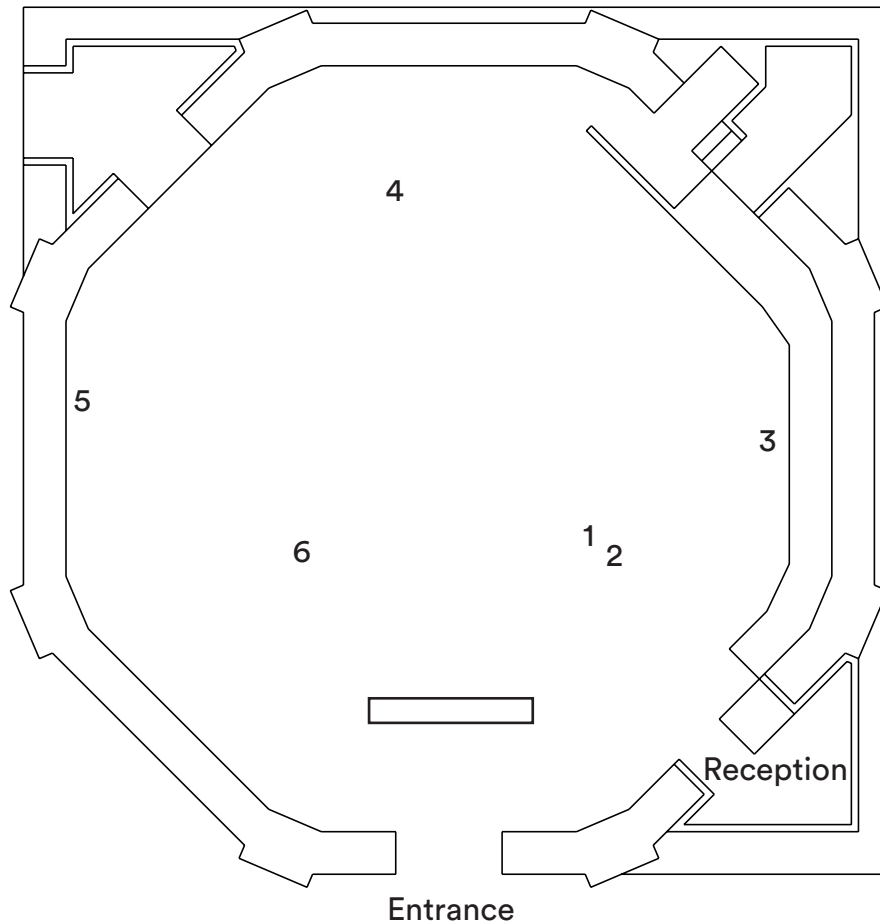
as *Above and Below*, 2014, a bronze sculpture resembling a switch of wood, tall as a human being, with a polished finger-tip sprouting from each end. Each work included in this show was selected with the particularity of the Collective's recently refurbished venue in mind, the landmark City Dome on Calton Hill, overlooking the city of Edinburgh. Designed in 1818 by William Henry Playfair, the City Observatory Complex is dedicated to the investigation of celestial bodies, burning brightly in the night-sky, whose light is transmitted to us across vast stretches of time and space. What better accommodation for an ensemble of works that conspire to suggest *inter alia* that the observable universe, the planet we occupy, and our built environment might all equally be figured as analogues of the human body, i.e. as marvelously complex, largely self-regulating systems, which are nonetheless susceptible to damage, subject to decay and fated to eventual demise? That said, Billy's work as a whole smacks less of a disheartening fatalism than of that mixture of systematic curiosity and inventiveness that once fuelled the Scottish Enlightenment of Playfair's day. This is in spite of her sculptures' generally downbeat titles not to mention the irony, on this occasion, of incorporating into a building devoted to the prosthetic augmentation of our powers of observation.

Her work is also, however, consistent with the preoccupation among some influential thinkers of our day with what might, on the contrary, be described as *things' view of us*. At a moment when philosophers like Quentin Meillassoux

are addressing the problem of how to describe the world as it is prior to human access, what he terms the 'ancestral realm' of pre-human reality, the notable recurrence of rocks and water within Billy's *oeuvre* may serve as a reminder that there is much on this planet that predates the existence upon it of sentient beings. An emblematic work here is the sculpture from which her exhibition's duplicate title derives, *Sustain*, 2014, composed of electric cables and functioning light bulbs that combine to bear the weight of a lump of primordial rock suspended at chest level. (This sculpture also supplies a bright, vital riposte to the turbid obsolescence suggested by *End of days*.) It is by no means accidental that the City Observatory Complex houses one of the earliest deep rock thermometers, whose purpose is to take the Earth's temperature, or that Calton Hill provides a spectacular view of Salisbury Crags, one of the rock formations that inspired James Hutton, the Scottish Enlightenment thinker known as the 'Father of Modern Geology', to develop the concept of deep time. In a lecture to the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1785 Hutton remarked that 'with respect to human observation, this world has neither a beginning nor an end.' It remains a resonant statement from a man who has been described as possessing 'an instinctive ability to reverse physical processes, to read landscape backwards, as it were.' Previous commentators on Billy's work have tended to cite a suggestive comment she made some years ago that her art works are intended to allow her to 'think through things'. On Calton Hill she may well have found the perfect site for this pursuit.

Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith is a critic and occasional curator who teaches Irish language and literature at University College Dublin. In addition to his writings on literature his many publications on contemporary art include essays on the work of Lutz Bacher, Thomas Demand, Ceal Floyer, Douglas Gordon, Susan Philipsz, John Stezaker and James Welling. He is a contributor to *Afterall*, *Artforum*, *Frieze*, *Parkett* and *Tate Etc*. He has curated exhibitions in Dublin, London, Amsterdam and New York and was a juror for the 2005 Turner Prize.

Floor Plan



Sustain, Sustain

1. *Sustain*, light bulbs, electric cables, rock, 2014.
2. *Spill*, resin, batteries, vitamins, 2014.
3. *No Place to Fall*, glass, straw, 2012.
4. *Empty the earth to fill the sky*, oil barrel, smoke machine on timer, 2013.
5. *Above and Below*, bronze, 2014.
6. *End of days*, glass, water, mud, used light bulbs, 2013.

Collective is a contemporary visual arts organisation that delivers an exciting and ambitious programme of new exhibitions, commissions and projects.

Collective was established in 1984 to support new and emergent artists and exhibit their work in Edinburgh. Now Collective commissions new work by artists who are at a pivotal stage in their development.

Over the next two years, Collective will be making the City Observatory complex its new home, opening the whole site to the public for the first time, placing contemporary art in the heart of Edinburgh.