PRESS RELEASE

TEST SITES: ASSEMBLY
Thursday 22 March – Saturday 12 May 2018
Open Thursday – Saturday, 12 – 6pm, admission free
Preview: Wednesday 21 March, 6:30 – 8:30pm

Arts Catalyst presents Test Sites: Assembly, an exhibition of work-in-progress by artists Neal White and Ruth Levene, and co-inquiry asking how we can respond collectively to social and environmental challenges.

People from art, science, academia, activism and various communities are invited to come together to explore methodologies for developing cross-disciplinary research and building community resilience. The Assembly simultaneously introduces and opens up Test Sites, Arts Catalyst’s ongoing programme of environmental co-inquiries around the UK.

The major challenges facing us today intertwine environmental, social, political and psychological factors. Flooding, species loss, pollution, and complex health issues like diabetes, mental illness and cancer, interweave large-scale global forces with the small-scale and the personal, and are inextricable from the social and political systems in which they unfold. Realising that empirical science on its own is not enough faced with these complex systems, many scientists and thinkers are calling for transdisciplinary approaches and for fresh thinking about conducting science and research in new ways. Critically, we need to involve those whose lives are directly affected – not just make assumptions about the causes, the impact, and what might be the best paths towards resistance and resilience.
The term Assembly indicates the intentionality of the programme, that is, to gather tactics, practices and theory to create “commoning tools”, creating social and cooperative alternatives for co-producing knowledge and taking control. Through workshops, study days, field trips, reading groups, talks and discussions, it will examine, practice and discuss possible approaches to ecology and society that centre on collaboration and co-creating knowledge, highlighting radical and progressive practices from the UK and internationally.

An exhibition of works-in-progress by Test Sites artists Ruth Levene and Neal White will be shown at Arts Catalyst’s King’s Cross-based Centre, drawing on their research in the Calder Valley and Poole Harbour. Ruth Levene presents Working Waters, an installation of maps and models created from her investigations into the flows and stewardship of water in the Calder Valley. Neal White meanwhile presents Brownsea: An Imaginary Island (An Island of the Imaginary), comprising a vivarium containing fauna and flora of an island in Poole Harbour alongside an archive of local knowledge, interrupted by industrial frequencies.

The programme will introduce and focus on issues, concepts and methodologies in a format that blurs the divides between expert and non-expert, those who make decisions and those who are affected by them. It will explore a set of approaches that include active citizenship, planetary commoning practices, co-inquiry processes, and collective governance and policy making, as well as making tactical use of concepts such as the negative commons (defined below).

Confirmed programme participants include architect Godofredo Pereira, complexity scientist Sylvia Nagl, social anthropologist Megan Clinch, public science expert Tom Wakeford, interactive theatre company Coney, and artists Ruth Levene and Neal White.

Events will be announced soon via the Arts Catalyst website (artscatalyst.org).

KEY TERMS

**Active Citizenship** - a philosophy that people have a responsibility to their society and the environment that encourages participation in local communities and democracy at all levels. We extend this to participation in research and environmental monitoring.

**Planetary Commoning Practices** - tactical actions towards asserting, enabling, connecting and networking local commoning practices relating to the use or stewardship of common-pool resources within transnational and extraterritorial spaces and natural resource domains, such as the atmosphere, biodiversity, the Arctic, the electromagnetic spectrum, outer space, the lithosphere, and the oceans (Triscott, 2017).

**Co-inquiry Processes** - Arts Catalyst has been developing a curatorial model of critical and transdisciplinary co-inquiry. The key principles of our model include focusing the inquiry on a shared “matter of concern”, the intentional co-production of knowledge - including artistic, scientific and situated - that is context-specific, and fostering an ecology practices that is sensitive to how particular practices relate to and impact on other practices.
**Collective Governance and Policy Making** - aimed at shifting the balance of power away from the regimes of commerce and strategic interests that seek to enclose the commons, and instead towards networked grassroots movements working for increased equity and environmental justice.

**Negative Commons** - the waste of capitalism’s operation, such as debt, epidemics, industrial wastes, and pollution including radiation, which becomes the burden of society once it is of no further value to commerce (Kohso, 2012).

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Notes to Editors:

1) **Test Sites** is Arts Catalyst’s series of inquiries into matters of concern relating to environmental issues, such as flooding, pollution, and species loss, and their impact on local culture and the health of ecosystems and communities. At each site, local people and groups are invited to be part of art-centred co-inquiries, working with artists, scientists and other experts. From 2017-2019, Arts Catalyst is focusing its research in three chosen sites: the Calder Valley (Yorkshire), Poole Harbour/Brownsea Island (Dorset), and King’s Cross (London), working with artists Ruth Levene and Neal White, artist group Coney, medical anthropologist Megan Clinch and marine biologist Rick Stafford among many others. The Test Sites programme represents a significant step in Arts Catalyst’s curatorial model of transdisciplinary co-inquiry. The aim of this model is to foster an ecology of practices, in which artists, curators, scientists, specialist experts and people with situated knowledge come together to co-produce knowledge around a shared matter of concern. Arts Catalyst commissions and produces cross-disciplinary art and research. The Arts Catalyst Centre is a hub for our work, nationally and internationally, where we can develop new projects and co-inquiries connecting local interests with wider planetary issues.

2) **Ruth Levene** is an artist based in Sheffield, Yorkshire working in video, performance, events, digital drawings, walks, installations and participatory work. Curious and concerned by the complex systems we live by, she is currently exploring water systems, farming and market driven developments of the countryside. Recent projects have included a research residency in the Faculty of Engineering, University of Sheffield, engaging with engineers about urban water systems; and A Field of Wheat with Anne-Marie Culhane, a 42-person strong collective and a Lincolnshire farmer, growing a 22-acre field of wheat. She is currently completing a collaborative work alongside Ian Nesbitt entitled Precarious Landscapes commissioned by In Certain Places. Recent exhibitions include Everything Flows at the Millennium Gallery, Sheffield and Formations, curated by Site Gallery as part of Abandon Normal Devices Festival, Castleton. Ruth was known by her nickname Bob Levene until 2015.

3) For over 20 years, **Neal White**’s work has critically explored art in relation to new ideas, forms and technologies. As part of many collaborative endeavours – he has been developing projects, research and artworks, publications, archives, fieldworks, critical excursions as bus tours and exhibitions with academics, architects and activists. His current work explores situated practices and knowledge - drawing together environmental and ecological matters of concern with marine biologists, ecologists, coders, architects and volunteers in Poole Harbour and Brownsea Island, Dorset for Test Sites. Neal White is a Professor at University of Westminster, where he also directs the Centre for Research and Education in Arts and Media (CREAM), a UK leader in research in art, design and media.

**Test Sites** is supported by Wellcome Trust, University of Westminster, Bournemouth University, Canal and River Trust, and Arts Council England.