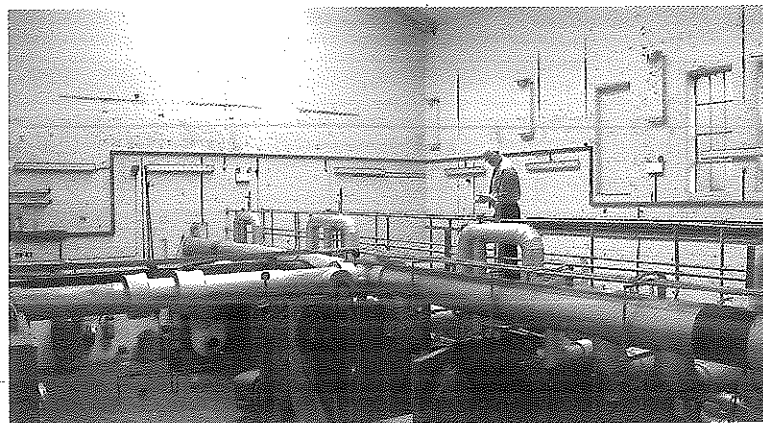


# Una Knox



*When what becomes who* 2009

*4 and a half feet to the left, behind me* 2011

In the mid-century notes that became his final work, *On Certainty*, Ludwig Wittgenstein goes to work on a 1939 paper by fellow analytic philosopher GE Moore, 'Proof of an External World', in which Moore claimed to know that his hand exists. A workable picture of reality, Wittgenstein argues, depends on not asking, when someone says 'I know...'; how one knows that one knows – and launching thereby into infinite recursion. 'The truth of certain empirical propositions belongs to our frame of reference,' he writes. Arguing over fundamentals has to stop somewhere or nothing will get done, and much of our discourse accordingly operates within consensual language-games and depends on shared but more or less manufactured worldviews. Strip away such a near-pragmatist approach to epistemology, though, and you find yourself falling through limitless trapdoors in Una Knox's world.

The Vancouver-born, London-based Goldsmiths graduate's happily prolix 11-minute video *When what becomes who*, 2009 – featured in that year's *New Contemporaries* – starts *in medias res*. Two technicians in the 'Preparation Department' of a museum trundle around in the institution's elevators, traversing space vertically rather than horizontally: which, it appears, unlatches their habitual conceptions of reality. While shifting crates and empty plexiglas vitrines, they turn inward, engaging sociably in big-picture philosophical jousting. We catch them as their semi-improvised discourse arrives at the possible origin of the creative moment. One argues that it began with man, but the other impatiently tosses in a *verboten* root-cause tickler: 'how is it that we conceive of thinking?'

From there, allowing that all such discussion is filtered through language, the pair pass through essentialist definitions of what it means

to be human, the disjuncture between words and their meanings, how the latter precede the former and how, relatedly, the meaning of the world arises in – is made by – human thought. Creativity, perhaps, is thinking the world into being. Additional to the caveats above, *When what becomes who* is full of abrupt cuts that signpost the compressing of a larger discourse, and it doesn't conclude as such speculations cannot: to quote Jonathan Lethem's recent neat summation of the traditional stumbling block for students of consciousness, 'the flashlight is incapable of shining on itself, so we can't trust what its light reveals'. As the film ends, one interlocutor is mocking the other for having arrived at a Kantian, Enlightenment-style personification of a creative force that also owes something to Dr Seuss. And yet, within Knox's systemic relativism, the idea that the world we know is the sum of our subjective interpretations feels, paradoxically, something like truth – if necessarily a relative one.

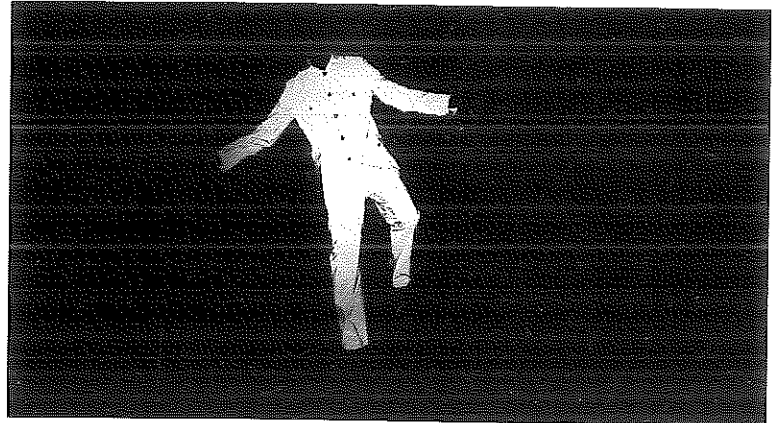
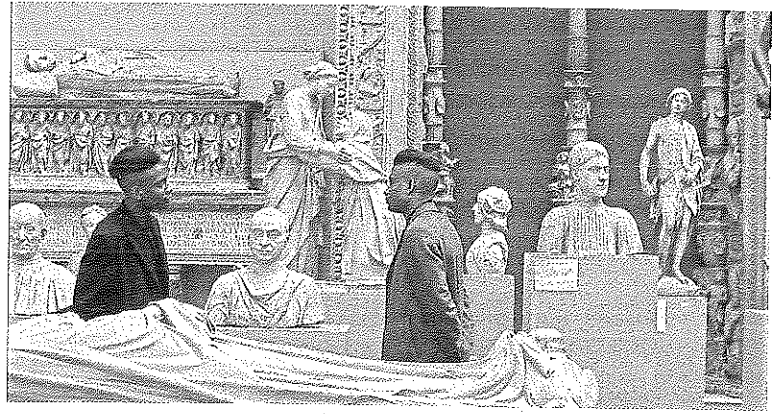
Museums are a recurrent motif for her. Condensing the immutable external world, they are storehouses of fixed entities that continually meet opinions and interpretations – that, indeed, are sustained by the commerce of estimation around them. This is literalised in *Never odd or even*, 2012, a series of three photographs using the trichrome process which separates wavelengths of light onto individual negatives. Maintaining the separation across multiple prints, Knox figures museum visitors as colourful transitory ghosts amid immutable artefacts. For her, this revealed layering is analogous to the museum's geologic stacking of temporalities; it also feels apposite for the intangible accretion of thoughts onto their contents. The nine-minute video *4 and a half feet to the left, behind me*, 2011, shown last year in a two-person show at Cell in London and more recently at Wysing Arts Centre in Cambridge, stars Steve Woodhouse, an archive manager at a London museum storage facility where he catalogues images (in a neat link back to *Never odd or even*, he speaks at one point of a group of photos that all, inexplicably, contained a ghostly image of a top-hatted man). But Woodhouse also suffers from temporal lobe epilepsy, experiencing episodes of *déjà vu* that herald seizures. The capacious and mazy storage building he moves through, recounting his experiences in voiceover, doubles for his chambered, treacherous mind – distorting his sense of time and yet, in the passing moment, the only consciousness he can know. If the archive serves a double purpose, literal and metaphorical, Woodhouse himself is also a double figure.

He also works as a professional actor and, speaking in a slightly theatrical fashion, effectively plays himself here.

Doubles and doppelgänger populate Knox's work. In *A kind of correspondence*, 2010, an 11-minute video that she has written, explores 'the moment when two things which appear to be the same become unique', nattily dressed black twins wander through a museum of plaster-cast copies. As with *When what becomes who*, the architecture seemingly dictates the drift of the conversation. But the brothers don't discuss the duplicitous exhibits. They talk about music: whether George Harrison or John Lennon was the better Beatle, which is the greatest Rolling Stones album (*Exile on Main Street? No: 'It's all about Sticky Fingers'*.) Beginning by quoting song titles in a harmonious way, their conversation fissures as they root in the cultural past. One twin remembers something the other has forgotten, the other comes to a set of conclusions that the first disagrees with. They link up again, then split apart like dividing cells. (One asserts that Lennon and his son had a psychic bond, that Sean would feel John's depression. The other isn't sure about that.) *A kind of correspondence* is predicated, clearly, on sameness and difference, externalising into two people a splitting that could play out in one: as when one's false consciousness – if falsity is a meaningful concept under such circumstances – acts against you.

That is also an implicit theme of the eight-minute *Tell me what they call you*, 2010, made on a residency in China, in which a character appears wearing a traditional Chinese suit cut from light-reflective material. Here the spotlight does literally shine. In a blacked-out room it shines on the suit, which becomes fragmentarily and then fully illuminated, making the figure a bright, evanescent presence – like the museumgoers in Knox's photographs – while a voiceover commands the assuming of certain poses, from those of statues to those of Buster Keaton, and engagement with certain props. This work emerged out of Knox's specific feeling of being out of place in China, her confusion over the slipperiness of power dynamics there, her attempts to fit in and to find apposite body language since she didn't speak Mandarin. The traditional five-button, high-collared Chinese suit, she says, has been a changeable cipher for generations of Chinese: once traditional peasant clothing, it has also been adopted, albeit in black, by China's pop-star elite.

This multifariousness – the singular, again, vertiginously subdividing – is redoubled by Knox's lightly domineering, disembodied voiceover and peremptory 'change pose now' finger clicking, which determine the moves by this miming, occasionally stumbling mannequin of light. And this, if we are to return to philosophical speculations, opens onto the thorny question of free



will. Are we, though we appear single, actually plural? Do determinist doubles inside ourselves – not necessarily sympathetic ones – guide our actions? We cannot know and, if we think we do, we cannot be sure. This is a central part of the epistemic anxiety coursing through Knox's art. In *On Certainty* Wittgenstein writes: 'I should like to say: "If I am wrong about *this*, I have no guarantee that anything I say is true." But others won't say that about me, nor will I say it about other people.' For addressing what artificial foundations we need in order to live, we have such philosophy. For what it might mean to peek behind *Weltanschauung* to how things conceivably are – or to glimpse the impossibility of doing so – we have art like Knox's. ■

*A kind of correspondence* 2010

*Tell me what they call you* 2010

Una Knox is showing in *How Art Things* at Nest, the Hague 9 September to 4 November.

MARTIN HERBERT is a critic and writer based in Tunbridge Wells.

<p><b>John Hansard Gallery</b></p> <p>John Hansard Gallery University of Southampton Tuesday to Friday 11–5pm Saturday 11–4pm</p> <p>John Hansard Gallery Central 9 Civic Centre Road, Southampton Tuesday to Saturday 11am–6pm</p> <p>Level 4 Gallery, Hartley Library University of Southampton Monday to Sunday 9am–midnight</p> <p>www.hansardgallery.org.uk</p> <p>twitter f</p>	<p><b>Main Gallery</b></p> <p><b>Rona Lee:</b> <b>That Oceanic Feeling</b> 28 August – 13 October 2012</p> <p>A John Hansard Gallery exhibition supported by Arts Council England Grants for the Arts and University of Wolverhampton</p>	<p><b>Off-site</b></p> <p><b>Hetain Patel:</b> <b>Love and Marriage</b> Until 13 October 2012 John Hansard Gallery Central</p> <p>Commissioned by the John Hansard Gallery as part of Art at the Heart, in association with Bollywood Baraat</p>	<p><b>Meanwhile II</b></p> <p>Susan Collis   Oona Culley Daniel Eatock   Cadi Froehlich Janne Malmros   Trevor H. Smith Until 16 September 2012 Level 4 Gallery, Hartley Library University of Southampton</p>
<p>UNIVERSITY OF Southampton   ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND   UNIVERSITY OF WOLVERHAMPTON   ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND   art asia   art at the heart</p>			