

## Conversation between Ian Jackson and Helen Pheby April-September 2022

**Ian Jackson** is an artist based in Leeds. Ian studied Foundation at Leeds College of Art and Design followed by B.A. Intermedia at Edinburgh College of Art.

Ian's work combines video, drawing, personal writing and sculpture to 'follow' dislocated objects/materials. His work is about building on these collected materials, researching and finding ways to unpick their specific languages and processes. Works often involve collaborations across disciplines with other artists, researchers and specialist makers to unravel the different physical shifts, cultural changes, personal decisions and boundaries that materials can become signifiers of over time.

More information on recent projects and documentation of works can be found at: [www.irjackson.co.uk](http://www.irjackson.co.uk)

**Helen Pheby** is a Yorkshire-born and based curator. Her particular interest is in supporting opportunities for talent to thrive, recognising that such opportunities are not equal. She is Associate Director, Programme, at Yorkshire Sculpture Park – an international centre for the creation, display and appreciation of modern and contemporary art. She is Co-Investigator in an AHRC-funded research project (2022-25) initiated by the Centre for Applied Human Rights at the University of York, considering whether 'the arts can save human rights?'

Her YSP Projects include Katrina Palmer *The Coffin Jump*, Fiona Banner *Wp Wp Wp*, Annie Morris *When a Happy Thing Falls* and Rachel Kneebone *399 Days*. Her offsite projects include *A Place in Time* at the NIROX Sculpture Foundation in the UNESCO Cradle of Humankind, South Africa, and co-curating the London Selfridges Art Block (2018-22).



**HP: Artists approach making art in different ways. For example, some artists draw an idea and fabricate it, or outsource the fabrication. Others work with the material itself, the form suggested by each interaction. What would you describe your approach as?**

**IJ:** I'm always wary of trying to come up with a single way for making art. I don't want to figure it out then be penned in by my own solution, if that makes sense? Different projects suggest different processes and approaches. I don't want to just have one way of working. I think what I'm looking for in my artwork is balance. I don't trust my ideas as much as I do things that I arrive at, happen upon or come across. I need things that come from outside of my own internal logic, challenge my own ideas, temper my taste and make me ask questions.

My work often starts with a collection of materials or objects that hold some kind of personal significance, but that also have potential for change, displaying a kind of wiggle room or transferability that means that they can become signifiers for bigger ideas and investigations. The work I make is about 'following' these collected materials and finding ways to unpick and explore their specific languages and processes. The collections I have chosen dictate the type of work I make, the materials I use and the skills I use to make it.

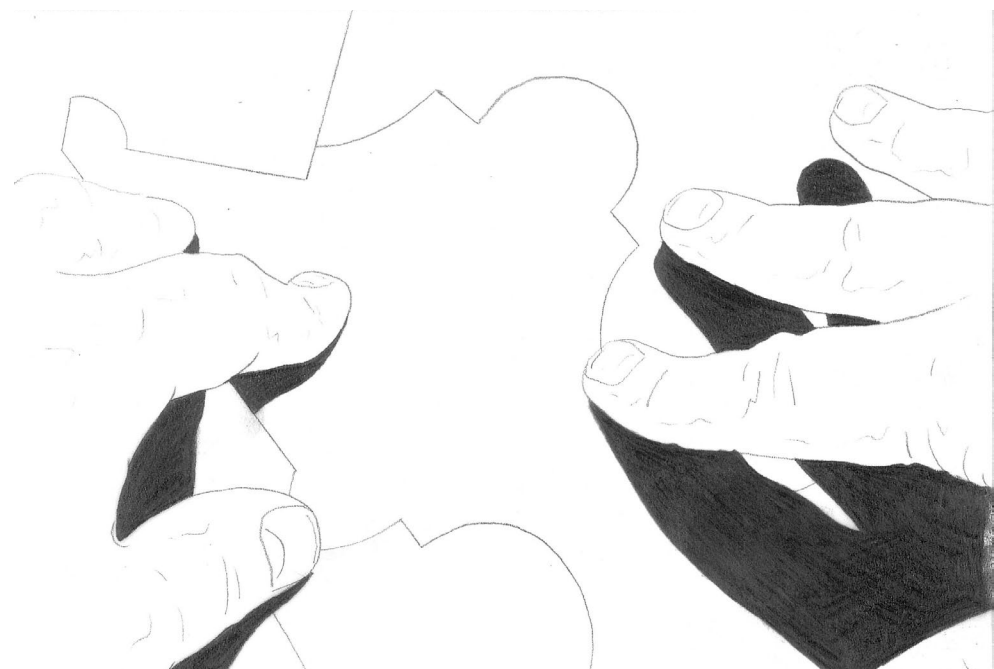
I prefer to be hands on and involved in the making process. I really enjoy solving problems and making things. I would rather follow a material, discover its uses, history and potential than try to make an idea and focus too much on reaching a singular end goal.

I've had artworks fabricated in the past and enjoyed the process (some people can do things far better than I can and it's a pleasure to see specialist processes unfold). But I personally started to notice that my fabricated works were also the lines of enquiry that ended abruptly. I like loose ends rather than neatly wrapped up outcomes. Sometimes the objective distance you get from having something fabricated means your ideas don't always progress with the work. You end up stretching an idea too thin or the whole process just doesn't translate and loses its integrity and intensity, shifting away from the thing you were really transfixed by in the first place.

I've found that if I get work fabricated by someone else, I can also end up with things that look like art. It's rare that a new language or way of working/making is developed. I think you need to be a very good communicator and find someone you trust to develop new ways of working with fabrication/craft/industry (also having a lot of money/support can help). The economy of involving others in the making process makes it harder to take risks and make mistakes. I still find it hard to retain a sensibility that is personal and specific to art production and not get caught up in the language of other makers.

Over the past few years, I've tried to display/present my making and thinking processes more by including video, personal writings and drawings alongside objects in an attempt to give viewers multiple alternative ways to approach and engage with my artwork and wider research/thinking. I'm still trying to figure out how to balance all these things so that when they come together in an exhibition space, one element doesn't overpower the other and they each work together to build a wider world around materials and divulge more of the process that informs me making artwork. Including moving image and writing was a big step for me and something I worry about a lot. I don't want to just make statements or explain my work too much. You need to leave room for viewers to get something of their own from a work, but without a way in, art objects can be effacing and hard to draw from when people are coming in cold. It's easy to say too much and kill it, but saying too little can just be an easy way out. Including writing and moving image has already opened up conversations and collaborations with other artists, makers, writers, an architect and video editors. It seems a productive and generative way of working, but balancing it is hard.





**HP: Can you talk me through one of your projects to illustrate that?**

**IJ:** One of my recent bodies of work explores zinc metal used in the process of historic building restoration. In 2021, I started using basic hand tools to cut and recreate zinc architectural profiles used by stonemasons in the restoration of York Minster. The Minster is continually being rendered in 1:1 scale drawings by a master mason. These drawings are made into zinc templates that are used by stonemasons, providing the correct geometries needed when recreating each damaged stone. In storage, these templates are hung up on nails. Layered with other profiles, and equipment, they overlap, join and start forming new shapes.

These zinc templates bridge drawing, objects and architecture. They are drawing tools and blueprints all in one. The materials I work with inform my approach, for example when I'm working with metal I'm actually thinking and problem solving in metal. How do you come up with an appropriate solution if you don't know the material? This kind of hands-on learning and material exploration often leads to me developing my own tools and ways of working. I think developing my own sensibility is an important step that moves the work forward and distances the material from its original source/context.

Masons use copper sulphate to etch notes, write key information and code each of the zinc templates directly on the metal form. This series uses direct research imagery to produce a series of 1:1 scale combined zinc etching plates that mirror the profiles in storage and emphasise the generative potential this kind of drawing tool holds.

This body of work came together in *Material Matters*, a group exhibition at Sunny bank Mills gallery, Leeds. The zinc works were displayed bolted to six structural I-beams in the gallery space alongside a portrait mounted TV bolted and displayed in the same way.

**HP: Bringing in other people, specialisms, points of view is an important aspect of your work isn't it. How much are you thinking about the experience of the work once it is made?**

**IJ:** I collaborated with another artist/filmmaker in the exhibition to make an accompanying moving image work, which incorporated an animated text titled *Making Something That Fits*, describing the process of me making the work punctuated by a series of hand-drawn pencil animations of my hand working the zinc. I really enjoy the conversations that come from involving other specialists and artists in my work.

I think a lot about how series of work can sit in relation to each other. In *Material Matters*, the work opened up as you moved around the space and the text appeared slowly as if read out on screen. Occasionally, it would be interrupted by the quick animations so there was an interesting pace to the work. You would get glimpses and have to look again and re-walk around the space to review a different part of the work. The work provided a subtle disruption to what the viewer expected.

This kind of work isn't big or dramatic, but I think this way of working is meaningful and has integrity. It was my first exhibition after lockdown and it made me realise how important seeing my work together alongside others in a physical space is. It really changes the way it is read. This was the first time I think I almost got the balance of object, moving image and writing right too.



**HP: I appreciate that time is a crucial aspect of your practice.**

**IJ:** In the last few years, I have become less interested in making ‘finished’ things that wrap up and might be packaged as a singular idea. I want to make things that are part of a larger process, could help me produce further works, learn skills or be recycled into bigger systems to extend the life of the work beyond a gallery exhibition. I got tired of making things that used up materials in an uneconomical way and then just took up space. This is a big problem when making physical work.

My work following the London Plane tree is developing into a body of work entitled *Falling From Together*, which tracks and explores the processes behind the purchase and milling of a London Plane tree felled from St. James’s Park. As a tree in a public park this material blends into its surroundings but once felled, cut through and through into slabs and stacked to be used as seating it becomes more awkward and visible. The truncated tree is not quite raw material and not something that is made, it is stuck between states – a generative object, to be left dormant and drying, waiting to reach full potential. Once dry, this material can then disappear again into objects – a table, chair, another artwork. It is still useful. It has not been used up or its potential exhausted. It’s part of a bigger more long-winded process.

Considering a work’s life before and after it’s shown to a public audience was an important step forward for me. I think more discussion needs to be had around the life of artworks and what it means to show and involve an audience in these wider process, which usually go unseen. I think there are more interesting ways to deal with objects rather than trying to uphold ideas of value held in preservation and keeping things the same.

**IJ: You said to me previously that people on average look at art in a gallery context for less than 60 seconds, so why make work in this setting?**

**HP:** That’s a very good question and one I’ve been wrangling with throughout my career curating object-based exhibitions. I do feel it’s a question that has become even more relevant in a digital and distraction age. By which I mean that companies are actively seeking our attention more than our money – the CEO of Netflix when asked said that his company’s major competitors were YouTube and sleep, for example. We are being manipulated by quick click dopamine hits. That said, for me, it makes encountering a rare, possibly unique, physical artwork in real life even more important and significant. Perhaps what’s key is how that experience is encouraged, mediated, but not necessarily explained. As the Yorkshire-born art critic Herbert Read believed, each artwork is unique to the person encountering it depending on their experience up until that moment. The artist Tony Cragg speaks incredibly powerfully about the importance of sculpture in the world, of it as a resistance to the mass-produced, the ubiquitous, the IKEA.

**IJ: Do you think there has been a change in the way people are making and thinking about artwork because of this? Do artists have to be quicker, more responsive and prolific now? Is simple better? Do things have to be neatly wrapped up?**

**HP:** Perhaps in a capitalist society people are conditioned to think in terms of product rather than process? The thrill of unboxing something that you know exactly what it is, what it will look like, what it will do. That fulfils the promise of the advertising, packaging and brand. The ideas, problem solving, innovation and failure that led to that product on the shelf is most often unseen and not public. But doesn’t that make art even more necessary?

**IJ: What keeps people looking and why?**

**HP:** Another good question, perhaps when it doesn’t read as we subconsciously expect it to. When something is a bit ‘off’, the usual view disrupted but you can’t pin down why. But also, curiosity, intrigue, precisely because it takes longer than a blink to comprehend it.



**IJ: Is there an artwork you think has gotten better with time or has changed your opinion of it? Are there any artworks that you see on a daily basis and how is this experience different?**

**HP:** It's the same answer for both, though if I think about it next week it might be something entirely different. I have the enormous privilege of having spent most of my adult life seeing work by Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth on a daily basis – Hepworth in my senior school and in Wakefield city centre and both of course at YSP. There's a danger in that familiarity that you don't really look, or enquire, but also that as a kid I assumed every school and city centre had the same. I grew to understand the specialness and how rare that was. And then of course having the huge privilege of learning more about both artists and their work through initially visiting, then volunteering at, and ultimately being recruited by YSP. To talk to the artists' families for example, to visit their studios. All of this has led to a deeper appreciation and fascination for both artists' work, not least their commitment to showing work in the open air, an echo of prehistoric menhirs and standing stones. They really do look different every day. As Hepworth said they seem to breathe.

**IJ: Do you think art should know its context and audience before it is made or find it after the fact?**

**HP:** It depends on the nature of the artwork and artist intention perhaps. Some artworks are complete in their own right, which isn't a criticism of those that aren't. Like a sphere, metaphorically speaking, they complete themselves. Others are intentionally dependent or activated by situation, by place, by people.

**IJ:** I think this can be tricky because a lot of the time as a maker you get held accountable by the medium you choose, your own situation and the work you put in at the start of a process to get to a place where something interesting can happen later. Often the most defining point of a work in fact comes later, when you can identify the potential for something interesting to happen. I often reach a point of no return and risk all that groundwork to do something irreversible. This scary risk is what pushes a work into new territory. An example of this could be deciding to dunk a metal work in an etching bath, cutting something in two on a circular saw, involving someone else in a process or altering a work to make its display site specific.

**HP:** That leap into the unknown is a defining aspect of your work perhaps?

**HP: Your current line of enquiry is into the vein of magnesium limestone that is like the spine of Britain, running from Nottingham to County Durham, exploring how this unique stone is, and has been, used for generations.**

**IJ:** Yes, recent work focusses on a geological vein of Limestone running from South Shields to Nottingham. This stone has shaped infrastructure and industry in the North, but is also rooted in local landscapes, personal histories and has been used in prominent monuments and buildings such as York Minster. I'm exploring the world around this material, unravelling the processes behind this stone's pervasive use, displacement and re-use in the hands of the public. Part of this new process involves a kind of road trip filming at key sites along this geological vein collaborating with rock climbers, walkers, stonemasons, dry stone wallers and geologists to explore this material.

**HP: Would you say that the process is absolutely part of the work, not just what might be seen as the finished article?**

**IJ:** Yes, and no, I think there will always be a biography around a work's creation that viewers just don't need to know – the fact that I slipped in a cave a few weeks ago and now have a scar on my left knee isn't vital to the work. Also, there will be facts and information that a viewer can choose to engage with or not and still appreciate the work either way. But I think bringing in key moments and elements of the processes into an artwork in a balanced way can just help people get to the interesting parts of the work (the stuff I'm interested in past surface level observations). Some people can pull these lines of inquiry out of objects quickly, but not everyone can. I think people get a lot out of a seeing/ hearing things happening instead of just looking at polished end results.



**IJ: I have noticed more exhibitions of contemporary art being curated alongside historical collections. This is another way to build a world around a work. What do you think about this, how do you tease themes or key conversations out of objects?**

**HP:** This is an area of curation that really appeals to me because it helps to understand the place art and making has had in people's lives throughout time. For example, I had the great privilege of curating an exhibition at a partner sculpture park, NIROX, in the UNESCO Cradle of Humankind in South Africa. I was able to borrow and show work from the Wits University collection, including several-million-year old tools made by ancestors of modern humans alongside contemporary artworks. One of the best exhibitions I've seen, from my point of view, was curated by Maya Binkin at Newland House Gallery which presented work by Julian Opie alongside pieces from his own collection including ancient Egyptian and Roman portraits.

**IJ: What is it like to have an artist come to you with a body of research/work/ideas. We have had a few conversations now and a studio visit. What helps you get into a person's headspace. Have you been drawn to anything in my work, is anything different to what you originally thought?**

**HP:** I think I first encountered your work during the open call for commissions for a private collection during 2020 and there was something that resonated with what I find interesting – about materiality, process, but also a poetry (if that's the right word ) about the use of stone from York Minster and what that has borne witness to over centuries. That intangible layering of the physical with other meanings whether shared or individual. Since we have met a few times and talked about your work I'm further struck by the depth of it and, from a curatorial point of view I suppose, how to make that genuinely accessible, in the sense of people giving it the attention and consideration it deserves.

**IJ: What do you think both artists and curators need to do more of/get better at?**

**HP:** There's an aspect to the curatorial / artist relationship that doesn't sit well with me which is, necessarily, I can help to create or reject opportunities for practitioners. There are always more brilliant artists and artworks than, for example, availability in the YSP Programme. And then there is a degree of editorial control that curators usually hold within an artistic project. That said I'm really keen to create and support artistic talent, especially in the North, and to find ways to do that beyond what's possible just through programming exhibitions or projects.