

FIGURE



conversation with **RACHEAL CROWTHER**
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Headquarters II, Framed digital scan on fine art archival paper,
177 × 129 cm, 2023.

ANGELA BLANC

in conversation with **RACHEAL CROWTHER**

AB

Your artistic approach mirrors that of an investigator; through installations composed of found objects or replicas, you evoke past community spaces, environments and buildings directly impacted by austerity where profit takes precedence over people. Maybe we could start with your background. How did you want to become an artist?

RT

I was born in Dublin. My mum became pregnant with me at sixteen. In Catholic Ireland, abortion was illegal at the time. She faced a lot of prejudice having a child so young so decided to move to Manchester. She enrolled onto a BA degree at Manchester Metropolitan University studying Design for Communication Media. We lived in a council flat, she would often do her course work from home, asking me to draw and write over the top of photographs she'd taken. The child-like finish I would add under her instruction jux-



taposed the stark images she'd created using screen-print and photography. I really recall these images, particularly the tone of them and I think subconsciously it has shaped parts of my work today. Her work was very personal, drawing from her own experience. Often exploring the hardships she'd faced due to the socio-economic background we'd come from and of course being a single teenage mother. Today I see my practice operating in two lanes; one which is also personal and draws from my own lived experiences and the other is operating in a broader societal lens, which relies on research and histories.

Growing up, I was interested in art, but I favoured history. I wanted to be an archaeologist for most of my early years. My interest later shifted when I started studying Photography. I went on to do my BA degree in Fine Art at Goldsmiths University of London.

After graduating and a long hiatus of working in retail, I started working in secondary schools and pupil referral units. Following that I worked in supported accommodation for young women who were facing homelessness. Most recently before joining the Royal Academy of Arts, I worked as a caseworker for the Integrated Gangs Team, closely supporting young women who were involved in or effected by gangs and serious youth violence. I loved this job but it was extremely intense, I worked throughout Covid and I started to experience frequent burnouts. I felt I needed to slow down and maybe carve something out for myself. It was difficult to maintain an art practice outside of working and a studio wasn't feasible. Much of my work existed in mediums that didn't rely on space. Photography, writing, moving image, things which could exist without a dependency of storage, things that



could be recorded in the moment, this gave the work a snapshot quality, I was always interested in this idea of capturing, particularly a ‘feeling’.

I decided to apply to the RA and I couldn’t believe it when I was awarded a place! I’m now in my final year, it’s had its challenges, but I am grateful to have had the opportunity and support to make the work that I potentially wouldn’t have been able to make otherwise.

AB

These experiences inform the work you’re making. Your exhibition “Qualified to Care” (2022), at Ginny on Frederick, London, delves into the decline of the United Kingdom care system. The display includes a LED ‘Pharmacy’ sign with a film playing inside the cross and a brochure holder exhibiting images of an abandoned space. This space, a centre for adults with learning disabilities in Peckham, was captured on its final day before demolition. As you guide us through the empty space and abandoned objects, they seem to act as silent witnesses to the community life there—an archaeology of the present. Can you give us more insight into the process behind this work?

RC

I first became aware of the centre as I lived nearby and saw petitions advocating for its preservation before its demolition in 2018. The erosion of important services such as day centres for the disabled had been affected by governmental budget cuts since 2012. I had noticed hoarding go up around the building and then the Global Guardians insignia—a company profiting on facilitating residency in vacant properties which are due to be demolished or refurbished. A friend of mine was already living in other Global Guardian properties and was moved into the day centre; coexisting with the previous service users’ and staff belongings which had been left in the building.

This created a surreal juxtaposition of objects, lives, and people that shouldn’t have been



“Qualified to Care”, Exhibition view, Ginny on Frederick, London, United Kingdom, 2022.



“Qualified to Care”, Exhibition view, Ginny on Frederick, London, United Kingdom, 2022.

in the same space. He lived in the centre for about three months until it was demolished. As the demolition approached, different company logos who would be working on the demolition started to pop up like territorial pissings. It made me reflect on the various stakeholders in this situation, exploring the hierarchy of those who occupy, buy, and control space.

In the hours leading up to the demolition, I visited the centre to film each room, capturing its final moments and documenting everything left behind—from adult nappies and medical equipment to toys and remnants of parties hosted by the temporary tenants. The space felt like it had experienced a mass exodus due to the urgency of the eviction of its original inhabitants; it's disheartening to see the land still empty today. While walking through, a constant sound of a slowing alarm echoed in the building, a recording of which I integrated into the space at Ginny on Frederick. The atmosphere was eerie and emotionally heavy.

I held onto the footage without a specific plan until I joined the RA. While at a reclamation yard, I discovered a pharmacy sign which worked but its surface showed some scars from being outside for a long period of time. Reprogramming it became like an investigation involving contacting a lot of different manufacturers. Eventually, I accessed the software needed to reprogramme it. It was a lengthier process than I'd intended. When I figured out how to input video, the cross became like a portal leading to a space within a space. I knew then it would work to use the footage from the day centre, creating a portal to a space which no longer existed.

What drew me to Ginny on Frederick was that its space kept its former identity, it kept the





“Qualified to Care”, Exhibition view, Ginny on Frederick, London, United Kingdom, 2022.



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original sandwich shop signage, and the entire room was tiled inside, a lingering ghost of its past. Much of my work explores the city as a site of layered erasure and overwriting, making it significant to showcase this work in a space like Ginny.

AB I'm curious to know why you choose a brochure holder to present your pictures.

RC When I took those photos it was a bit rushed as I shouldn't have been there. It was no longer residential and was being handed over to construction workers and DDS—a company specialising in demolition. All the photographs were taken on my phone so they have a raw snapshot quality to them, I had a much older model of iPhone too so the quality isn't great either, but that wasn't important to me. Given that Ginny is such a small space I didn't want to overwhelm it, but I also felt that it was important to include the images somehow. I decided a pamphlet or zine booklet would be the best way to showcase them. You often see these metal wire rack pamphlet holders in doctors' waiting rooms or youth centres, a familiar style in some of the spaces I've encountered or worked in. It made sense to present it this way.

AB Your focus on the psychological and social aspects of places, especially abandoned ones, ties in with what you mentioned about London's buildings erased histories. This reminds me of your exploration of Counterfeit Street in Manchester in your essay *The Eternal Pursuit of the Unattainable* (Montez Press, 2023), and it brings up thoughts of your exhibition "Managed Decline" presented at 243 Luz, Margate, in 2023.

RC "Managed Decline" (2023) is composed of four door covers that replicate the door covers one would find on various post-war housing estates across the UK which have been decanted and are



“Managed to Decline”, Exhibition view, 243 Luz, Margate, United Kingdom, 2023.
Photographer: Ollie Harrop.

due to be demolished. These inexpensive ‘security solutions’ seal off hundreds of former homes, preventing squatters from entering. Usually, Sitex would be used in a situation such as this. Sitex is a stylized security screen, a machine perforated zinc-coated steel panel. Due to the copious amount of former homes and the government’s frugality; this led to the use of scrap steel sheets being welded together, creating these haunting patchwork barricades. When I first witnessed rows of hundreds of these door covers, the experience was claustrophobic, frightening, upsetting, and violent, there was a pervasive smell of rust in the air as the steel began to eat itself.

AB

When we see the work, we’re caught up in its materiality and details, from the rust to the carved numbers on the doors, which create—or recreate—a sinister situation, reminiscent of the images in “Qualified to Care” (2023). How do you navigate presenting those complex realities?

RC

I have documented spaces on the brink of demolition. I never document the people who have occupied them. I am very mindful of what I present, honouring anonymity. I am mindful of this, drawing from my own experience as I’ve had the unique perspective of being both a service user and an employee. My work remains purposefully absent of the body, absent of people. Instead, there is a focus on the abject, the environment, the buildings and the causality of degradation, loss and failure.

In the press release for “Managed Decline” (2023), Ed Leeson captures something that resonates with me deeply: “*The notion of ‘revitalisation’ is inseparable from the violence and hostility of displacement, that which often occurs under, what Rosalyn Deutsche calls, the inscrutable whims of an invisible hand.*” This concept



“Managed to Decline”, Exhibition view, 243 Luz, Margate, United Kingdom, 2023.
Photographer: Ollie Harrop.

of the invisible hand manifests in various forms, particularly in the bureaucratic delivery of care and the complex dynamics of determining who or what is deserving of care by a given distributor. I've observed those who have the power to take it all away and those who are complicit in the erosion of livelihood. This has been an underlying current throughout my work as I have been data in such systems, I have worked under such systems. I aim to mirror the psychosocial dysfunction within these systems throughout my work.

AB

A coffee machine, an LED 'pharmacy sign', ten pharmaceutical wall clocks... It feels like these objects enter your life organically. You're not actively seeking them.

RC

The sites I've used in my work I didn't intentionally seek out. I found them through connections with people in my life. I would say I am a naturally investigative person, intuitive and explorative which means I am super aware of my surroundings, so this benefits me when it comes to noticing the overlooked. Similarly, I accumulate objects psychically. Sometimes I will find something and recognise its potency but have no plan for it in that moment, but something in me knows that I should hold on to it, knowing it will play a part in the future. Some objects may stay with me for years before finding their final form, like the footage from the day centre taken in 2018, it was not shown until 2022 through the pharmacy cross.

Although, my studio is eerily empty, clean, and uncluttered. I'd feel overwhelmed if all my objects were on display simultaneously. I keep only what I'm currently working on in that moment, and once a piece is resolved, I remove it. I don't need to see it anymore.

AB

I like how you use "resolved" to talk about the comple-



'113', Door cover made using repurposed steel, 105 × 215 cm, 2023.
Photographer: Ollie Harrop.



'113' (detail), Door cover made using repurposed steel, 105 × 215 cm, 2023.
Photographer: Ollie Harrop.

tion of a work. It really points how your artistic process is akin to an investigation. What is currently kept in your studio that you are seeking to resolve?

RC Currently, my studio has not much in there except a lot of scent materials.

AB Scent materials recall your essay, *The Eternal Pursuit of the Unattainable*, in which you reflect on the psychological nuances and social class implications of perfume. The narrative starts with the tragic incident in England in 2018, where a woman lost her life after being exposed to a fake perfume bottle containing a deadly chemical. Your essay explores the symbolic connections between poison, perfume, and societal aspirations, using examples like Dior's Poison and Hypnotic Poison. What sparked your interest in working with scent, and researching into the perfume industry?

RC I've wanted to work with scent for years; it felt like a natural progression for me. Scent is an invisible signal; you know when something is gone off by how it smells, when something is infected, when you are nervous, sweating, scent is seen as truth. Yet we desire to mask naturally occurring scents with synthetic ones. I'm truly fascinated by perfume and its history. In my essay *The Eternal Pursuit of the Unattainable* I start to look at examples of the engineered aspirations within perfume via material and advertising. I also look at poisonings which have occurred using perfume, the lucrative sales of counterfeit perfume and the class hierarchies within perfume. I'd be interested in expanding this essay in the future as there was so much more I wanted to include and discuss but I only had a month to write it!

AB Do you create the scents yourself, or do you collaborate with perfumers?

RC I initially reached out to a few classically trained perfumers, but their expertise was more in crafting wearable perfumes. Whereas I was slightly

but I was interested in being like the other girls at school. I didn't want to stand out or to be shamed for not having what everyone else had. Every girl had a bottle (or at least lied about having a bottle) of *Glow*. I too would lie about having a bottle of *Glow*: instead, I had an inexpensive body spray from Asda. 13-year-old me was worlds away from J Lo's intentions for the scent: "I wanted *Glow* to be fresh & clean, but still sexy & sensual – something that feels like you just came out of the shower & are the sexiest person in the world."⁵



Glow was the best-selling celebrity fragrance of its time: it made \$300million in its first year in 2002. *Glow* paved the way for the saturated celebrity fragrance market which followed. *Heiress* by Paris Hilton, *Heat* by Beyonce, *Fantasy* by Britney Spears, *Beyond* by David Beckham, *Legend* by Muhammed Ali, *Girlfriend* by Justin Bieber, *Fame* by Lady Gaga, *Controversial* by Jade Goody, *Success* by Donald Trump (just to name a few).



as WhatsApp, Signal & other encrypted messaging apps. TikTok pages promoting new stock would cyclically be removed for breaching community guidelines, but always find ways to return, like perennial weeds. The demand was high & showed no signs of slowing down. Until November 2022, when Greater Manchester Police implemented *Operation Vulcan*. This would be a multi-agency attack on *Counterfeit Street*.

"*Operation Vulcan* is following the Government strategy of clear, hold, build – through which officers are methodically clearing the area of criminal activity, the next phase is to hold it so other criminal gangs cannot get a foot-hold & ultimately building it into a prosperous area once more where people are proud to live & work."



10

more interested in making a scent that wouldn't necessarily be worn, more how scent could function in a space as an invisible architecture. I came across Clara Weale, a self-taught Perfumer and Scent Designer in Glasgow who founded A Library of Olfactive Material, an open-access resource for scent education and experimentation. I took a short course with her in scent building. She's amazing and has taught me so much!

During one of her experimental scent courses, she had us smell cadaverine, the scent released by the body when it dies. It is used to train cadaver dogs. It was strange as before smelling it I was expecting to smell something truly horrific and it was certainly horrible, but I remember being alarmed at how sterile it smelt. Smelling something sterile, which hadn't been affected by the outside world made me think about how revealing scent can be. It is indicative of the conditions in which one lives. It is well known that Cadaverine also resembles the scent of sperm. There is a French perfume brand called Etat libre d'orange who have a perfume, Secretions Magnifiques designed to mimic the scent of sperm, sweat, saliva, and blood. It interested me that cadaverine could emulate the smell of both life and death. That being said, I won't be using it personally!

Another exercise which sticks out is the very first activity we did with Clara; she had us smell rose absolute, obviously we knew what that was. Then we added geosmin which smells like damp soil and suddenly the rose was in the ground, then we added cis three hexanol which smells like cut-grass and suddenly the rose became so vividly part of an environment. This really opened up my mind in terms of scents capacity and power.

AB This reminds me of a work by Morgan Courtois, a French

influenced by various cultural & folkloric elements. In the United States, Dutch settlers brought the tradition of “Sinterklaas”, their version of St. Nicholas, to New Amsterdam (now New York) in the 17th century. The name “Sinterklaas” gradually evolved into “Santa Claus.”

The commercialized iteration of Santa Claus we see today has become a conduit for economic interest. Imbued in conspicuous consumption, the image of Santa has been harnessed as a marketing tool designed to stimulate consumer spending & deftly capitalise on the tradition of gift-giving.

There has always been an intrinsic link between gift-giving & perfume.

Last Christmas alone, *The Perfume Shop* sold 1.8 million bottles between 28th November – 24th December 2022.¹⁶ One of its bestsellers being *Poison* by Dior.

POISON IS MY POTION



In 1985, luxury fashion house Dior released *Poison*.

Why would anyone name a perfume *Poison*? Maybe in hopes that a perverse name would be noticed and prove intriguing, as it had for such scents as *Opium* and *Obsession*.

“If someone says to you, ‘Would you like to smell poison?’ You’re interested because everyone wants to know what poison smells like.”

– William Slater, Senior Vice President of Christian Dior US (1986).¹⁷

artist who collaborated with a perfumer to craft a fragrance named *Fond de sac*. The fragrance aimed to recreate a man's olfactory experience during his journey from Paris to the South of France. It begins with scents reminiscent of the Seine, tobacco, and urban environments, and concludes with the aromas of fresh grass and earth. It's fascinating how the olfactory aspect adds a temporal and spatial dimension to the overall experience.

RC

I've assembled my own olfactive library with just over sixty different scents. Currently, I'm experimenting to see which combinations work best. As you mentioned, some scents only linger for seconds, whilst other can last for hours. Balance really is key; everything is extremely volatile. I have a dispenser from a company that manufacture scent dispensers for theme parks and 4D cinemas. It has the capacity to fill quite a big space. I'm hoping to incorporate a scent in my degree show.

AB

Recently, you presented a piece as part of Arcadia Missa Open Office x 243 Luz, titled *Meantime between Failures* (2023). It featured a coffee machine with both Serco and Kenco branding. I know Serco as the private landlord subcontracted by the UK Home Office, which created scandal for evicting hundreds of asylum seekers through inhuman tactics such as changing locks on the properties. Kenco is a British brand of instant coffee. Can you tell us more about this work?

RC

Serco secures contracts with governments, providing services in defence, justice, immigration, healthcare, and the military. Originally a UK subsidiary of the Radio Corporation of America (RCA Services), it began as a radio technology company after World War I. During World War II, due to its engineering expertise, RCA Services was contracted by the British War Office to supply equipment simulating the sounds of warfare for deceptive purposes. In 1985, RCA



Mean time between failure, Serco[®] coffee vending machine, 160 × 70 × 66 cm, 2023.
 Photographer: Harry Mitchell.



Mean time between failure, Serco[®] coffee vending machine, 160 × 70 × 66 cm, 2023.
Photographer: Harry Mitchell.

Services underwent a buyout, rebranding itself as Serco, an abbreviation for “services company”. A few years ago, they faced a lot of backlash and controversy around an electronic tagging scandal they were charging the government way more than they should have, tracking electronic tags of dead people or people who had already been released from prison. Even though they were sued for millions of pounds, in 2022, they signed another ten-year contract with the government to continue its services with the prisoner escort and electronic tagging.

I first encountered Serco through my job at the integrated Gangs Team. Serco holds the contract for prisoner escort and custody services across the South of England. Serco’s presence is visible through its vans transporting prisoners between different prisons. The company privately manages six UK prisons and owns three immigration removal centres. Encountering its branding in the midst of its controversies felt surreal.

The vending machine was probably installed in a waiting area or a precursor to a visitation space of a building ran by Serco. When I encountered it, the bizarre layering of the Serco and Kenco branding immediately grabbed my attention. Serco and Kenco share a visually elliptical quality. The association with Serco places us within the realms of surveillance systems, privatization, outsourced government contracts, and institutional authority. On the other hand, the Kenco advert claims to “make a real difference with every cup”. The Kenco endorsement recalls coffee’s associative relationship with one’s ability to work for longer periods of time.

The title, “Meantime between Failures”,



Mean time between failure, Serco[®] coffee vending machine, 160 × 70 × 66 cm, 2023.
Photographer: Harry Mitchell.



1	3	5
2	4	6

1. PROGRAM ENTRY
2. PAPER FEED
3. FLUSH
4. BREWER FLUSH
5. VIEW COUNTERS
- SERVICE

7	9	11
8	10	12

7. CUP TEST
8. SYRUP PRIME 1
9. PARK HEAD
10. SYRUP PRIME 2
11. COUNTER RESET
12. SYRUP PRIME 3

IN THE EVENT OF
FREEZING REFER TO
USER MANUAL

 **WARNING**
Disconnect the
mains supply before
removing this cover

PAT / PAC TESTING
BEFORE ANY ELECTRICAL TESTS
ARE CARRIED OUT, ENSURE ALL
M.P.U. BOARD CONNECTIONS ARE
DISCONNECTED INCLUDING THE
EARTH STRAP

is a metric used in the field of reliability engineering, and it calculates the average time between system breakdowns. This term resonated with me, evoking the phenomenon of burnout linked to chronic workplace stress.

AB I initially thought you intentionally added the Serco brand logo to the coffee machine.

RC Oh, no, it's a found object.

AB That makes the situation even more ominous.

RC Yeah, it's an authentic one I acquired in a public auction.

AB Considering it's featured in pictures for the online exhibition, do you see the object as a sculpture to be presented in the show? Also, we've seen images of the machine both opened, revealing its inner workings, and closed, prominently featuring the Serco name. How does this duality contribute to the narrative?

RC The vending machine itself is fully functional. It works, but in order to run it needs to be plumbed into the water supply of the building it's in. I'm drawn to this dependency of the functionality of the object. As an object itself; it's almost on the verge of obsolescence. This specific type of vending machine is of a certain time; it utilises convenience, perhaps where it was stationed was far away from cafes and shops.

I would like to show this work functioning in a space, for that to happen the door of the machine would have to be closed. I saw an opportunity in displaying the work online as it enabled me to show it both open and closed. It was important for me to get detailed shots of the inner workings of the machine, revealing the hidden mechanical labour.

AB Another interesting aspect of your work is that it's often exhibited in unconventional spaces, such as Ginny on Frederick, a former sandwich shop, and "Best Before" (2023), an installation of twelve pharmaceutical wall



“Best Before”, Exhibition view, Espace Louise, Brussels, Belgium, 2023.
Photographer: Racheal Crowther.



“Best Before”, Exhibition view, Espace Louise, Brussels, Belgium, 2023.
Photographer: Racheal Crowther.

clocks in an abandoned area within a shopping mall in Brussels...

RC

I enjoy showing work in interesting spaces, spaces loaded with their own histories. Only ever displaying on white walls feels very prescribed and lacks the transformative quality of an intervention. Locations like these present challenges as well as opportunities to augment the work in unexpected ways. This excites me. Yet on the other hand, some works do require the silence of a white walled, isolated space.

AB

Connecting to your earlier discussion about the public's experience with the doors in "Managed Decline" (2023), where some felt discomfort or claustrophobia, it seems that you're interested in provoking strong emotional responses. And the layers of history within those abandoned places create an intense, eerie, and ambiguous atmosphere.

RC

I chose to display the clocks in a relatively small room, and sonically, you could hear the ticking of each clock. But since they were all set to different times, it created a disjointed, surreal yet subtle intervention. Being alone in the room was quite disconcerting, with the incessant ticking.

The idea for the work came to me whilst waiting for a prescription at my local pharmacy. I noticed a bizarre promotional clock for Sertraline with hands shaped like sunshines. This led me to research pharmaceutical clocks manufactured for promotional purposes. I ended up acquiring 15 of them, mainly from the 80s and 90s, a time when advertising infiltrated homes through objects like clocks, pens, mugs, etc. I draw parallels between this work and the Serco vending machine, the battle of the brands in terms of who occupies space and who can afford to occupy the most space.



“Best Before”, Exhibition view, Espace Louise, Brussels, Belgium, 2023.
Photographer: Racheal Crowther.



“Managed to Decline”, Exhibition view, Margate, United Kingdom, 2023.
Photographer: Ollie Harrop.

Racheal Crowther, Figure Figure 2024
Courtesy of the artist

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