



Title

Katrina Palmer: What's Already Going On

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About the author(s)

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Cover image:

Katrina Palmer: What's Already Going On

by Anneka French • 22.02.2023

In her multidisciplinary, text-based practice, Katrina Palmer (b.1967) grapples with evocative subjects. Absences, openings and the body, for instance, surface in *End Matter* (2015), a project comprising an installation, audio tour, radio broadcast and book.¹ Commissioned by Artangel and BBC Radio 4, the project centres on the Isle of Portland in Dorset and explores sculptural material in relation to language, philosophy and sociopolitical geographies through a close examination of the materiality of the limestone that the location is famed for, alongside contexts of the stone's formation, extraction and subsequent use. The book *End Matter* is a (largely) fictional work and although its subject-matter is rich, it is primarily notable for its formal qualities. It is composed solely of end matter – 'Addendum', 'Epilogue', 'Colophon' and 'Acknowledgements' – thereby foregrounding aspects that are typically peripheral. The book is described as being 'presented – like the stone itself – as absences from the narrative; end matter, whose body is missing'.²

Similarly, *What's Already Going On* at the Mead Gallery, Warwick Arts Centre, which is part of the University of Warwick, focuses on the structural and institutional frameworks of the university to explore absences and openings. The exhibition relates to Palmer's previous teaching role and office there, where some of the work was made. She focuses on the parameters of the institution, in particular a corridor within the Department of Philosophy. Indeed, corridors and offices are significant in the exhibition, with spaces constructed from board and timber, creating a division between an ostensible 'backstage' [FIG.1](#) and a central 'void' [FIG.2](#). Doors with differently weighted hinge mechanisms operate as invitations to explore the separate but connected spaces, sometimes opening easily and other times resisting; the visitor must push into the exhibition. This is evident not only in the physical exertion required to open some of the doors, but also in the obstructions that are found behind them, such as a shelving unit that blocks entry to the space beyond. It is simultaneously disconcerting, amusing and claustrophobic. Although the construction is simple in form and material, it is also maze-like, by turns offering routes of perambulation and denying them. Palmer explains that 'one of the drivers for the show [is] the question of whether we can act freely or whether we are channelled along certain paths through the external conditions that shape us, by conforming to stereotyped behaviour, or by internalised resistances and limiting assumptions'.



Fig. 1 Installation view of *Katrina Palmer: What's Already Going On* at Mead Gallery, Warwick Arts Centre, 2023. (Photograph Ed Florance).

This sense of denial or refusal comes to the fore at the end of the exhibition, in which a large space containing tables supporting eight clay sculptures can be seen only through narrow gaps in a series of horizontal slats **FIG.3** **FIG.4**. At the end of the corridors, large photographs of two of the sculptures are mounted on the wall, in a move that shifts the planes and dimensions of the clay, arguably rendering them as inaccessible as the 'real' ones behind the slats. That said, it is the production of the clay objects **FIG.5** that is the most striking element of Palmer's exhibition; the clay is twisted and split. These forms are a result of, as the exhibition guide states, the artist's decision to '[learn] to throw knives in a university setting'. This bizarre declaration belies the fact that Palmer slept for a period of time in her university office, making works of art at night, with a knife as her tool of creation.



Fig. 2 Installation view of *Katrina Palmer: What's Already Going On* at Mead Gallery, Warwick Arts Centre, 2023. (Photograph Ed Florance).

A series of eight videos mounted on the wall towards the end of the exhibition **FIG.6** reveal something of this process, with glimpses of Palmer's hands, arms and shadow caught in the act of throwing a large knife towards head-sized lumps of clay on a shelving unit. The artist connects the knife-throwing to a range of conditions: from the frustrations of her former academic teaching job to anxieties instigated by the COVID-19 pandemic and to global issues in the recent and distant past that exist within the still-lengthening shadows of colonialist violence.⁴ There are loaded concerns regarding the gendered body at play here too. This becomes clear, for instance, in her position as a female artist making works of art without necessarily making physical objects, operating in a male-dominated field that relies on monolithic ideas of form and 'traditional' materials. The videos are predominantly monochromatic, which affords them an air of surveillance or transgression. They bear witness to the artist as she makes up a sofa bed in her office and the sounds of her breathing and a metal bottle being opened and closed. Such banal noises reverberate around much of the gallery, interspersed with the less-familiar thud of a knife entering a mound of clay at speed.

Along the 'back' of one of Palmer's constructed 'walls', a series of drawings made with marker pen on ruled A4 paper are tacked to long blackboards **FIG.7**. At first glance, the pages recall memos on noticeboards – of the kind commonly found in universities and other places of work. These line drawings contain no text, however, and explore the frame and format of the paper and its printed lines **FIG.8**. Palmer's drawings, minimal by any standard, parallel the linear constructions of the exhibition's corridors and the slatted viewing windows, as well as speculating on the linear pathways taken by the viewer in navigating the display. The drawn lines can

also be understood in reference to the pathways made by the thrown knives, while at the same time resembling preparatory sketches for works of art unseen. More widely, they revert back to the broad themes of the exhibition in asking interrelated questions of routes, constraints and resistance on the one hand, and absences and openings on the other.



Fig. 3 Installation view of *Katrina Palmer: What's Already Going On* at Mead Gallery, Warwick Arts Centre, 2023. (Photograph Ed Florance).

An accompanying publication, provocatively titled *Black Slit*, published by Book Works in their third collaboration with Palmer, is not composed of text. Instead it reproduces the drawings on paper from the exhibition and some of the stills from the video installation.⁵ 'A story unfolds but it's more like a visual essay or graphic novel', she explains.⁶ Palmer admits that she is not presently in a 'headspace' for writing.⁷ This exhibition therefore marks a departure for her. Words or the lack of them, however, remain central to *What's Already Going On*, as the exhibition nudges at the limits and failures of language and sculpture. It also moves towards the limits of buildings, notably offices and corridors, bringing out both the everyday and distinctly unsettling qualities of each.



Fig. 4 Installation view of *Katrina Palmer: What's Already Going On* at Mead Gallery, Warwick Arts Centre, 2023. (Photograph Ed Florance).



Fig. 5 *MT21WK7*, by Katrina Palmer. 2022. Unfired clay, 30 by 30 by 8cm. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Stuart Whipps; exh. Mead Gallery, Warwick Arts Centre).



Fig. 6 Installation view of *Katrina Palmer: What's Already Going On* at Mead Gallery, Warwick Arts Centre, 2023. (Photograph Ed Florance).



Fig. 7 Installation view of *Katrina Palmer: What's Already Going On* at Mead Gallery, Warwick Arts Centre, 2023. (Photograph Ed Florance).

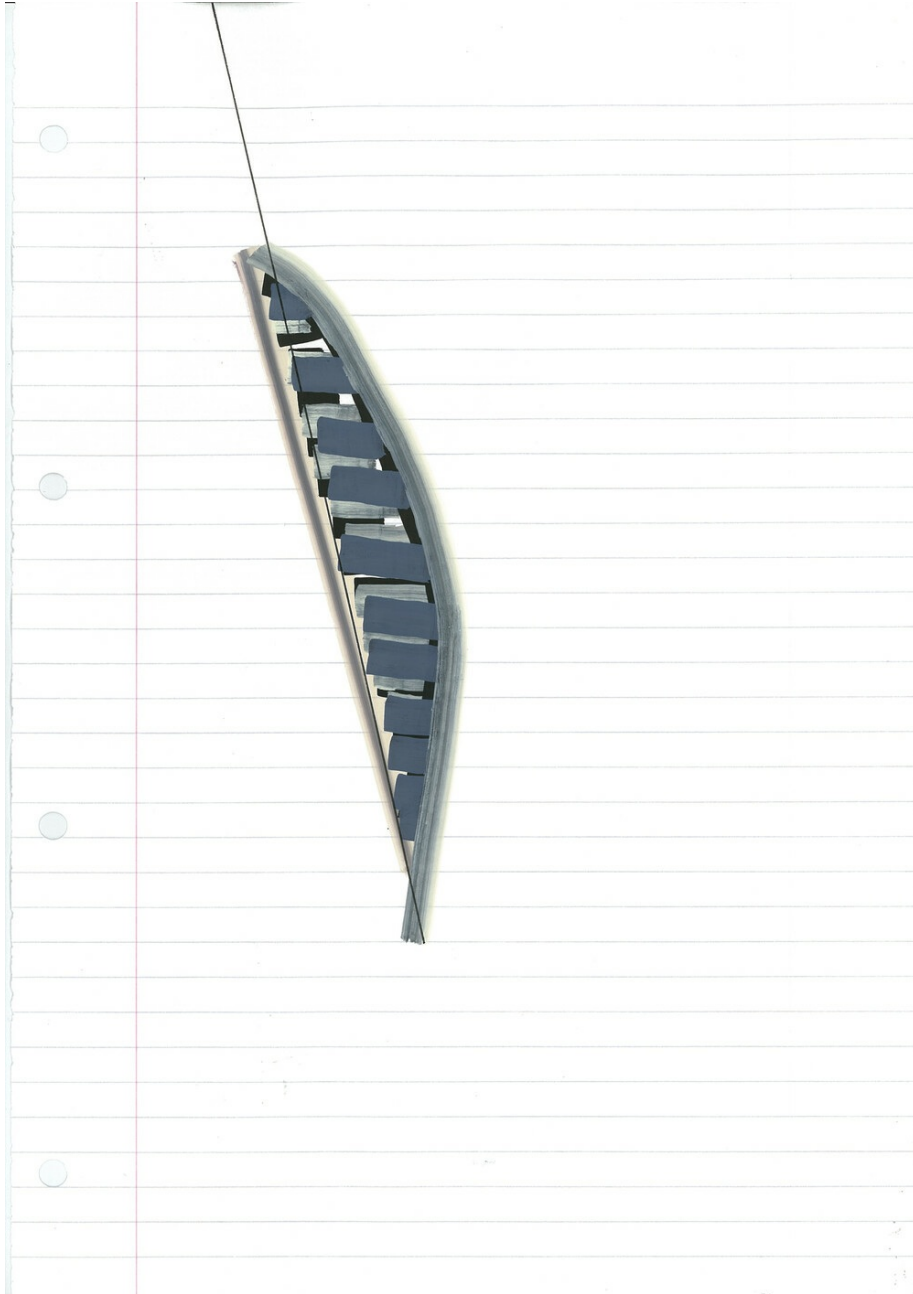


Fig. 8 070822-2, by Katrina Palmer. 2022. Marker pen on lined paper, 29.7 by 21 cm. (Courtesy the artist; exh. Mead Gallery, Warwick Arts Centre).

Exhibition details

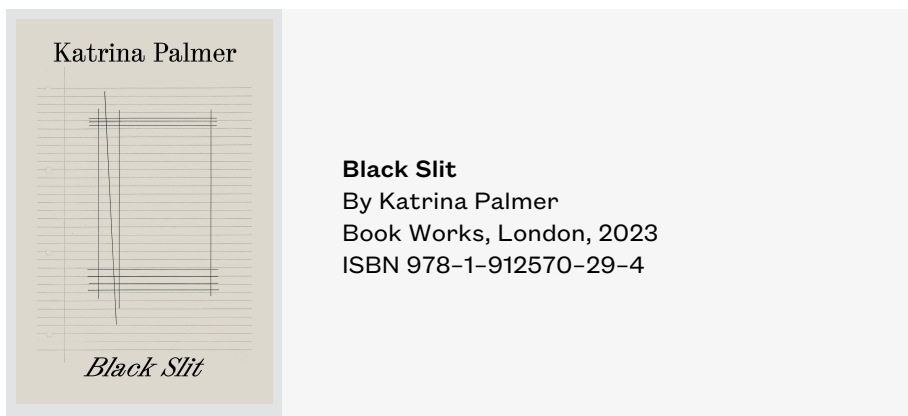
Katrina Palmer: What's Already Going O

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Mead Gallery, Warwick Arts Centre

12th January–12th March 2023

About this book



Footnotes

- 1** See K. Palmer: *End Matter*, London 2015.
- 2** “‘End Matter’: Katrina Palmer (2015)”, Book Works, available at bookworks.org.uk/publishing/shop/end-matter/, accessed 21st February 2023.
- 3** ‘Corridors of power: Katrina Palmer interviewed by Chris McCormack’, *Art Monthly* 463 (February 2023), pp.1-5, at p.1.
- 4** See *ibid.*, p.2.
- 5** Accompanying publication: *Black Slit*. By Katrina Palmer. 96 pp. incl. numerous col. ills. (Book Works, London, 2023), £15. ISBN 978-1-912570-29-4.
- 6** McCormack, *op. cit.* (note 3), p.5.
- 7** See ‘Katrina Palmer What's Already Going On exhibition’, Warwick Arts Centre, available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cez3y2RIAeU, accessed 17th February 2023.

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