



**Title**

Mike Nelson: Extinction Beckons

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Cover image:

# Mike Nelson: Extinction Beckons

by Rachel Withers • 12.04.2023

The work of Mike Nelson (b.1967) might usefully be prefaced by invoking an alternative universe – one where works of art appear unpredictably, without attribution or announcement. This might, for instance, involve the spontaneous decision to try the handle of an unremarkable door, which leads to the discovery of a room containing an ensemble of contents that are subtly strange and compelling, but also betray a kind of artifice: a dense ‘tissue of citations’ drawn from places within ‘the thousand sources of culture’, to recycle an already overly recycled phrase from Roland Barthes’s ‘The death of the author’.<sup>1</sup> This ‘tissue’ hints at narratives that are absorbing and urgent despite their vagueness or incompleteness. It also performs the contradictory task of bringing its own non-existent creator (or quoter) into being. In this universe, therefore, works of art realise a warped version of Barthes’s most famous literary proposition. Here, there really are no authors. Art is practically, as well as conceptually, autopoietic and when it appears, it tears at the surrounding fabric of the real, for real.<sup>2</sup>

This mode of self-creation is the impossible dream that haunts each of Nelson’s works, from his earliest installations of the 1990s, to the labyrinthine assemblages of the early 2000s – notably *The Coral Reef* (2000; Tate, London) and *The Deliverance and the Patience*, first realised in an old brewery at the 49th Venice Biennale in 2001 – to his recent installation *The Book of Spells (a speculative fiction)* (2021).<sup>3</sup> Recently Nelson has largely focused on more recognisably ‘sculptural’ works, such as the totemic arrangements of industrial machinery that constitute the series *The Asset Strippers* (2019), or *Untitled (public sculpture for a redundant space)* (2018); however, these also perceptibly dream the same dream.



**Fig. 1** *Solstice* from the series *The Asset Strippers*, by Mike Nelson. 2019. Hay rake, steel trestles, steel girders, sheet of steel and concrete slabs, dimensions variable. (Courtesy the artist and Hayward Gallery, London; photograph Matt Greenwood; exh. Hayward Gallery, London).

*Extinction Beckons* at the Hayward Gallery, London, a survey of Nelson's practice from the mid-1990s to the present, revives and reconfigures fifteen of his works and incorporates elements from others. It includes *The Deliverance and the Patience*, a selection of *The Asset Strippers* **FIG.1** and *Untitled (public sculpture for a redundant space)* **FIG.2**. The latter work, an algae-green sleeping bag stuffed with bricks and concrete, lies in semi-darkness at the foot of the gallery's Brutalist staircase. It simultaneously invokes the gravity of a Templar tomb and the shameful scale of homelessness in the United Kingdom. Grimly suggestive of a 'concrete overcoat', it also recalls the unsolved case of the Italian banker and alleged Mafia victim Roberto Calvi. In 1982 Calvi's corpse was found hanging from Blackfriars Bridge in London, his pockets weighted with bricks. These jarring resonances – relating to conspiracy theories, 'discredited' histories, genre fiction, deep European history and lives lived on the margins of society – are distinctively 'Nelsonian' but at the same time complicatedly site-specific. They are, therefore, a component of the work's most powerful affect: its uncanny, Borgesian, inverted 'aura' of not having been made by the person who made it.

One might protest that Nelson's work is in fact intensely 'authored'. It features a sprawling but deliberate and idiosyncratic repertoire of references: from such writers and artists as Jorge Luis Borges and Ed Kienholz to the historical discipline of Orientalism; from the Gulf Wars and Western colonialism to bikers, pirates, vagrants and the marginal and the undocumented. The work also often entails hugely laborious, time-consuming construction processes. However, a key objective of this heightened authorial effort is arguably Nelson's poietic

disappearance, the better to endow the mesh of subjects he draws from 'the thousand centres of culture' with its own uncanny life. This paradoxical goal has had consequences for the artist. The complexity and site-specificity of his major projects render them irreproducible without significant resourcing and a depletion of their affect. This has placed constraints on his professional advancement; he once described himself as having a 'ghost career'.

<sup>4</sup> Despite exhibiting at the Venice Biennale in 2001 and 2011, the Biennale of Sydney in 2002 and the São Paulo Biennial in 2004, as well as at prominent art fairs, including Frieze and Art Basel, he remained a niche figure, struggling to fund his practice and unwilling to force it into conformity via the standard processes of institutionalisation, such as mid-career retrospectives or survey exhibitions.

As the primary goals of a conventional retrospective are to review an artist's practice and secure it within the traditional authorial model, placing Nelson's work in this format clearly requires compromises. The solution arrived at by the artist and curatorial team at the Hayward is to resurrect and recombine the remnants of projects in a non-chronological configuration that foregrounds Nelson's tactic of cross-referencing his own works. Upon entering the gallery, visitors encounter the deconstructed remains of Nelson's installation for the British Pavilion in the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011, *I, IMPOSTER* FIG.3, which are displayed on factory shelves. On the floor above, a domed photographic darkroom, also recycled from *I, IMPOSTER* FIG.4 has been inserted into the 'belly' of the spectacular *Triple Bluff Canyon (the woodshed)* FIG.5, which is itself a reconstruction of Robert Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970), adrift in forty tonnes of sand. Whereas in the original *I, IMPOSTER* the photographs in the darkroom showed Istanbul's Büyük Valide Han, which initially inspired the project, in the exhibition under review they show *Triple Bluff Canyon* under construction at Modern Art Oxford in 2004.



**Fig. 2** *Untitled (public sculpture for a redundant space)*, by Mike Nelson. 2016. Sleeping bag, rubble and concrete, 50 by 180 by 70 cm. (Royal Academy of Arts, London; courtesy the artist and Hayward Gallery, London; photograph Matt Greenwood; exh. Hayward Gallery, London).

On the same floor, an unlabelled, ravaged and splintered wooden door **FIG. 6** marks the previous presence of Nelson's installation *To The Memory of H.P. Lovecraft*, which was exhibited at the Hayward in the group exhibition *Psycho Buildings: Artists Take On Architecture* (2008).<sup>5</sup> This earlier work – the forensic remains of an 'attack' on the modernist white cube made by a barely imaginable monstrosity – was itself a reworking of a 1999 installation at the Collective Gallery, Edinburgh, and was later reinvented as another installation, titled *Le Cannibale (Parody,*

*Consumption and Institutional Critique*) (2008), at Villa Arson, Nice, which was reinstalled at the Singapore Biennale in 2011. The list of reworkings and reiterations could continue. The exhibition catalogue explains this assemblage of 'bleeding chunks' as Nelson's memory palace – the artist's meditation on remembering and forgetting, myth and obsolescence.<sup>6</sup> In his catalogue essay the critic Dan Fox construes Nelson's works as 'laboratories of the obsolete [. . . where] time rusts function and rots at symbols' (p.19), and the exhibition curator Yung Ma describes them as 'expression[s] of how to recall and renew both the remembered and the forgotten' (p.11). The justification for this is clear, but its effect is to draw Nelson's project back into a conventional authorial framework – to neutralise Nelson's brilliant, quixotic effort to make works with the power to annihilate their own creator.





**Fig. 3** *I, IMPOSTOR*, by Mike Nelson. 2011. Mixed media installation, dimensions variable. (Courtesy the artist and Hayward Gallery, London; photograph Matt Greenwood; exh. Hayward Gallery, London).

Fortunately, despite this process of musealisation and memorialisation, many of the reconstituted works in the exhibition still twitch with signs of their previous, independent, autopoietic lives. *Studio Apparatus for Kunsthalle Münster – A Thematic Instalment Observing the Calendrical Celebration of its Inception: Introduction; towards a linear understanding of notoriety, power, and their interconnectedness; futurobjects (misspelt); mysterious island\* / \*see introduction / or Barothic shift* **FIG.7**, for instance, is an impenetrable matrix of rebar and steel reinforcement fabric that dominates half of the Hayward Gallery's ground floor. At the



heart of this cage-like structure are tools: workbenches, a cement mixer and an array of rubbery Halloween masks. Someone – or something – has used these masks to cast dozens of severed heads, which dangle hideously from the bars of the ‘workshop’. The ensemble has a profound capacity to disturb. The grids of minimalism, the meshes of modernist construction and the ‘future ruins’ of Smithson are contaminated by imagery that invokes extreme brutality, exploitative labour and the nightmares that haunt genre fiction and ‘discredited’ mass culture. There is nothing nostalgic or elegiac in this sculptural rubble.

Who, or what, animates this ‘studio apparatus’? Fancifully, one might suppose its maker to be something like a Crungus, the menacing digital cryptid that artificial intelligence has dredged up from the depths of the internet’s unconscious. This conceit is more apt than the ‘memory palace’ for thinking about Nelson’s ultimately non-surveyable oeuvre. The miasma of dreams, desires, paranoias and obsessions that permeates his works – the imagery of failed utopias, cults, ruins, gangs, marginal lives and artists’ attempts to unmake the systems they inhabit – has deep historic roots, but it emanates directly from the globalised, neoliberal present. Nelson, in a significant way, is simply its medium: he operates the loom, but the patterns that emerge are overdetermined by the drives, power structures, prejudices and fantasies of the present-day culture that supplies the thread.



Fig. 4 *I, IMPOSTOR*, by Mike Nelson. 2011. Mixed media installation, dimensions variable. (Courtesy the artist and Hayward Gallery, London; photograph Matt Greenwood; exh. Hayward Gallery, London).



**Fig. 5** *Triple Bluff Canyon (the woodshed)*, by Mike Nelson. 2004. Mixed media installation, dimensions variable. (Courtesy the artist and Hayward Gallery, London; photograph Matt Greenwood; exh. Hayward Gallery, London).



**Fig. 6** Detail from *To The Memory of H.P. Lovecraft*, by Mike Nelson. 1999. Mixed media installation. (Courtesy the artist and Hayward Gallery, London; photograph Matt Greenwood; exh. Hayward Gallery, London).



**Fig. 7** *Studio Apparatus for Kunsthalle Münster – A Thematic Instalment Observing the Calendrical Celebration of its Inception: Introduction; towards a linear understanding of notoriety, power, and their interconnectedness; futurobjects (misspelt); mysterious island\* / \*see introduction / or Barothic shift*, by Mike Nelson. 2014. Mixed media installation, dimensions variable. (Courtesy the artist and Hayward Gallery, London; photograph Matt Greenwood; exh. Hayward Gallery, London).

#### Exhibition details

#### Mike Nelson: Extinction Beckons

Hayward Gallery, London

22nd February–7th May 2023

#### About this book



#### **Mike Nelson: Extinction Beckons**

Hayward Gallery, London, 2023

ISBN 978-1-85332-375-1

#### Footnotes

- 1** R. Barthes: 'The death of the author' in *idem: Image Music Text*, London 1977, pp.142–49, at p.146.
- 2** Autopoiesis is a neologism coined in 1972 by the Chilean biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela to describe a system that is capable of reproducing and organising itself.
- 3** *The Book of Spells (a speculative fiction)* is on view at Matt's Gallery off-site location at 92 Webster Road, London, until 23rd April 2023.
- 4** Conversation between Mike Nelson and the present author, April 2011.
- 5** R. Rugoff, B. Dillon, J. Rendell, *et al.*: exh. cat. *Psycho Buildings: Artists Take On Architecture*, London (Hayward Gallery) 2008.
- 6** Catalogue: *Mike Nelson: Extinction Beckons*. By Mike Nelson. 240 pp. incl. numerous col. ills. (Hayward Gallery Publishing, London, 2023), £35. ISBN 978–1–85332–375–1.



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