Crossing Currents: Episode 3

An interview with Caitlin Devoy in Personal Structures

by Contemporary HUM

Published on 06.07.2024



Caitlin Devoy. Courtesy of the artist.



Caitlin Devoy, *Canons (medium pair)* (detail), 2024, silicone, resin. *BODYOBJECTS* installation view, *Personal Structures: Beyond Boundaries*, Palazzo Mora, Venice, Italy, 20 April–24 November 2024. Photo: Federico Vespignani. Courtesy of ECC.



Caitlin Devoy, *Basso Fermata*, 2024, silicone, acrylic, steel. *BODYOBJECTS* installation view, *Personal Structures: Beyond Boundaries*, Palazzo Mora, Venice, Italy, 20 April–24 November 2024. Photo: Federico Vespignani. Courtesy of ECC.



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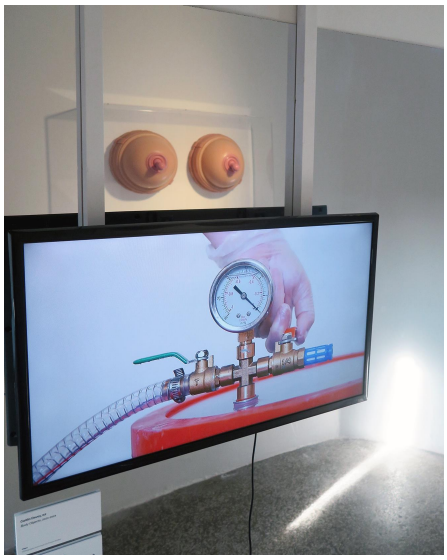
Caitlin Devoy, *BODYOBJECTS* (video still), 2024. Copyright 2024 Caitlin Devoy. All rights reserved. Courtesy of Fraser Walker and the artist.



Caitlin Devoy, *BODYOBJECTS* installation view, *Personal Structures: Beyond Boundaries*, Palazzo Mora, Venice, Italy, 20 April–24 November 2024. Photo: *Contemporary HUM*.



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This is the third of eight interviews in Crossing Currents: Aotearoa New Zealand Artists in Venice*, a podcast series produced in 2024 by* Contemporary HUM. *Listen below or wherever you get your podcasts. This is a transcript of the episode that has been edited for clarity and length.*

In April 2024 during the opening week of the 60th Venice Biennale, Co ntemporary HUM *spoke to artist Caitlin Devoy about her presentation in the 7th edition of* Personal Structures*, a biennial contemporary art exhibition organised by the European Cultural Centre (ECC) that runs parallel to the Venice Biennale. Comprising two soft, fleshy silicone sculptures and a video work,* BODYOBJECTS *is a challenge to the power relations encoded within gallery spaces. Devoy discusses the use of humour as a feminist strategy and the ways in which her works subvert the Cartesian binaries that have historically dictated art viewership, taking shape as objects that refuse disembodied objectivity in favour of tactility, subjectivity and intuition.*

CONTEMPORARY HUM Congratulations on your involvement in the show. I wondered if we could start with you talking about how you came to present in *Personal Structures*, what that process was like and how you found it.

CAITLIN DEVOY I received this really nice email one morning inviting me to be part of this show. There was a really lovely response to my work. I've been to Venice a couple of times in the past and I saw Lisa Reihana's work in the Biennale, so I was familiar with how beautiful and intense Venice is and how it is so full of people who are interested in art. So, I was really excited by the prospect of being able to show in Venice. Then, I spoke to other artists who I had heard of who had shown here. Then, I had to apply for funding, because it's not cheap, and I started working on a proposal to Creative New Zealand to be able to have this opportunity to show here. I'd love to thank Creative New Zealand for their funding, which I'm really grateful for, and also to thank Heather Galbraith, Chelsea Nichols, Gill Gatfield and Alice Tappenden for their advice and support, because it really does take a lot of support to be able to do this show.

HUM Could you describe the work, what they're made of and where they're located?

CD There are two cast silicone sculptures in display cases and a video work. The first of the sculptures is called Canons and it features a pair of cast silicone objects which are a hybrid between switches, alarms or breasts, and they're poking out of an acrylic display case with the toggle-switch-nipple components exposed. Then, there's another sculpture called *Basso Fermata*, which is a cast silicone version of a Yamaha bass recorder, in a freestanding display case. The body of the recorder snakes around inside the display case, but the mouthpiece protrudes and dangles down out of a hole in the case, [which] is a little bit like a glory hole. The third work is a video work called *BODYOBJECTS*, which was filmed in my house in Newtown, and I'd like to thank Fraser Walker for his amazing videography and music. The video work features

multiples of the silicone objects, and then there's silicone goo, which sort of comes alive, slithering over the objects. There's also a performance component from me in the video, where I dance wearing one of the objects.



Caitlin Devoy, *BODYOBJECTS* installation view, *Personal Structures: Beyond Boundaries*, Palazzo Mora, Venice, Italy, 20 April–24 November 2024. Photo: Ben Stewart. Courtesy of Creative New Zealand.



Caitlin Devoy, *BODYOBJECTS* installation view, *Personal Structures: Beyond Boundaries*, Palazzo Mora, Venice, Italy, 20 April–24 November 2024. Photo: Federico Vespignani. Courtesy of ECC.



Caitlin Devoy, *Basso Fermata*, 2024, silicone, acrylic, steel. *BODYOBJECTS* installation view, *Personal Structures: Beyond Boundaries*, Palazzo Mora, Venice, Italy, 20 April–24 November 2024. Photo: Federico Vespignani. Courtesy of ECC.

HUM The works transform everyday objects in unexpected ways, which subvert how we would normally anticipate to interact with them. What expectations or assumptions are you aiming to subvert with your work, and what role does humour play?

CD I have a similar impulse to comedians and other feminist artists towards irreverence, where I want to poke fun at and also critique some of the affectations and inequities in high art. I'm also trying to subvert the expectation that when the viewer is in the space, they are neutral and passive and invisible. An artist that I really like, Maurizio Cattelan, describes laughter as a Trojan horse and it really is; it's like a stealth approach to revealing serious concerns without being boring and didactic about it. There's a really rich history of feminist and queer artists using

humour as a form of rebellion against male power structures. Humour is sort of like the honey and the bee sting combined. I think that's why I'm drawn to it.

The reason I've used those everyday objects like recorders, switches and, in other work, boxing bags and cream canisters, is that people have a familiarity with those objects, and it's a familiarity that is visual and tactile. You recognise them when you see them, but you also have this embodied cognition, [so that] when you're looking at them, you know how it would feel to touch and toggle the switch or to put the mouthpiece to your lips. And I've played around with the materiality of the objects, so they're not made with the materials they would be in the real world. They're made out of silicone and resin, and the silicone in particular has these qualities that make it body-like: the droop, the tactility, and then also the colour of the objects that I've made. That gives them this body [-like] feel and look, so when you're in the room with the works, you're having this funny experience, reading them as the objects and also as body parts. There's a sexual kind of suggestiveness to them, which works a little bit like metaphor in poetry, where you're likening things to other things and it opens up different ways of experiencing them.

HUM This uncanny status between body and object is really palpable, so much so that people have quite visceral responses to the works. Could you speak to the range of responses that people have to these works and what kind of responses you are aiming to provoke?

CD With the works, I'm sort of placing the visual and the tactile on an equal footing, and undermining the binary hierarchy between mind and body; this Cartesian hierarchy, where vision is associated with logic, understanding and masculinity and touch is associated with the body, sensuality, emotion, perversity and femininity. I want to challenge those binaries, because they encode power.

HUM People can touch the works, right?

CD Well, there's a provocation there in the way that they're displayed because usually a display case is about protecting the artwork and keeping it away from people's grubby fingers. It's in this sort of hallowed sphere of the vitrine or the display case. The objects that I've made intentionally stick out into the space of the viewer, and, because of the material they're made from, if you move around in the space that recorder starts to jiggle a little bit. In previous shows where I've shown silicone objects, people just absolutely can't resist touching them. They look around and check that there's no security guard watching them, ready to tell them off. They want to touch them to figure out what they feel like, but also because it's a little bit naughty and a little bit cheeky.



Caitlin Devoy, *Basso Fermata* (detail), 2024, silicone, acrylic, steel. *BODYOBJECTS* installation view, *Personal Structures: Beyond Boundaries*, Palazzo Mora, Venice, Italy, 20 April–24 November 2024. Photo: Federico Vespignani. Courtesy of ECC.



Caitlin Devoy, *Basso Fermata* (detail), 2024, silicone, acrylic, steel. *BODYOBJECTS* installation view, *Personal Structures: Beyond Boundaries*, Palazzo Mora, Venice, Italy, 20 April–24 November 2024. Photo: *Contemporary HUM*.



Caitlin Devoy, *Canons (medium pair)* (detail), 2024, silicone, resin. *BODYOBJECTS* installation view, *Personal Structures: Beyond Boundaries*, Palazzo Mora, Venice, Italy, 20 April–24 November 2024. Photo: Federico Vespignani. Courtesy of ECC.

HUM There's some sort of desirability of the material; you can't resist, but you know you shouldn't, because it's an artwork and also because it looks like a sex toy, or something you shouldn't be touching in public. That's a really interesting combination.

CD [With] the *Canons* work, with the giant switches which also sort of look like breasts, the toggle switches are sticking right out of the display case, and if you read those as toggle

switches, you know that you're meant to flick them on and off. [But] then you can see that they have this rubberiness to them, and you just want to know how they're going to bounce or jiggle around.

HUM On the topic of material, would you be able to speak about the process of creating your sculptures?

CD My process involves digital modelling and stereolithographic 3D printing, alongside mould making and casting processes, which have a 7,000 year old history. So, there's that combination of the really contemporary and really ancient in my making process. I cast multiples of the objects in a prosthetic-grade silicone, which is a material that's more commonly used to produce sex toys, medical devices and prosthetics than it is to create art objects. All of those types of objects, like sex toys, have this association with the body. Silicone behaves in a really bodily way, because it droops, it flexes, it jiggles. I find silicone a really subjective and responsive material. It flows and it moves like a body in motion, and I really enjoy the unruliness and sensual qualities of the silicone. That's partly why I wanted to make that video work, *BODYOBJECTS*, because it allows the viewer this insight into my experience in playing with and working with silicone when it's in its liquid state. The gooey silicone in the video becomes this kind of animated, sensual entity that has its own energy. You see these climactic ripples of goo flowing over the objects, and that's really what it's like when I'm casting those recorders and other objects. I really enjoy it when it's in this luscious, shiny liquid state. I find it really beautiful. I know that some people find it quite gross and sticky and disgusting, but I find it really appealing.

HUM It's interesting to hear you talk about the video as representing a part of the sculptures that the sculptures themselves actually can't represent, because they've been cast, so they're no longer in that flow state. You say you have a background in dance as well. How do you see that in relation to the work?

CD I did classical ballet for 13 years, long ago. I do actually still continue to dance, but not classical ballet anymore. I think that dance background feeds and has always fit into the way that I approach sculpture. When I was doing my Masters, I realised that my way of looking at sculptures might not be the way that everybody looks at them, because I've always seen the objects, whether they're figurative or completely abstract, as stilled moments in a dance or in a movement. They're like these moments that are frozen in time, like Medusa has turned them to stone. But then, because of my dance background, I have this impulse to un-still them, in a way, and that is something that the video allowed me to do, but that is also probably part of the reason why those silicone objects have that capacity to be kinetic and move and be wiggled and jiggled around by somebody in the space.

HUM On the topic of sculpture—because we're in one of the centres of the Italian Renaissance—we were talking about the image of David and how this beautiful piece of Renaissance sculpture has become commodified as kitsch souvenirs, like aprons and underwear. Do you see a relationship between your work and Michelangelo's *David* or Renaissance sculpture?

CD I do, actually, funnily enough. There's this reverence that I have for the virtuosity of works like that and the sensual quality of the marble, but then that appreciation exists alongside my impulse to subvert the gravitas and the power of this heroic male nude and, by association, [to subvert] the maleness of sculpture and this tendency to glorify and equate the masculine with solidity, visibility and social power. In a way, it's my sense of humour to see what it's like if you reduce this heroic male nude all the way back to just the phallic member, dangling out of the display case.



Caitlin Devoy, *BODYOBJECTS* (video still), 2024. Copyright 2024 Caitlin Devoy. All rights reserved. Courtesy of Fraser Walker and the artist.



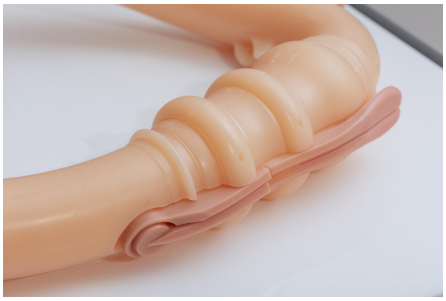
Caitlin Devoy, *Basso Fermata*, 2024, silicone, acrylic, steel. *BODYOBJECTS* installation view, *Personal Structures: Beyond Boundaries*, Palazzo Mora, Venice, Italy, 20 April–24 November 2024. Photo: Federico Vespignani. Courtesy of ECC.



Caitlin Devoy with *BODYOBJECTS*, installation view, *Personal Structures: Beyond Boundaries*, Palazzo Mora, Venice, Italy, 20 April–24 November 2024. Photo: *Contemporary HUM*.



Caitlin Devoy, *Basso Fermata* (detail), 2024, silicone, acrylic, steel. *BODYOBJECTS* installation view, *Personal Structures: Beyond Boundaries*, Palazzo Mora, Venice, Italy, 20 April–24 November 2024. Photo: Federico Vespignani. Courtesy of ECC.



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Caitlin Devoy with *Canons (medium pair)*, 2024, silicone, resin. *BODYOBJECTS* installation view, *Personal Structures: Beyond Boundaries*, Palazzo Mora, Venice, Italy, 17 April 2024. Photo: *Contemporary HUM*.



Caitlin Devoy, *Basso Fermata*, 2024, silicone, acrylic, steel. *BODYOBJECTS* installation view, *Personal Structures: Beyond Boundaries*, Palazzo Mora, Venice, Italy, 20 April–24 November 2024. Photo: *Contemporary HUM*.



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HUM Could you talk about the kinds of responses that they provoke in viewers and how these responses differ?

CD They definitely do provoke quite differing responses. Some people are really drawn to the objects and find them hilarious. They immediately start laughing, and they want to touch the objects and play around with them. Other people feel quite embarrassed and uncomfortable around the objects, [particularly] the sexual suggestiveness of the objects. It's almost as though, when you're in the space, you're comparing yourself to the objects, which as a woman is something that you're so used to—being looked at and, in contexts that are not sexual, perhaps being sexualised. I think that [for] men, when they go into the space and there's this big, thick, flaccid recorder dangling in front of them, it's kind of an uncomfortable experience. I really enjoy that, that it's their turn to feel exposed in that space of the gallery. [There are] really different responses, from humour to discomfort.

HUM And then there are some very visceral responses of discomfort.

CD The tactile aspect to some people is super appealing and to other people it's really, absolutely not. They find it a bit creepy.

HUM How do you figure people's relationship to touching the objects?

CD It's really interesting to observe people interacting or not interacting with the objects. The people-watching aspect is part of the work. It can be very entertaining. As a woman, it feels really different to watch a cis man twiddling those nipple switches than it does to watch another woman do that. All of these moments in those interactions can reveal something about a power disparity and something about subject versus object. It's

intriguing to see people's comfort or discomfort levels and whether it brings out their cheeky side or whether people tense up around the objects.

HUM You also said, although this is on a more personal level, that there was a moment in the video that your mum finds particularly uncomfortable...

CD Yeah, there's this moment in the video where I'm straddling the camera in a way, which is [the viewer's] perspective, and the giant strap-on recorder I'm wearing at the time is dangling around above you. It's parodying pornography, but, for me, there's also a little reference to looking up at these grandiose, heroic male nude sculptures, like, you're down there and the work or the phallus is up there above you. I find it funny to draw that parallel.

HUM I guess your mum didn't find it so funny.

CD Not so much!

HUM *Personal Structures* is not part of the official Biennale and it also isn't a curated exhibition. Instead, as you said, artists are invited to present their work, but they also need to find their own funding to cover their participation, which is a point of controversy for some artists. Could you talk about what it was like when you accepted the offer to show your work as part of *Personal Structures* and how you navigate the complexities of the exhibition, given that it's also a valuable opportunity for artists to present their work in Venice?

CD Straight off the bat, I knew that I would need support in the form of funding, because it is really expensive to show in Venice. I don't earn much in my teaching, and I'm a solo mum, so that was something that was definitely needed. I

immediately started putting together a funding proposal to Creative New Zealand and I'm really grateful for their support of my project, because without that it simply wouldn't have been financially viable for me to show here. I have also spent a considerable amount of my own money, but, with my financial means alone, there's no way that I would be here.

I didn't want to miss this opportunity to show internationally. I love Venice, and it's so full of people who love art, so that alone was really exciting to me. It's also this opportunity to meet other artists and to create those international connections, so that was another reason why I was really interested in coming here. It's an honour to have this opportunity to be here as a New Zealand artist and a woman artist.

HUM This year is a stellar year for New Zealand artists at Venice. There are so many presenting and it's so fantastic to be a part of that.

CD Absolutely, it's super exciting to see artists like Mataaho (Collective) here in Venice. They're amazing and it's lovely that there's a nice bunch of New Zealand artists here, so there's a range of New Zealand artists' voices and more than one person has the opportunity to show their work. It's incredible, all of the artists who are showing in the Biennale, and their work is [of] such an amazing, high quality; it's cool that they are *all* here. I really like the fact that [there is] not just one person representing.

HUM What is it like to be in Venice during this busy week of the Biennale opening, and what are you hoping to achieve while you're here?

CD It's a bit of a crazy mixture of overwhelm and awe. The scale and virtuosity of the architecture and art, and humorous clash of high and low culture, going from St Mark's Basilica to

tourist carts selling t-shirts of Michelangelo's *David* doing a rude gesture… it's pretty funny.

One of the main things that I'm hoping to achieve while I'm here is to make connections with other artists and galleries and look at a whole lot of art. Just drink it all in, basically. I'm [also] looking forward to seeing the reactions to my work and watching people interact with it.

HUM Will you be in the space [with your works] much?

CD I will visit. We'll come back a few times, because I do find it really funny looking at people looking at people looking at my work, because being in that space, there's a mirror for one thing, but it's also something that the objects do, so you're looking at them, but you're also looking at yourself. You're really aware of yourself and your body in the space with those "body objects". [There is] this back and forth between the body objects and your own body, [and] I find it really interesting to see how people react [to that].

HUM And you have a whole room to yourself.

CD Yes. I was really keen to basically create an installation with all of the objects together in a space. That room that my work is in, in this building, used to be the servant's bathroom, which I think is really funny in relation to those body objects. It's also a really nice, small scale, which means that you're forced to be up close and personal with the objects, and you feel them surrounding you, so it's this strange experience.

HUM It's quite a narrow room as well. You really are up against the sculptures, and then you see yourself in this mirror, which takes up most of the wall, so there's kind of nowhere to hide.

CD Yeah, there is nowhere to hide. [The room] is really only just over a metre wide. When you turn away from the "Canon" switch works on the wall and you see yourself in the mirror, and you see them behind your head, [it's] like your head is nestled between them. There are moments like that that are pretty funny.

Crossing Currents: Aotearoa New Zealand Artists in Venice *is an original podcast series produced with the support of Creative New Zealand Toi Aotearoa, with editing and mixing by Hamish Petersen. Cultural advisory is provided by Matariki Williams, graphic design by Emma Kaniuk and music by João Veríssimo.*

Click here for the second interview in the series: Brett Graham at the 60th Venice Biennale

Biographies



Caitlin Devoy (b.1976) is a contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand artist. Born in London, she grew up in Omārōrō Newtown, Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington, where she lives and works.

Her work combines humour (engaging its history as a strategy of disruption) with the erotic and explosive politics of the body. Laughter and parody are pitted against sexist and binary attitudes to gender, bodies, and value in art making. Her sculptures employ the tactile, seductive, and kinaesthetic potency of materials, harnessing their potential to engage the viewer in an embodied, rather than predominantly visual, experience. The temptation or provocation for viewers to touch the objects, playfully challenges the customary relationship between viewer and artwork. She employs our tactile familiarity with everyday objects, and their usual uses or functions, for pointedly humorous means.

HUM

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