Kate Newby: I can’t nail the days down

by Chloe Geoghegan

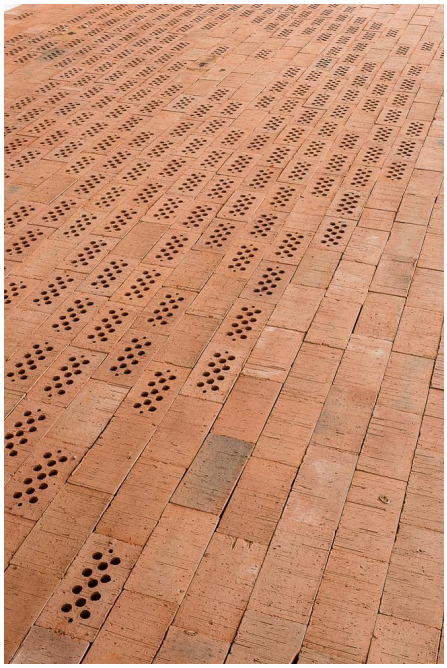
Published on 14.08.2018



Kate Newby. *I can't nail the days down*, Kunsthalle Wien 2018, Photo: Jorit Aust. Courtesy die Künstlerin.



Kate Newby. *I can't nail the days down*, Kunsthalle Wien 2018, Photo: Jorit Aust. Courtesy die Künstlerin.



Kate Newby. *I can't nail the days down*, Kunsthalle Wien 2018, Photo: Jorit Aust. Courtesy die Künstlerin.



Kate Newby. *I can't nail the days down*, Kunsthalle Wien 2018, Photo: Jorit Aust. Courtesy die Künstlerin.

Chloe Geoghegan reviews the solo exhibition of Brooklyn-based artist Kate Newby, presented at the Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, Austria from 16 May – 2 September 2018.

One day after another—
Perfect.
They all fit.[01]

Some of these bricks look like they've had a long day. Worn down with scratches and chips, scattered with lost coins, glass, and pebbles. If a brick is like a day, these six thousand bricks amount to sixteen years laid across the floor of Kunsthalle Wien Karlsplatz.

The brick floor meets the glass wall of the building at one end, but at the other there is room to step off and encounter five solid glass sculptures. Suspended from the ceiling, they hold the light of the day and the colour of the garden through the window. Outside is a thirty-three metre long ceramic gutter dug into the ground. It has caught a clod of grass, some sprigs of lavender and some moisture leftover from the last rain. This is Kate Newby's *I can't nail the days down*, her first institutional solo exhibition in Austria.

Kunsthalle Wien Karlsplatz is the satellite project space of Kunsthalle Wien MuseumsQuartier, which is located ten minutes walk away in a large tourist-friendly cultural district. The gallery space on Karlsplatz, however, is a glass pavilion, nestled in a tiny public park next to a subway stop and attached to a busy restaurant with a rambling community garden on one side. It is a place where casual meets formal, as the austere aesthetic of the exposed gallery space is somewhat worn away by the quaintness of its grassed surrounds. Beyond the park, the city of Vienna is grand and historic, having been continuously inhabited since 500 BC. For an established city, Vienna is anything but static. Cobbled streets mingle with modern asphalt and brick, weaving around the city's built environment, often irregularly. Responsible for these moments of planned irregularity was urban theorist Camillo Sitte. In his 1889 publication *Der Städtebau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen* (City Planning According to Artistic Principles) Sitte opposed the ruthless logic of grid cities. Echoes of his work can be seen around Vienna in the many plazas he designed that disrupt generic patterns of movement through the city. Their enduring presence exemplifies the way disparate elements of a city tend to build up over many years and together construct a layered personality.

In his 2017 book *The Language of Cities*, Deyan Sudjic suggests that navigating a city is a similar process to exploring a library. The contents of library shelves only reveal themselves through random encounters, but categories and classifications give us the opportunity to explore it in a more purposefully.[02] In this way, *I can't nail the days down* reads like an excerpt; as though parts of the city's historic identity have been peeled up and relocated to the gallery for a close reading. Like a library or a city, one cannot see the entire exhibition at once. For one, to see the twenty-four

metre-long brick floor it must be walked on. Moreover, the glass sculptures and gutter change hourly as the weather and light change during the days and months over summer.



Kate Newby. Install of *I can't nail the days down* at Kunsthalle Wien, 2018.



Kate Newby. Install of *I can't nail the days down* at Kunsthalle Wien, 2018.



Kate Newby. Production of *I can't nail the days down* for Kunsthalle Wien, 2018.



Kate Newby. Production of *I can't nail the days down* for Kunsthalle Wien, 2018.



Kate Newby. Production of *I can't nail the days down* for Kunsthalle Wien, 2018.

Bricks along with glass and ceramics, have featured regularly in Newby's work since she was at art school. Although she has made several brick floor works prior (Biennale of Sydney in 2018, Michael Lett in 2016, and Laurel Doody in 2015), this is by far one of her largest. Her Lett show *Big Tree. Bird's Eye*. contained three hundred modified bricks and three hundred left untouched. Similar

to this exhibition, the bricks in Kunsthalle Wien were manufactured at the nearby brickworks Ziegelwerk Lizzi. Before the firing process, some of the bricks were modified by Newby and a team of assistants who took to them with chisels, hammers and drills. While some bricks belong to larger groups, for example a circular depression in the floor or a long scratch, others have been individually worked into or had their edges chipped off and function as one piece in a larger repetitive pattern.

The range of mark-making on the floor is formidable, and on its own would perhaps function as a drawing. The scattered remnants added atop the floor, however, allow the work to speak to the artist's experience of her time moving through the city of Vienna. Ring pulls, twigs and pressed coins combine with small sculptures to create a codified mess, perhaps speaking the chaotic language of a city street full of tiny tactile moments too difficult to organise into a single viewpoint. Some of these moments are uncanny, for example, a few tiny glass bottles that have been melted flat or a coin that perfectly fits into the depression it sits in. Large white pinched choral-like balls of fired porcelain provide moments for the eye to trip on—seemingly natural in construction but in a foreign land on this dry, urban floor. A collection of glass pieces each pressed into a medallion of clay are taxonomical in appearance, almost resembling a method of classifying historic artifacts. These very graphic moments provide a chance for the weight of the work to lift a little; so as not to take itself too seriously and reveal what appears to be hundreds of preserved moments of observation and construction by Newby. She seems to honour the discarded remnants of everyday moments that collect up like the day's residue on a city street.



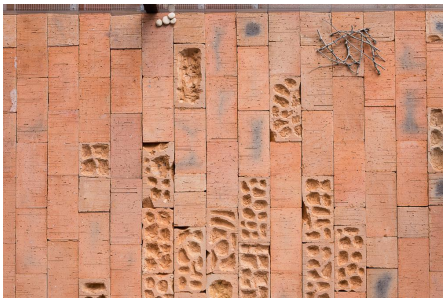
Kate Newby. *I can't nail the days down*, Kunsthalle Wien 2018, Photo: Jorit Aust. Courtesy die Künstlerin.



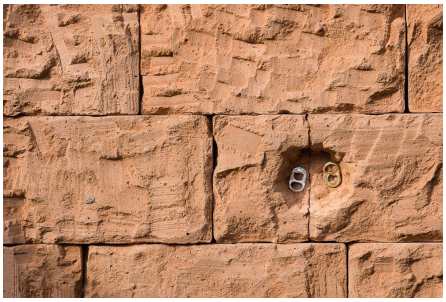
Kate Newby. *I can't nail the days down*, Kunsthalle Wien 2018, Photo: Jorit Aust. Courtesy die Künstlerin.



Kate Newby. *I can't nail the days down*, Kunsthalle Wien 2018, Photo: Jorit Aust. Courtesy die Künstlerin.



Kate Newby. *I can't nail the days down*, Kunsthalle Wien 2018, Photo: Jorit Aust. Courtesy die Künstlerin.



Kate Newby. *I can't nail the days down*, Kunsthalle Wien 2018, Photo: Jorit Aust. Courtesy die Künstlerin.



Kate Newby. *I can't nail the days down*, Kunsthalle Wien 2018, Photo: Jorit Aust. Courtesy die Künstlerin.



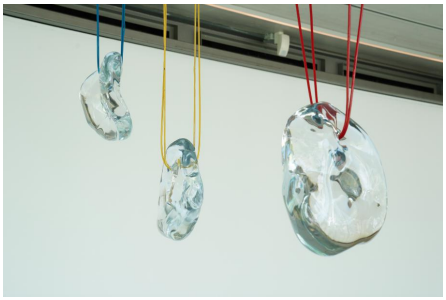
Kate Newby. *I can't nail the days down*, Kunsthalle Wien 2018, Photo: Jorit Aust. Courtesy die Künstlerin.

After some time in the space pacing, shuffling pebbles, and bending down to closely inspect bits and pieces, I came to think of *I can't nail the days down* not as mimetic of the city but biographical. These enduring materials and subtle objects combine to reference the foundations of the everyday. It is easy to see why a line from *A Few Days* by poet James Schuyler has been borrowed for the title of this exhibition.

It's cool
for August and I

can’t nail the days down. They go by like escalators,
each alike, each with its own
message of tears and laughter.[03]

In all of Schuyler's work, ordinary moments are celebrated. Tiny fluctuations in the weather or an observation from a window are treated as remarkable encounters. Schuyler was known for the precise way in which he could combine moments of ambiguity and familiarity as a method of elevating the ordinary. Devotion to these simple yet profound unoccupied moments requires the conviction that the inconspicuous elements of each passing day are tremendously valuable[04]. Like Schuyler, Newby has faithfully held these particular moments at the centre of her practice for her entire career.



Kate Newby, *I can't nail the days down* installation view, Kunsthalle Wien 2018. Courtesy the artist.



Kate Newby. *I can't nail the days down*, Kunsthalle Wien 2018, Photo: Jorit Aust. Courtesy die Künstlerin.



Kate Newby, *I can't nail the days down* installation view, Kunsthalle Wien 2018. Courtesy the artist.



Kate Newby, *I can't nail the days down* installation view, Kunsthalle Wien 2018. Courtesy the artist.



Kate Newby, *I can't nail the days down* installation view, Kunsthalle Wien 2018. Courtesy the artist.

As a self-proclaimed observer, Newby has been travelling the world for more than a decade, tracing and collecting ordinary moments that play out in every society. A puddle of rainwater and detritus in Wellington's Civic Square in 2011; a stone skipping over icy water on Fogo Island in 2013; thick red rope attached like a loose line drawing around the top of a building in Bristol in 2014; hand pressed ceramic wind chimes strung up on a tree in Los Angeles in

2015; clusters of pit-fired earthenware rocks arranged on window sills in Wisconsin in 2016; a crystal-clear glass bag and string dangling on a rooftop in San Antonio in 2017; leaves and fingerprints pressed into a half-buried ceramic drain in Vienna in 2018. As her oeuvre builds, it becomes difficult to separate what is made and what isn't. Always travelling with a copy of Frank O'Hara's *Second Avenue* (1960)[05] and its catalogue of haphazard juxtapositions, in each work but especially at Karlsplatz, the city street seems never to be far from her feet or mind.

walking walking
on asphalt
the strange embrace of the ankle's
lock
on the pavement
squared like mausoleums
but cheerful
moved and stamped on[06]

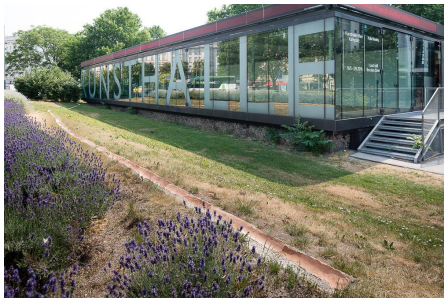
While standing on the brick floor prompts thoughts and feelings in my mind about the weight of time passing and the discursive nature of cities, the ability to step on and off it is also important. It creates perspective, and offers the viewer a chance to literally take a step back from this enormous formation and consider its tomb-like quality. Nearby, the five adjacent glass sculptures hanging from the ceiling welcome in the world outside by distorting the green, brown, and blue hues of the community garden. Their density unites them with the brick floor, yet they carry nothing but a blurry, dew-like refraction of nature and a connection to what is outside of the gallery through light.



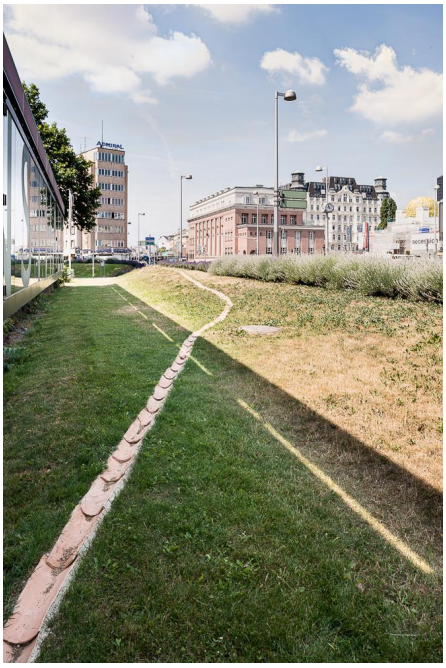
Kate Newby. *I can't nail the days down*, Kunsthalle Wien 2018, Photo: Jorit Aust. Courtesy die Künstlerin.



Kate Newby. *I can't nail the days down*, Kunsthalle Wien 2018, Photo: Jorit Aust. Courtesy die Künstlerin.



Kate Newby. *I can't nail the days down*, Kunsthalle Wien 2018, Photo: Jorit Aust. Courtesy die Künstlerin.



Kate Newby. *I can't nail the days down*, Kunsthalle Wien 2018, Photo: Jorit Aust. Courtesy die Künstlerin.

Easily missed is Newby's ceramic tile gutter outside, which quietly runs along the side of the gallery as though it has always been there. This long, subdued work seems to suggest that streets are not the only pathways responsible for creating connections and patterns of movement in a city. For centuries, aqueducts, pipes, and tunnels have been part of the infrastructure that allows the everyday to be ordinary, yet profoundly complex as cities expand and diversify around them layering up new systems over old. The Karlsplatz subway station where the clay used to make the tiles comes from is an example of this.[07] Just like an aqueduct or a gutter, a subway system is both ordinary and extraordinary as a modern conduit for the everyday experience where everything and nothing happen all at once.

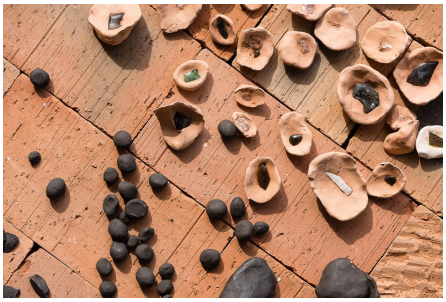
Casual in its construction, there is something clumsy about the gutter compared to the functional item it represents. It attempts to transport whatever falls its way yet only really succeeds in gathering it up. Like the bricks inside, it collects and also very slightly accentuates quiet moments as they happen over the course of the exhibition. This can also be seen in the way found objects are pressed onto the surface of the material before the firing process. By etching out a life for these objects as they are made, it is almost as if Newby has propelled them forward in time to allow us a chance to explore their essence within a more drawn out timeline than an exhibition can afford.

The scars upon the day
are harsh marks of
tranquility.[08]

While material and form are used to unearth Vienna's layered persona and trace a biographical journey through it, they also ask us to pay attention to them. Over the two short days I spent in Vienna, I found myself seeing the city in one light before arriving at Kunsthalle Wien, and another when I left. On the way to Karlsplatz, I followed the blue dot on my phone map around the Ringstraße, over several street crossings and through Resselpark. When I wasn't checking the screen to ensure I was following the fastest route, I was rehearsing the way in my mind, not focussed on the three dimensions of the city surrounding me. For the moment, Vienna was a flat series of grey and white lines mixed with green squares and blue circles.

As soon as I came out of the exhibition, I started to trace the ground looking for dusty shards of glass, smooth around the edges from weeks of being kicked around the park. I looked for shadows sunken into holes and puddles made from dents and scratches in the ground. The cobblestone pavement along the Ringstraße felt lumpy under foot, some laid out in loose grids, others arcing in large circles. Occasionally, an interlocking tessellation of pavers or section of chipped granite would feature, designed to prevent pedestrians slipping in the winter. Small stones and twigs caught

between cobbles vibrated if there was subway line underneath. The history on these streets is prolific. Nearby on Freyung, a random and uneven patch of modern pavers has been lifted permanently to reveal a section of mossy roading that dates back to the year 1200. Close by in Albertinaplatz, there is a monument depicting an elderly Jewish man bent over scrubbing the street. It memorialises the humiliation of those who were forced to wash the streets after the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany in 1938. Now I was paying attention, I noticed how much could be seen and felt about this place while walking. I wondered where Newby had walked. I wondered where Sitte had walked. I wondered where everyone had walked since 500 BC.



Kate Newby. *I can't nail the days down*, Kunsthalle Wien 2018, Photo: Jorit Aust. Courtesy die Künstlerin.



Kate Newby. *I can't nail the days down*, Kunsthalle Wien 2018, Photo: Jorit Aust. Courtesy die Künstlerin.



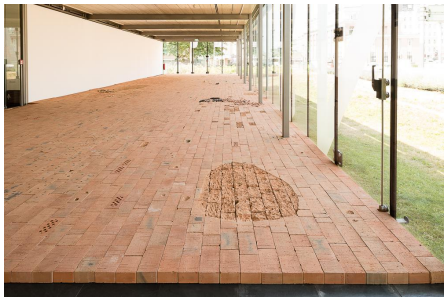
Kate Newby. *I can't nail the days down*, Kunsthalle Wien 2018, Photo: Jorit Aust. Courtesy die Künstlerin.



Kate Newby. *I can't nail the days down*, Kunsthalle Wien 2018, Photo: Jorit Aust. Courtesy die Künstlerin.



Kate Newby. *I can't nail the days down*, Kunsthalle Wien 2018, Photo: Jorit Aust. Courtesy die Künstlerin.



Kate Newby. *I can't nail the days down*, Kunsthalle Wien 2018, Photo: Jorit Aust. Courtesy die Künstlerin.

I'm becoming the street.[09]

When thinking about the language of cities, it is no coincidence that Kate Newby, an artist experiencing today's globalised epoch of

newscycles and celebrity Instagrams, is drawn to the work of O'Hara and Schuyler. As leading figures in the New York School, their use of everyday life poetry was a way to resist the cultural explosion of the 1950s and 60s. Schuyler's understated chronicling of life's most unimportant details defied the new wave of mass media and consumerism. Even artists of his milieu who embraced these new hyperactive distractions knew the value of a quiet moment. This can be seen in Andy Warhol's *Sleep* (1963) and John Cage's *4'33* (1952). Likewise, Newby uses the exhibition framework as a tool to momentarily quieten things down.

Today's sensory overload isn't in our view, it is our view. It is well established on multiple devices, attached to our eyes, ears and hands obscuring our senses. The chaos we swipe through today is accelerated and networked. It is a rushing wave perpetually building up to seemingly break into crisis at any moment. With the loose inventiveness that Newby has become known for, *I can't nail the days down* combats some of this associated anxiety. As the unintended effects of distraction affect our grasp of reality, we all should take a moment to:

Look *now*. It'll never be more fascinating.[10]

Footnotes

01. Robert Creeley, "One Day" from *The Collected Poems of Robert Creeley: 1945-1975*. Accessed 15 July 2018.

02. *The Language of Cities*, Deyan Sudjic (New York: Penguin Random House, 2017), 75.

03. James Schuyler, A Few Days (1985), excerpt. Source: Andrew Epstein, *Attention Equals Life: The Pursuit of the Everyday in Contemporary Poetry and Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2016), page number not attributed. Accessed 16 July 2018.

04. Epstein, page number not attributed. Accessed 20 July, 2018.

05. Lucy Vincent, "Kate Newby, Artist" in *Sans Woman Journal*, 8 January 2018. Accessed 25 July 2018.

06. Frank O'Hara, "Walking" excerpt. Source: *Poetry*, February 1969. Accessed 15 July 2018.

07. Newby made the gutter tiles from 300 kg of clay that has been stored at and used by the University of Applied Arts Vienna since it was excavated during the construction of the Karlsplatz subway station in the 1970s.

08. James Schuyler, “The Morning of the Poem” (1980) excerpt. Source: Wayne Koestenbaum, “Schuyler's Colors” (1999) in *My 1980s and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2013), 257.

09. Frank O’Hara, "Walking to Work", excerpt. Source: *Poetry*, February 1969. Accessed 15 July 2018.

10. James Schuyler, c. 1957 – 1962. In *Koestenbaum*, 257.

Biographies



Kate Newby received her Doctorate of Fine Art in 2015 from the Elam School of Fine Arts at the University of Auckland; she has shown internationally at galleries and museums. Recent institutional exhibitions include the Palais de Tokyo (2022), Adam Art Gallery Te Pataka Toi (2021), Institute of Contemporary Art Villeurbanne/Rhône-Alpes (2019), Kunsthalle Wien (2018), 21st Biennale of Sydney (2018) and the SculptureCenter (2017). In 2012 she won the Walters Prize, New Zealand’s largest contemporary art prize. In 2019 Kate was awarded a Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters & Sculptors grant. She has undertaken residencies at The Chinati Foundation (2017), Artspace (2017), Fogo Island (2013), and the ISCP (2012). Kate currently lives and works in Floresville, Texas.



Chloe Geoghegan holds a BFA (Hons) in Graphic Design and Art History, and a Post-Graduate Diploma in Art Curatorship (UC). She has held curatorial positions at Te Uru gallery (2020-2021), Hocken Collections (2019) and Blue Oyster Art Project Space (2014-17). She has travelled to China and Korea on the CNZ Asia NZ Curators Tour, and to New York for an ICI Curatorial Intensive, and written for several platforms including: *Contemporary HUM*, *Pantograph Punch*, *Hue & Cry*, *un Magazine*, *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, *On Curating* and *HAMSTER*. She is interested in furthering curatorial discourse around art in Aotearoa through critical writing, exhibiting and publishing.

creative nz
Arts Council of New Zealand Toi Aotearoa