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Published on the occasion of the exhibition:

**NIHILISTIC OPTIMISTIC
TIM NOBLE & SUE WEBSTER**

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TIM NOBLE &
SUE WEBSTER

BLAIN SOUTHERN







«O R E » O R D

G » S « A » M « T ~ G « R

Gustav Metzger, *Untitled*, 2008
pencil, charcoal and pastel on paper



N-H-L-S<|O/

O&T-M-S<|O:

ADVENTURES

IN THE

FIFTH DIMENSION

JOHN SAVAGE



So you pick your way through the freshly sanitised Shoreditch streets to the Dirty House. If you didn't know it was there, you could easily pass it by – even though its seemingly oblique nature is revealed by mirrored windows and a certain stylised blankness. You ring the bell, and there is either Tim Noble or Sue Webster, or both. You notice the doormat, emblazoned with the motif 'welcome motherfuckers', and then the sign at eye level: 'come in – WE'RE CUNTS'.

Both Tim and Sue are dressed in basic black: hair, T-shirts, attitude. Their postures could be that of an avant-garde rock band. And the Punk affiliations are there. Above her computer, Sue has a vintage Ray Stevenson print of Siouxsie and the Banshees in their considerable 1977 pomp; both enjoy a good bout of provocation and taboo-busting in their work.

We sit down in the studio's middle space. The room is full of jokes, dead rodents, tabloid cut-outs, pictorial inspirations and various artworks: new versions of *A Pair of Arseholes* (bronze casts of Tim Noble and Sue Webster's nipples and anuses); brightly coloured variations on their *Spinning Heads* sculptures (their individual profiles spun like pottery); bronzed animal skeletons and, getting in everyone's way, *The Bad Little Christmas Tree* (a sad-looking cast bronze tree, with branches arranged in the form of a swastika, perceptible only from certain angles).

On one level, Noble and Webster's work is infused with the shock dynamic that has coursed through much of 20th century Modern Art – in recent times most obviously from Punk through to the YBA's et al. There's always a desire to throw the viewer off, to test the limits. This, I suspect, is basic to their personalities, but as one-time outsiders who have been accepted by the art world – to some degree – it's also a necessary reflex action to keep things fluid, interesting, unpredictable.

But that's just window dressing. The shadow sculptures – a couple of which currently live in the studio next door – are extraordinary works. Existing in 3D, projected into another two by a light source, they are adventures in the fifth dimension – which, as *The Twilight Zone* so eloquently stated, is 'beyond that which is known to man'. These assemblages of junk, worked on over months, reveal levels and levels of intricate detail in the process of being transformed into scathing, almost forensically accurate self-portraits.

In an accelerating world, the shadow sculptures freeze time, as does the almost hermetically-sealed environment of David Adjaye's Dirty House – an oasis amidst the encroaching development of Shoreditch. There's a tempting glimpse of the very hot weather in the tiny garden outside, but we're here to talk about the new show, *Nihilistic Optimistic*, and a



new piece, *My Beautiful Mistake*, which forswears the shadow in favour of a fifteen-foot high psychological portrait constructed out of discarded objects.

What strikes me about these shadow/not shadow pieces is the length of time that goes into their construction: the original conception, the chance gathering of materials, the wrestling in and out of shape that eventually accretes into a large sculpture. They seem to be a mixture of intention and intuition, of feeling and discussion; the product of a real collaboration, and one that bleeds into Tim and Sue's lives. When we talk, they very much work as a double act, adding to or countering each other's answers.

"We find it difficult to let go of the pieces," Tim begins, "and I think that's to do with becoming very emotionally involved with them, because you're building these things in your head, just behind your eyes, then suddenly you're putting them out there. It emerges but there's a time scale gone into that where you're using your fingers and your whole body, and there's blood, sweat and tears in it. It's a bit different to just picking up the phone and getting someone else to do it."

Sue continues the theme, "It *isn't* a production line, and we don't have a mould and orders lined up. We're not that type of artist. I mean, we tried it, because it was in fashion, but we realised that we didn't like it."

I want to ask them about Punk, because it seems to inform their lives in many ways, both obvious and subtle: the black clothes, the unwillingness to conform, the use of deliberate provocation. Later, as we walk around Shoreditch in the blazing sun, I stop them to take a picture. They naturally slip into a Post-Punk band pose, circa 1978/9: standing at 90 degrees from each other, blank but expressive, separate but together. It's uncanny.

Tim slides around any overt connection, "Well, we were too young to be punks, but there is an attitude, which I think is about wanting to get something done, and finding your own way of doing it. Often that means that you can't just listen to



other people, you just have to do it. And there's a tremendous energy in doing that, especially if there's two of you. You're like your own whirlwind, for better or worse."

Sue is forthright about Punk as an inspiration, "I always felt like an outsider; I lived in suburban Leicester where there were no role models. There was nobody at school I fitted in with. So I looked to Punk as a saviour, and discovered that I could be myself, and not feel like I was a freak. I found that in Punk. My mother and my sister were just into being stereotypical women. They wanted permed hair, high heels, and to dress in a certain conventional way. I immediately felt uncomfortable with all that, and thank God for Punk, where you could see images of women wearing jeans and Dr. Marten boots – I felt that was a more comfortable uniform for me. Cutting my own hair from an early age – just being an individual. Like at school, when all the girls had to sit in the sewing room and sew, and all the boys were outside



playing football. That didn't seem right to me. Can I join the football team, please? And I did. And the rugby team."

"Funnily enough, I went to a school where we had sewing classes," muses Tim, "and played hockey..."

"You probably quite liked it."

"I did, actually."

This sense of kicking against the bricks is ingrained and appears to pervade and inform the myriad twists and turns of their career. Sue acknowledges this, "Every single opportunity that we were given, we would throw something out there that we knew had something controversial in it. I don't know why, but it always did, and it would get banned. And you think, ha ha, in this day and age you can still get banned. Then you do it again, and it's, 'Sorry we can't use this because of that word.' Okay. And you do it again. And after about a year of this you think, nothing of ours is actually getting out there. But we're having so much fun, we can't help ourselves. We can't stop putting this little edge on it."

"Even in the art world, we would do a show before we had a gallery, and we were just so angry about everything, but there was an attitude – an energy," adds Tim.

We move to the studio next door. The artworks seem to fill up the blank, high ceilinged room. Tim and Sue are fascinated by space; the transformation of an old factory into the Dirty House; the specially-designed galleries where their work is shown; and the ever-changing urban landscape of Shoreditch.

You could spend hours wandering around the shadow pieces, working out what comes from where and how it all fits together. They're mostly constructed out of sheer rubbish, stuff that people have thrown away and haven't even bothered to recycle or put in bins – it's just out on the street. How and when do they source this stuff?

"When we're in the studio we need to get out, cos we're in the dark," Tim says, "and you end up going for a little walk, down the alley way, trying to avoid people, and there would be one solitary chair that someone has put out, but very meaningful, almost like it's sitting there, sadly, on its own."

"It's almost like a gift," Sue suggests, "as if someone had actually presented it to us. Sometimes I'll go for a walk and bring something back, and Tim'll go, 'I was looking at that yesterday'. All the stuff in the new show is from the streets around here – unwanted things that have been chucked out. We wanted it to be very wooden, so a lot of it is discarded furniture. We got some of the interesting parts from our local pub, The Owl & Pussycat, when they had a refurb, and after working with it we realised it was really good wood. It took a long time to drill through some of it; it was so thick, not like cheap pine. Teak is really dense and heavy."

Noble and Webster have been working together for seventeen years. In 2012, they're working towards one major show, *Nihilistic Optimistic*. It will include a number of paired and single shadow pieces, as well as a not-shadow piece, as Sue reveals: "With *My Beautiful Mistake* we introduced the idea of not having the shadow. When we were working on the sculptures that were gonna have shadows, we just thought, they're quite fascinating in their own way, and we kept daring ourselves to not make the shadow."

The superstructure of *My Beautiful Mistake* is loaded up with books – I was trying to read their titles... Sue notices me looking, "I had to sacrifice loads – I've always got piles of books by the side of my bed, cos I love reading, and I just keep them there. I don't like giving people books. You never get them back, and I like to see what I've consumed. It's like looking at what's inside my brain."

"If you really want to read something into it," Tim ventures, "it's like, don't judge a book by its cover. When you meet someone, there's a mountain of psychological crap to get through. No, not crap. Very interesting stuff."

Noble and Webster are living and working in an area which is going through convulsive changes. Are they trying to record that or capture that sense of dislocation?

“We’ve lived in Shoreditch now for fifteen years,” states Sue, “since it was the place to go in order to get away from everyone else, and it’s not stopped changing and evolving. Everything is speeding up. I’m noticing that more and more. Nobody’s got any time – everybody’s juggling twenty thousand things. Trying to get your best friend to meet you for dinner is just impossible. People are taking on too much. In this constant changing and rebuilding, your mind works differently.”

But then the shadow sculptures reverse all that acceleration. It stops. They’re built out of decay, but they’re not entropic – rather, a deliberate process of slowing down time to a point of stillness amidst all the dazzling distraction and dislocation.

Tim offers his own view, “They’re like breathing spaces – very calm, almost meditative.”

“We’re so used to getting everything *now*.” Sue adds, “We read it, we look at it, and go. We walk around an art exhibition in one minute. But you can’t walk past that [gesturing to *My Beautiful Mistake*], you have to give it time, to work it out and understand it. We’re slowing down the acceleration. Interesting. I think the title is in there somewhere, isn’t it?”

I ask about the title, and whether it’s to do with a war within themselves.

Sue explains, “I think I’ve still got the desire to hold on to something to make it special, to hold back, to deny – to say no; Nihilistic Optimistic. Then there’s the subtitle, *Street Compositions*. Because you’re walking down the street and you see a bin liner with a banana skin on top of it, and you think, nice composition. We’re going around photographing. There’s a bin that’s full, it’s teetering with junk and it’s a nice composition, so we came up with that term.”

I ask which one they see themselves as being – Nihilistic or Optimistic – or whether they’re both.

Sue answers first, “I think you can be, because there are two of us – if one is up, the other is down. I don’t think we’re ever both on one side of the coin.”

Tim adds, “Sue likes to really have a go at things. I’m always trying to be more reasonable. So I think I’m optimistic, and she’s nihilistic.”

Sue half agrees, “I’m nihilistic, yeah. But I can be optimistic. I think it just goes up and down like a yo-yo. The mood can swing just like that.”

“It’s not negative, because it’s hugely energetic,” Tim explains, “but you’ve got a slant on it. I’ve got an internal optimism, I think. I can go off into the land inside my head, and that can be a mad, weird place. So I need pulling back.”

“You mean floating up there, like a balloon?” Sue asks, “I’ve always thought that, ever since I met you. You’re up in the clouds somewhere. I need to keep hold of that string.”

I ask one final question – with such a slow accretion of detail within an overall shape, I wonder whether the pieces are planned or if they evolve organically? They both begin to answer at once...

“*My Beautiful Mistake* was really just about enjoying the form it took as it unfolded,” says Tim, “and then seeing what happens, which we love.”

“You’re making it up as you go along,” adds Sue, “literally, like abstract painting. You’re in the dark, the two of you, and some of the best times I’ve had have been whilst making that.”

“It was very spontaneous, wasn’t it? A screwdriver and a jigsaw...”



“We often don’t work on one thing at the same time,” Sue muses. “We just can’t bear someone else being in the room, but with these pieces we worked very much in unison. It was such a fantastic experience. Tim would be at the top making the big sweeping statements and I’d be at the bottom, concentrating on the detail. I’d be making it tight, he’d be loosening it up. I’d be really into the frayed bit on the ripped jeans, or the shoelace, or something. I’ve got my pile of debris there, which I’ve been collecting; some of them are off-cuts from something else. Once I’d left the room, and half of them would be missing...”

“Like stealing a bone from another dog.”

“The penguin stealing the rock from the other’s nest.”

“You’re talking about an ecstatic pleasure of the highest form,” Tim concludes. “You can wander around feeling quite insecure and insignificant, but when you’re doing that, whaaa!”

Jon Savage is a journalist, author and screenwriter. He has written numerous books, including the seminal *England’s Dreaming: Sex Pistols and Punk Rock* (1991).









NASTY

R/W CWS

OF

WORK









NASTY PIECES OF WORK

2008–2009

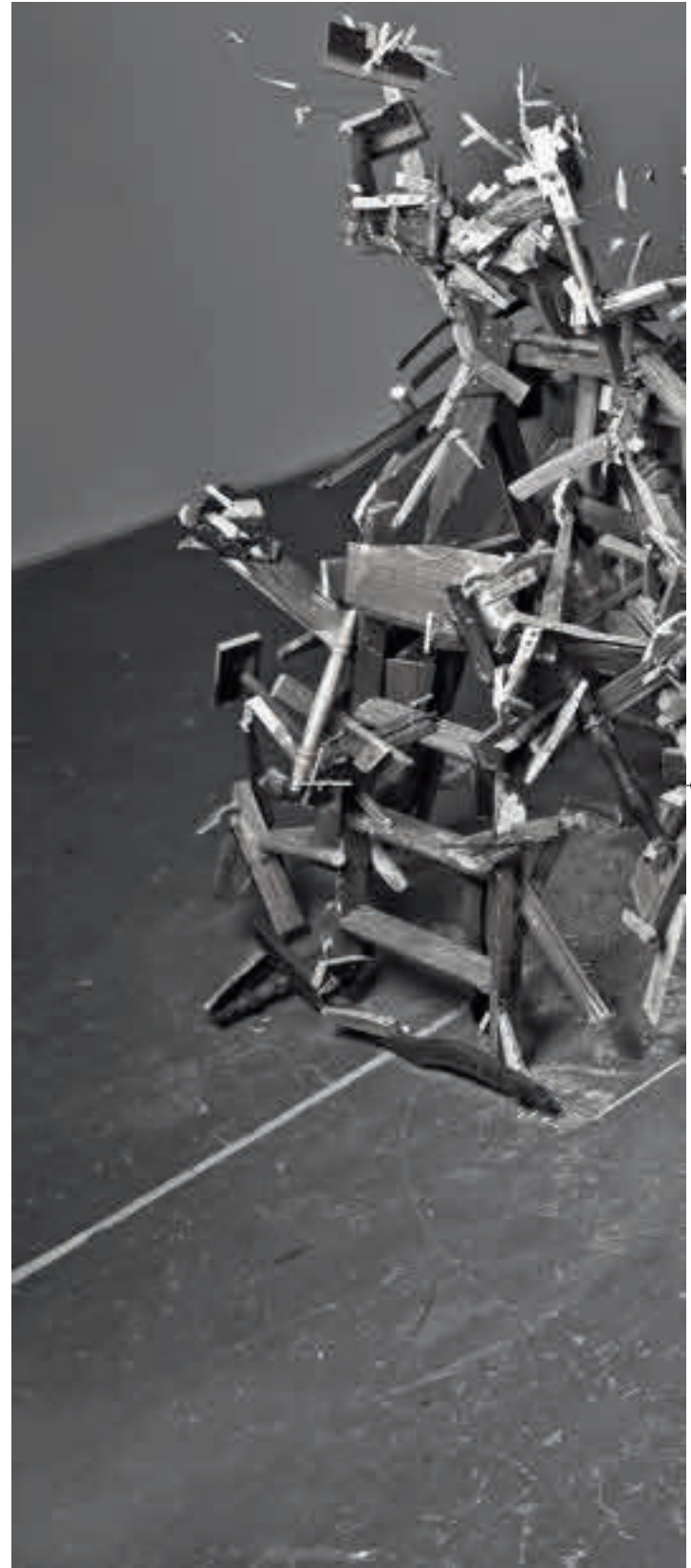
TWO WOODEN STEPLADDERS, DISCARDED WOOD,
BROKEN TOOLS, LIGHT PROJECTOR

DIMENSIONS, 2 PARTS:

171 x 166 x 86 cm (67 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 65 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 33 $\frac{7}{8}$ in)

191 x 156 x 101 cm (75 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 61 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 39 $\frac{3}{4}$ in)





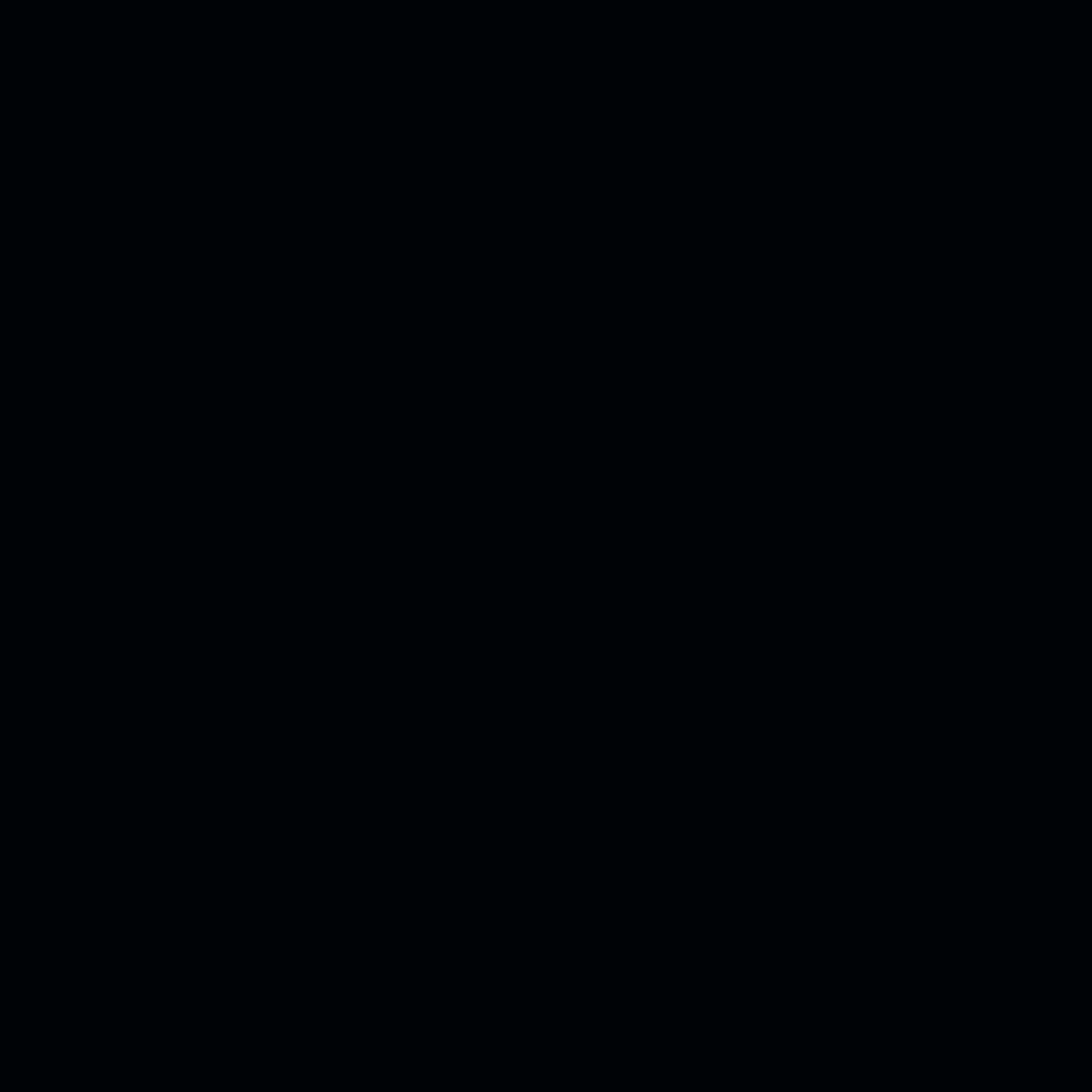












WILD

MOOD

SWINGS













WILD MOOD SWINGS

2009–2010

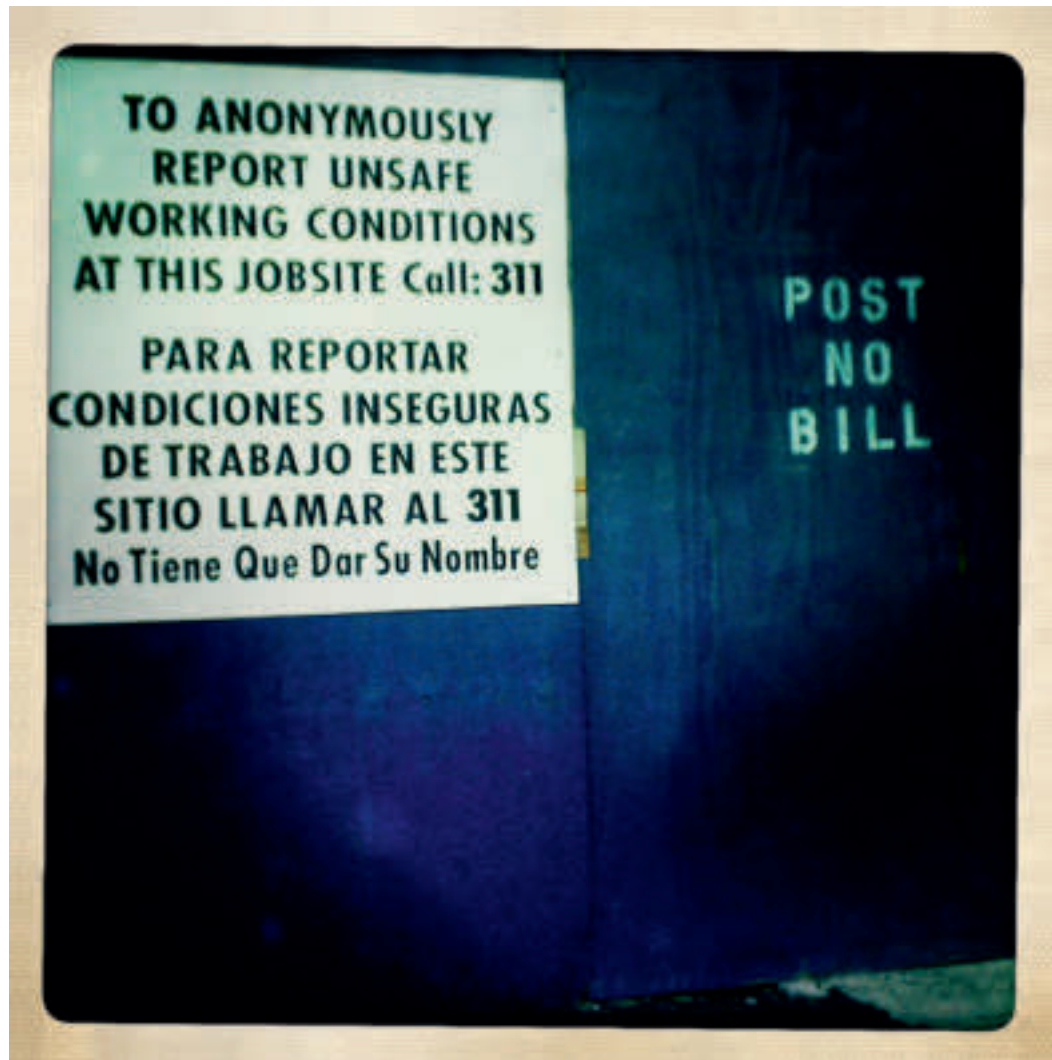
TWO WOODEN STEPLADDERS, DISCARDED WOOD,
LIGHT PROJECTOR

DIMENSIONS:

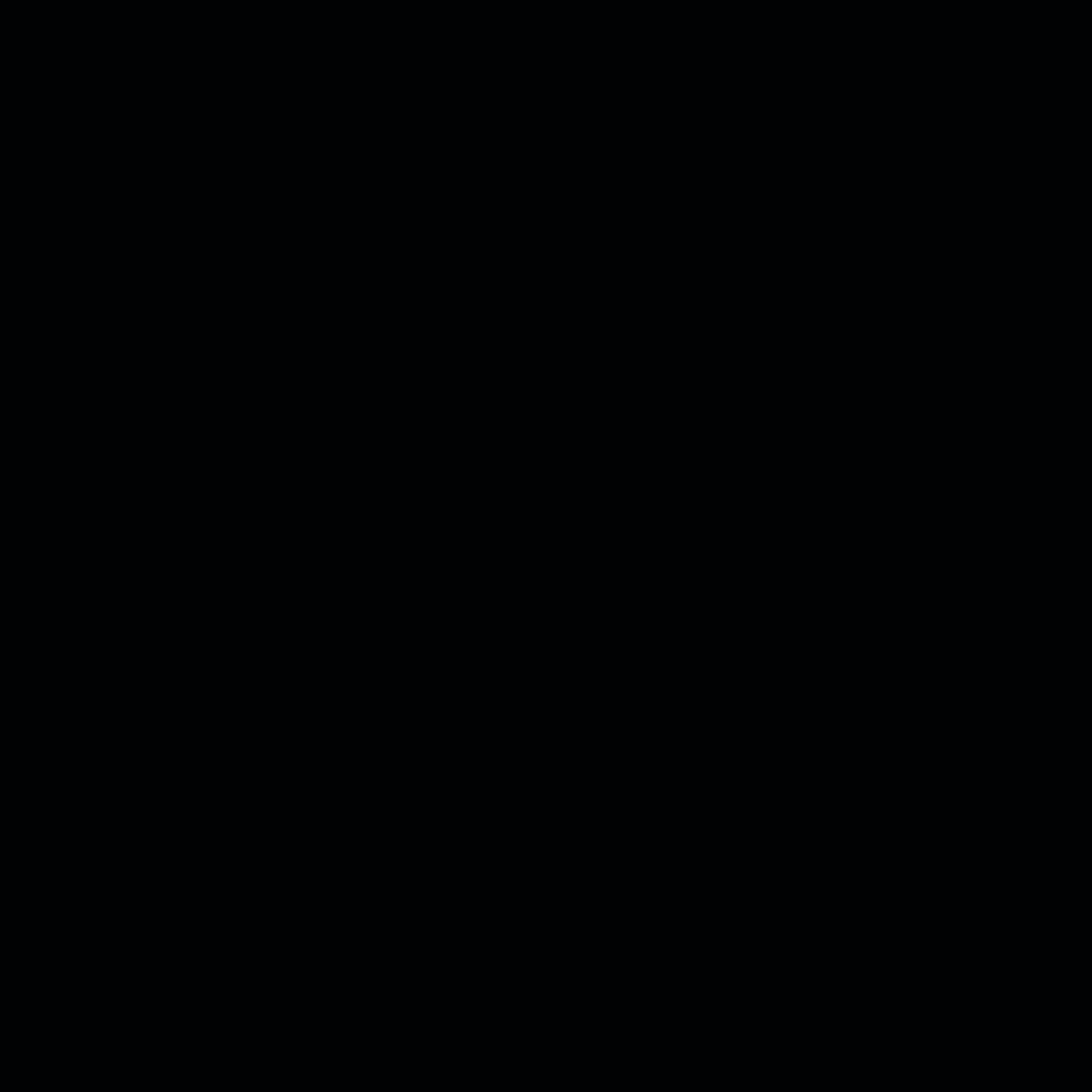
TIM: 167 x 178.5 x 110 cm (65 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 70 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 43 $\frac{1}{4}$ in)

SUE: 130 x 215 x 98.5 cm (51 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 84 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 38 $\frac{3}{4}$ in)









S-W-L-E

-M-R-O-S-E-D

M-S-E-R-T

















SELF IMPOSED MISERY

2010

WOODEN STEPLADDER, DISCARDED WOOD,
LIGHT PROJECTOR

DIMENSIONS:

224 x 78.5 x 403.5 cm (88 ¼ x 31 x 158 ⅞ in)







THE

IND-V-DJA





THE INDIVIDUAL

2012

WOODEN STEPLADDER, DISCARDED WOOD,
LIGHT PROJECTOR

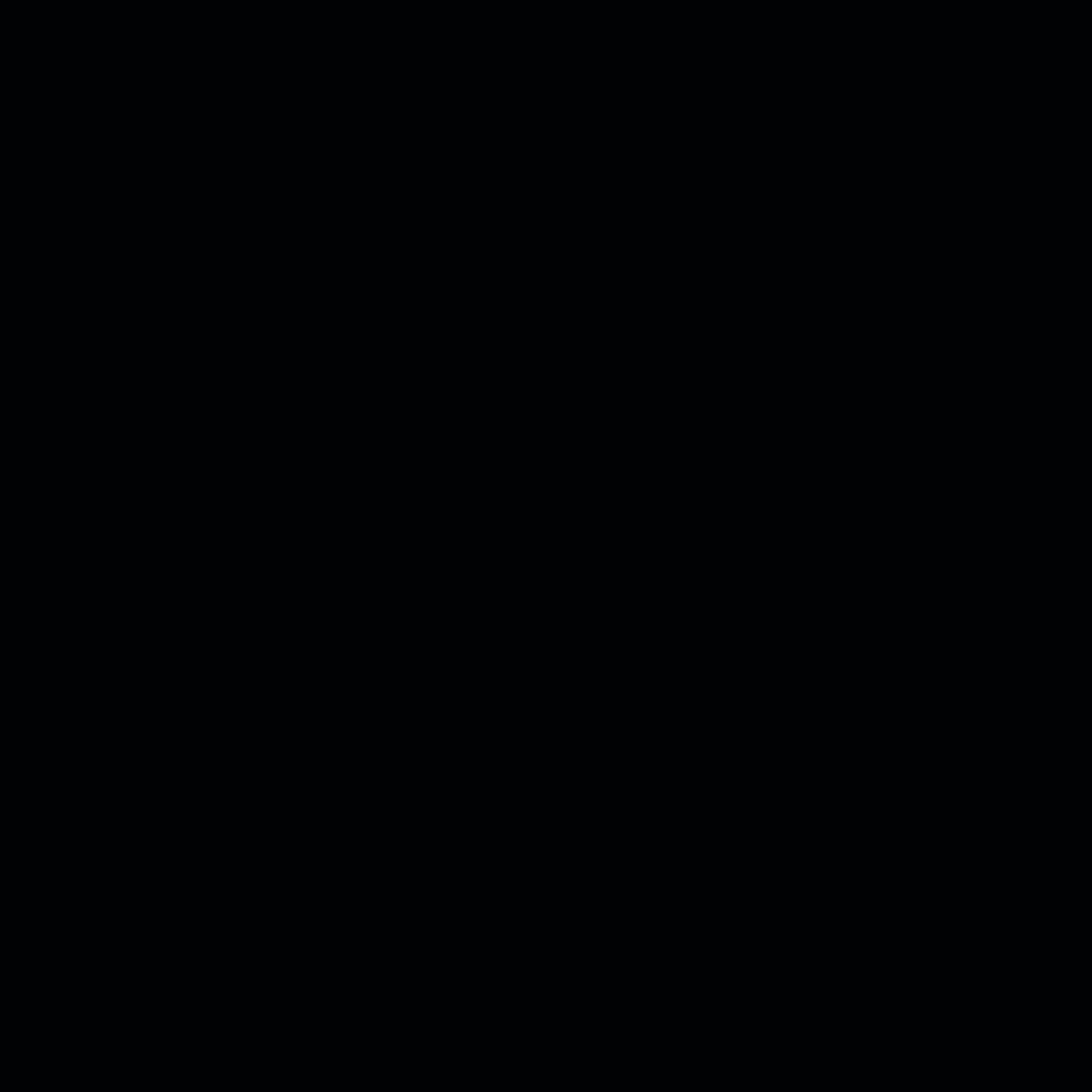
DIMENSIONS:

193 x 299 x 69 cm (76 x 117 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 27 $\frac{1}{8}$ in)









YOUNG MAN





YOUNGMAN

2012

WOODEN STEPLADDER, DISCARDED WOOD,
LIGHT PROJECTOR

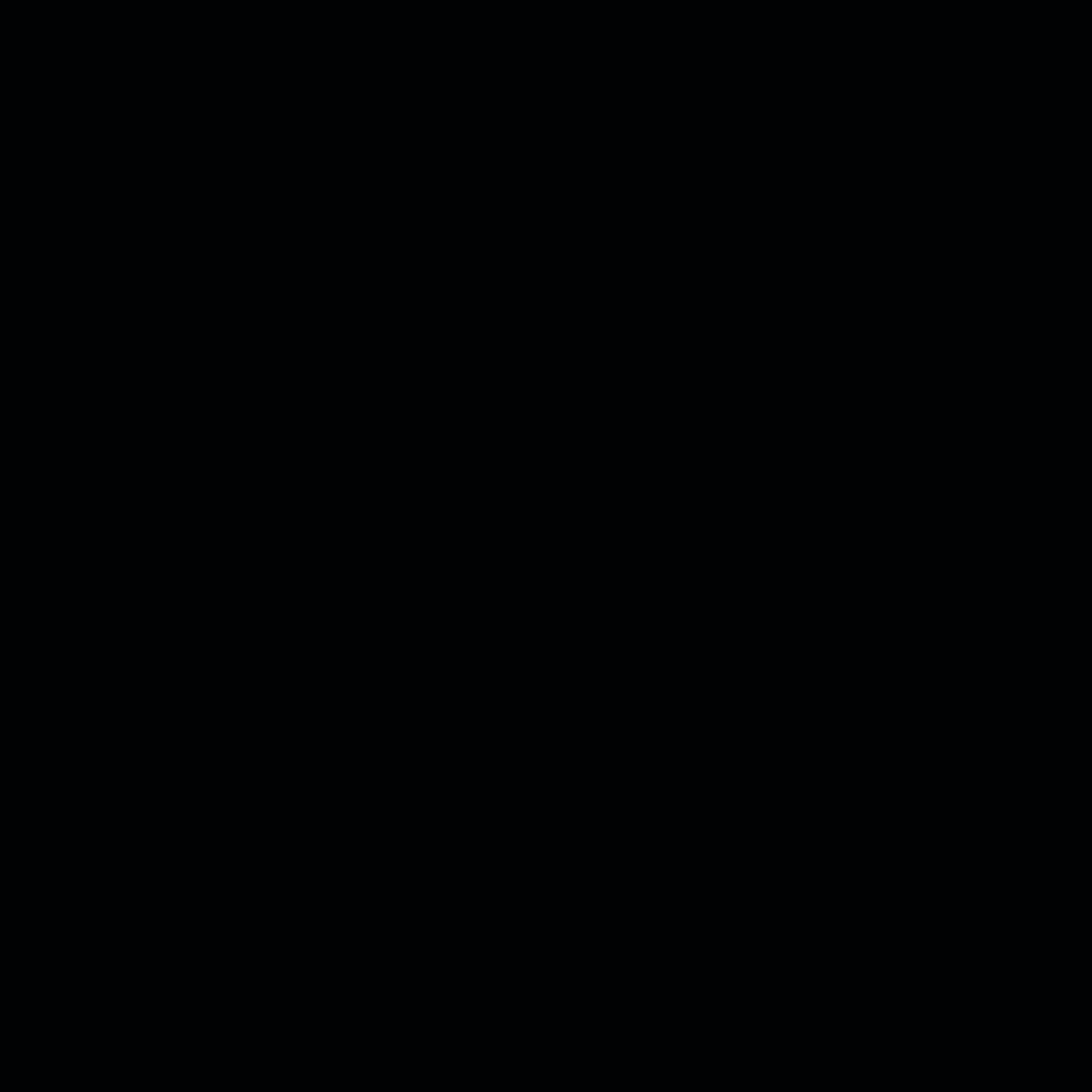
DIMENSIONS:

213.5 x 338.5 x 58 cm (84 x 133 ¼ x 22 ⅝ in)





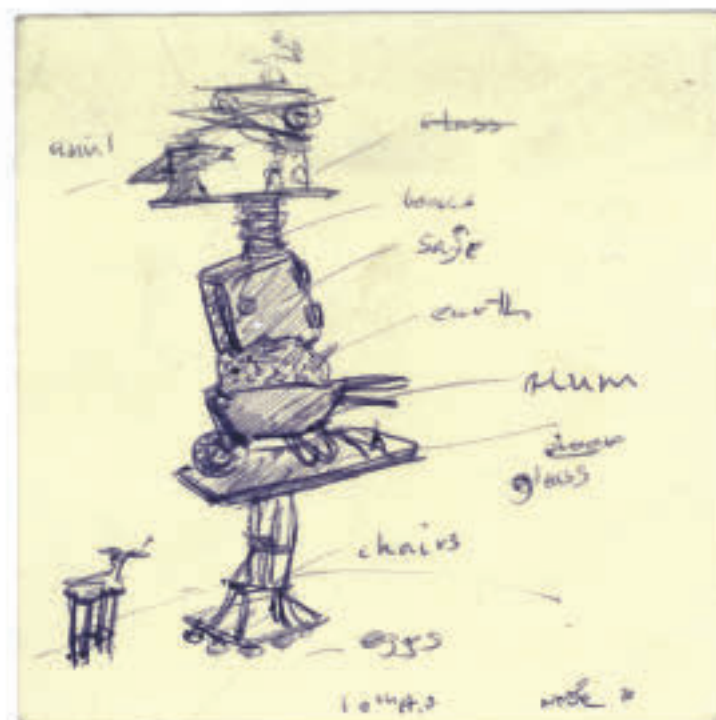


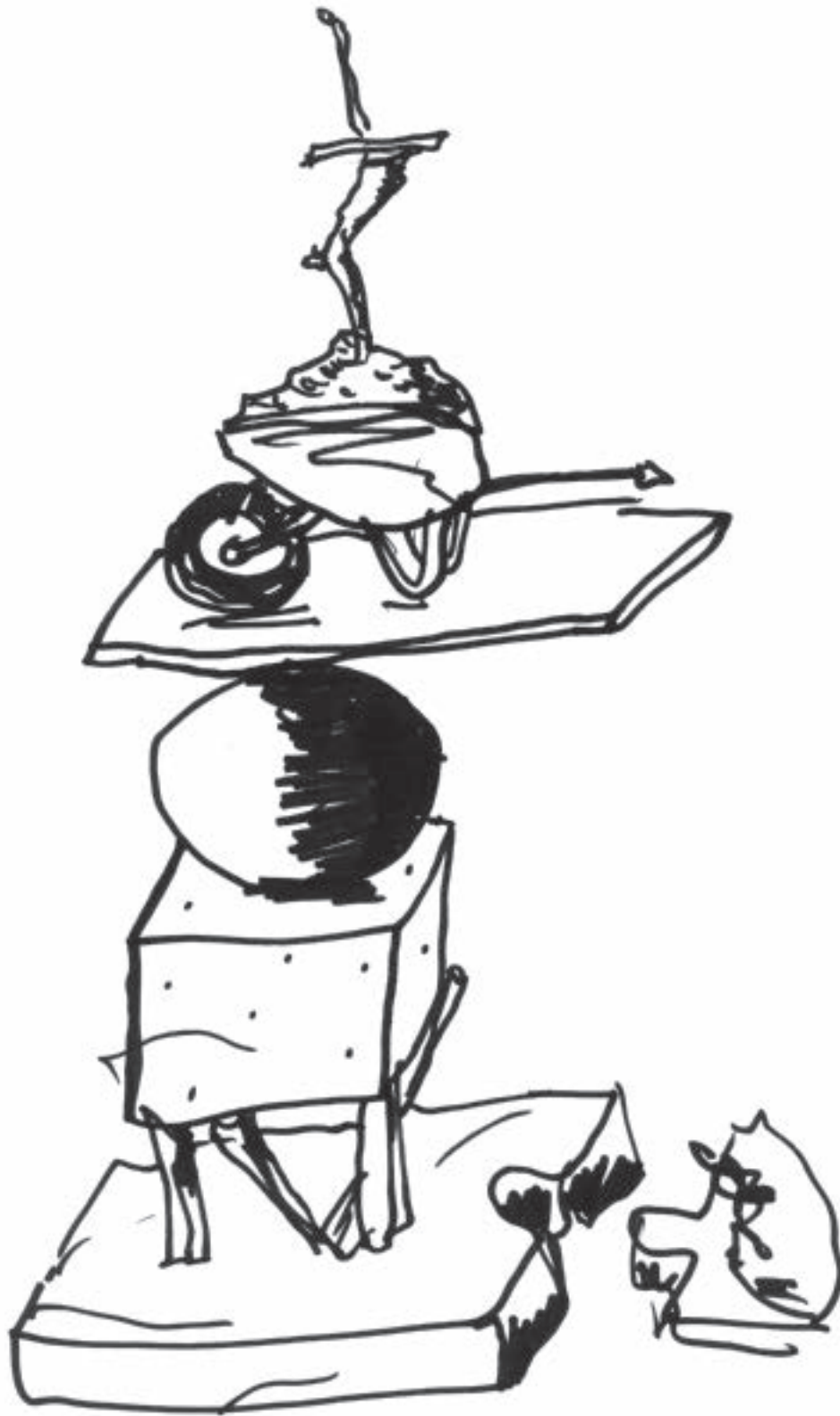


M

BEAUTIFUL

MESSAGE









MY BEAUTIFUL MISTAKE

2012

WHEELBARROW, TWO CHAIRS, STOOL, BOOKS,
TUBE OF PAINT, PENCIL, WOOD, STEEL, ALUMINIUM,
RUBBER, COTTON SHEET

DIMENSIONS:

MAIN: 355.6 x 188 x 118.75 cm (140 x 74 x 46 $\frac{3}{4}$ in)

STOOL: 56.5 x 45.1 x 40 cm (22 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 17 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 15 $\frac{3}{4}$ in)









DELAYS ARE
REVOLUTIONS

HANS ULRICH
OBRIST



BEGINNINGS

Hans Ulrich Obrist: I have to open my computer because I have some questions on there.

Sue Webster: You've got questions, good.

HUO: Some are structured and some are improvised because obviously some are about chance, particularly for recording an interview in your studio on Chance Street. It's the best address ever!

SW: I think that was one of the reasons why we bought the building.

HUO: I thought it must have played a role, no?

SW: It did, it played a massive role.

HUO: So chance plays a role in your work?

SW: It does, absolutely.

Tim Noble: We allow things to unfold. I mean sometimes you start off with a very specific idea but it never really ends up the same – it's the glorious nature of making mistakes.

SW: But also chance is like circumstance, isn't it?

TN: Chance is circumstance.

SW: So the chance discovery of an object could lead to a whole sculpture, or it could lead to a whole body of work, couldn't it? Which it has done.

TN: [To HUO] How much do you reckon things are up to chance?

HUO: I think there is always a form of controlled chance, but it's an open-ended system ... I love Chance Street. We'll come back to this, but first can you tell me how it all started? Tell me about the epiphany of your beginnings – how did it all begin?

TN: Well, I guess I didn't want to be in London, so I went to Nottingham [Trent Polytechnic at the time, now Nottingham Trent University] and I bumped into Sue.

SW: By chance.

TN: Well, there was no chance about going to that college; I wanted to experience the north of England as I'd never been there. But I was late because I'm always late. I can't help it.

SW: You were late enrolling on the first day.

TN: So I was a day late and there was only one other person who was late and that was Sue. It was quite electric because she was dressed in such a unique way; bright green coat, red lipstick, peroxide hair, these skinny-type jeans with holes in them and silver sprayed monkey boots, and I was like wow, she's really interesting. Obviously we had a conversation but she was very much saying, 'Oh, well I'm not staying

because I'm going to be a TV presenter for this rock and roll music programme called *The Tube*.' I really liked that – that she had one foot out of the door, that she was off. She wasn't hanging around.

SW: You were late and I was late. The only two people in the room.

TN: I thought it was pretty amazing.

SW: Yeah, me too.

HUO: Delays are revolutions.

TN: I like that.

HUO: I'm curious about the context of the time. Was there an art scene [in Nottingham], what was the kind of vibe?

SW: There was no art scene, but it was the most interesting city near where I lived. I was born in Leicester and I used to go to Nottingham quite often as a kid to watch bands. There was a music scene, but not an art scene. So when it came to leaving home I just thought, well I want to go to Nottingham.

TN: There was this myth that there was supposed to be seven girls to one guy.

SW: Yeah, there were too many women.

TN: You would literally get gangs of women walking down the street arm in arm, like whole rows of them – it was quite a terrifying place.

SW: It was one of those slightly northern Midlands cities, and it had a big city centre where everyone would accumulate at night. Despite the weather everyone would go out in short sleeves.

TN: It was freezing cold.

SW: Girls in little miniskirts, boys in T-shirts ...

HUO: Wow, it sounds hard.

TN: It is hard.

HUO: It's interesting that music connected you in some kind of way. Because Dan Graham says that one can only understand an artist's practice if one knows what music the artist is listening to.

TN: Do you think everyone understands music? I just assumed music played a big part in everyone's lives, but I'm not sure. I mean it always seems integral that the two things go hand in hand – from your childhood bedroom, to school days, to everything. But does it *always* figure?

SW: Well, often when you talk to rock stars or lead singers, they all went through art school. Nick Cave went through art school, Brian Eno, John Lennon ...

TN: But I guess when you're in the womb you either see

colour and light, or you hear sound of some sort – you piece together a landscape.

SW: For our generation there wasn't really an option to become a professional artist as a full-time career, so you started off being in a band, and you just thought, I'll go to art school while I'm getting my band together.

HUO: So art school was more of a clouded reality, something to do, and then the band was the main thing?

TN: There was a very great sense of being wanted when you were in a band, because music at the time seemed like the most amazing thing to be able to get involved with – like, the most direct kind of thing to do with clothes and your attitude. I was always put forward as the lead singer, but then nothing came out. It was like a psychological block. So you end up doing something else, and I always liked making things.

HEROES

HUO: So, in 1986 you were in Nottingham and you met on that first day. Who were your heroes at the time, the kind of people that you loved?

SW: My hero was Siouxsie Sioux from Siouxsie and the Banshees. That was the reason I was late – because I'd been to see them in Amsterdam. I used to travel all over Europe to see bands play.

HUO: So you went to see Siouxsie and the Banshees in Amsterdam, you were late for college and then you met. Amazing.

SW: That's the chance meeting. But the thing is, to this day I have no idea why Tim was late.

TN: I'm always late. I probably had to get there myself, which means I'm going to be late.

HUO: [To Tim] Who were your heroes?

TN: I think I sort of had my dad, my brother and my mum – they were very into art, so to me it just seemed like they were all quite like heroes in a funny way. My brother would bring music into the house – there was a band called The Specials – in terms of music they were really important.

HUO: The Specials?

TN: Yes

HUO: And what kind of music was that?

TN: They were from Coventry and they played this kind of

ska, but the lyrical content was just genius.

SW: It was political music of the time ...

TN: Very fast. It was basically a two-tone, black and white band but the Skinheads got involved so the atmosphere would consequently get very violent. They were anti-racism but it had this phenomenal atmosphere attached to it. It appealed to the working class kids.

SW: Coventry's in the Midlands, near Leicester and Nottingham. So they came from the inner city and they spoke a lot about the concrete jungle.

HUO: Very J. G. Ballard.

TN: Well, that's it – everything is informed by the city but I grew up in the countryside, and Sue grew up close to a town. At the time, I was interested in making stuff; improvising, making go-carts, making dens, damming streams ... it was just hours and hours and hours of improvisation and you literally can't hear yourself think because it's so loud. It's humbling, isn't it? But I suppose one day you've got to get out of the village and, I guess, something like music beckons you out – it calls you out because you want to go and see that band, so it draws you out of the village into the town.

HUO: Like a magnet.

TN: I was going to say like puss out of a spot, but maybe a magnet is better.

HUO: So that's 1986. Who else in music did you find influential at the time?

TN: The Clash.

SW: I wasn't really big on The Clash. I was always a big fan of David Bowie – see, Bowie never went out of fashion.

HUO: That's the interesting thing, that Bowie is still relevant today.

SW: Tell me about it! I was listening to *David Live* while I was cleaning my mirrored windows this afternoon. He's like Madonna (or Madonna's like him) – continually reinventing himself. And every persona was a classic; The Thin White Duke, The Cracked Actor, Ziggy Stardust ... he's so cool.

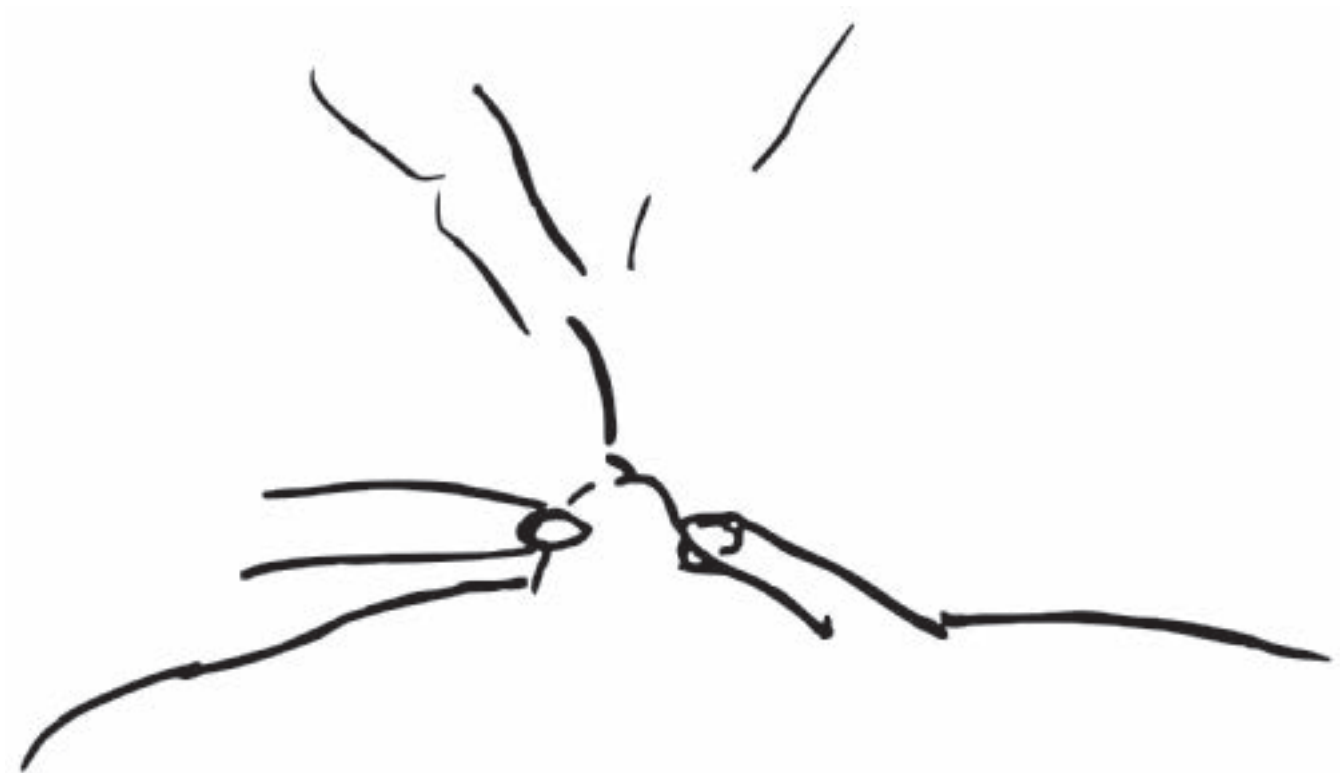
HUO: I often see Nicholas Roeg the film director, he's my neighbour in Notting Hill. He directed *The Man Who Fell To Earth* [1978 film starring David Bowie] – that's also amazing.

TN: 'Don't take my photo, don't take my photograph. Otherwise my eyes become fixed'

HUO: He is my big unrealised interview you know, David Bowie.

SW: Oh my God, he's my big unrealised interview as well. I'm hoping to interview him for a music paper.





HUO: It would be a great thing if it happens – it would be so amazing if you get to meet him... I was also wondering if you were subject to any artistic influence, or did that come later? Who were the artists who originally inspired you?

SW: I didn't have an artistic upbringing – my parents were quite working class, so art was never talked about or brought into the household, contrary to Tim's, which was nothing but art. Art for me had to be found and discovered, but when I was at school we were just taught about the Renaissance, which I found really uninteresting. It wasn't until I went to art college that my mind was opened up to people like Andy Warhol. But I think Dali was my first big art hero if you like.

TN: How did you find out about him then?

SW: There was a new boy at my school and his parents had recently divorced, so he was considered a bit of an outsider. I used to go and visit him after school to do the ironing for his dad, and it was because of this that I discovered *The Sunday Times*, which I'd never heard of as my parents would only read the tabloids. I thought it was an amazing newspaper, and I tried to convince my Dad to read it instead of the *News of the World*. Anyway, *The Sunday Times* had a review of a book that had just come out in 1986, *My Life with Dalí* by Amanda Lear. So I bought it, and it was the first book that I ever read outside of the school curriculum.

TN: She was beautiful, wasn't she a transvestite?

SW: Transsexual and a pop star ... So, that's how I discovered Salvador Dalí.

HUO: It's interesting because both Warhol and Dalí are artists who resonated far beyond the art world. There are very few artists who at every moment, during every epoch, go beyond the art world. I once had a conversation with Jeff Koons about it and he said he went to see Dalí when he was a boy – they met in a hotel and he shook his hand. It was really important for him.

SW: So after I read that book, I went on a pilgrimage to Barcelona by myself – I was 17 or 18 – to visit the Dalí museum in Figueres. Have you been there?

HUO: No, never.

SW: It's really tacky but in a great way. I had to get the bus from Leicester to London and then the train to Dover, the ferry across to France, another train to Barcelona and then onto Figueres. It was a massive thing to do at the time – a two week trip with little money, sleeping wherever I could. So yes – I guess it was Dalí more than anyone else.

HUO: And that was before you met [Tim]?

SW: Yes.

HUO: So Tim grew up in a completely opposite environment to you, in a place where there was art?

TN: I was always making sculptures – kinetic things. My mum was a jeweller so she got me obsessed with detail. My dad [David Noble] became head of sculpture at Cheltenham Art College, so as a kid he used to bring me in and they used to build whole environments in there – it was the most incredible place. Everything was about the magic of making things; you could get old prams and make go-carts – you could have exhilarating, dangerous fun. Piecing things together to make a ride from hell, those were just the most crucial pieces of education I've ever had. They also had lectures in the College, which were very antagonistic – the audience used to really have a go at the person giving the lecture. There was a guy called Nigel Rolfe who was a performance artist, and he had a piece of string ...

HUO: I know his work – amazing.

TN: He used to wrap this ball of string around his head.

HUO: It's kind of like body art – post-Viennese Actionism.

TN: He just kept wrapping this ball of string around his head – it was quite wonderful.

HUO: I saw the work in the late '80s, early '90s when I first came to England.

SW: Where would you have seen that?

HUO: I saw it on a VHS tape when I did this lecture tour through art schools in the early '90s and people showed me lots of things.

TN: That piece is just the most suffocating thing, but very powerful. So things like that and also Jean Tinguely was very influential as well.

HUO: Tinguely played a big part in my Swiss childhood; he was like the Salvador Dalí of Switzerland – a very public figure. We didn't have to go to school on the day he died, and when his funeral happened there was a free afternoon.

TN: I think, later on, Tinguely got too good at making things and he started to make adjustments so that the machines would last. But when you go back to his original show at Tate [1982], you can watch footage on YouTube of these amazing machines that are clanking away and it's just the most dysfunctional human thing I've ever seen in my whole life. They're just phenomenal. You only realise how addicted you become to his work once you've been in its presence.



Even though I hate the idea of interactive art, the way you have to connect with it seems so phoney, but Tinguely's sculptures were really, really good. You know what I mean by literally pressing a button to have entertainment? But those things had a madness about them, a psychotic madness.

HUO: I was wondering, what were the first works that you did together which you think are valid? Because you met in '86, but it's only 9 years later that you did your first work together. It's interesting, no?

SW: Well, we were growing up and we were at art school. We lived together after we left – we went further north because it was much cheaper to go up north than down to London. We were offered a free studio and we started working together, but not in a contemporary art way, more in a survival way. We did the odd jobs, making shop window displays, and stage sets for bands.

TN: It was very free flow ...

HUO: So what kind of stage sets did you do?

TN: They were very improvised, and there wasn't a great sense that these things were going to last so you had to make things really quickly. They had to have visual effects and movement – there was a tremendous energy to them. We had some very crazy inventions – a giant fishing rod that had a very realistic crow on the end that flapped its wings in a really odd way, and you could dangle it over the audience...

SW: Around that time there was the whole rave scene in Leeds and Manchester, when Ecstasy came into fashion. And we kind of didn't really fit in because we came from the punk thing, but they had lots of money to spend on stage sets...

TN: Everyone was united by this pill and there was this tremendous feeling to dance and have raves, so people could get hold of huge spaces and actually charge an entrance fee.

HUO: So it became a business?

TN: I think it started to become a business but we caught it at quite a good time, when they were saying, 'Wow, God those huge stage sets.' We never took any E at all, we just thought it was hideous, and I didn't like the fashion either – baggy clothes and that whole *love* thing. We wore black and had black hair – we were the antithesis of that.

HUO: It's interesting that in all the things you're telling me, London never pops up in these years. It's all kinds of places except London.

SW: I didn't have any family or friends in the south – the

idea of moving to London was what everyone else did.

TN: My grandmother was from Kensington and my dad studied at the Royal College of Art, so it seemed quite good to explore a different kind of England.

SW: Your family had never been north.

TN: So it was quite electric, unknown territory, you bring something back to the table don't you, like a different kind of conversation.

SW: But then I think there was a moment where it kind of ran its course. We felt that we'd done everything that was possible, and we were trying to stage exhibitions but there was no audience.

HUO: And when was that?

SW: Around the same time, because we had a studio in Dean Clough in Halifax. We had thought we could do the same kind of thing that happened with the Manchester music scene; with Factory Records, and you know, Joy Division, only with art. We'll stay up here, they'll discover us one day. Of course they never did because everything revolved around London. So one day the news hit us that somebody, an unknown artist, had put a shark in a tank and it was the biggest shock the art world had experienced.

TN: My brother came in and said, 'There's some guy who's putting maggots in a tank in this glass thing.' And even though we always talked about things like that, I was still shocked.

SW: So, we travelled 200 miles down to London and we saw the Damien Hirst show at the Saatchi Gallery [1992] and it just blew our minds.

TN: It was the vacuous space, the confidence, it was also the Saatchi.

SW: Yeah, seeing the Saatchi Gallery for the first time where you had one work of art in one room, just the complete confidence of the work and the luxury of having nothing else. It was just a massive influence for us. So, I think it was then that we started thinking more about art than music. Tim got a place at the Royal College of Art, and we moved to London.

HUO: So that was a kind of epiphany – it's a moment when it all comes together, after the first epiphany when you met each other ... Were you inspired by Gilbert & George, when you did the posters of your heads on their bodies?

TN: They stood out as being fairly extraordinary I think, in terms of their persona and their image. *Underneath the Arches* [1970] seemed like a fascinating idea. We actually



saw that striking image of them in *The Face* magazine, which had been the crucial magazine of the '90's.

SW: Just like the *NME* [*The New Musical Express*] was the hero of the late '70's, early '80's, although it was more about music – it was how you discovered what was happening in the world. Then *The Face* came along and suddenly art started dribbling into the cultural magazines. So where did you get the information from if you weren't living in London in the middle of the Punk scene? You got your information from the music papers and magazines that came through the letter box.

NIHILISTIC OPTIMISTIC

HUO: And – jumping forward – when the shadows entered your work, that was another revelation that has obviously continued ever since.

SW: Well, that was by chance wasn't it?

HUO: I love it, another chance encounter.

SW: So we were working on making sculptures with electricity and light bulbs, but we had to make them in the dark ...

TN: I think we read about Las Vegas having no corners and no clocks, so it was this timeless environment – you couldn't tell the difference between day and night. We blocked off all the natural sunlight and created this cocoon. But we used to leave these things on all the time.

SN: Yeah, we used to leave the light sculptures on because we had no money for heating, and they would warm up the studio. We used to fiddle the electricity meter so we had these light bulbs running around the clock. I think I walked into the studio one day and the silhouette of my profile was on the wall, and it was so precise that Tim wanted to draw round it.

TN: We were very embarrassed by these sculptures to begin with. They didn't seem very good to us – it didn't seem very important.

HUO: And what's going to be in the show? All I know is the title – *Nihilistic Optimistic*.

SW: N O for short.

TN: ON, NO, I just want to know.

SW: I like to refer to this body of work as *Street Compositions*, because we've built the entire exhibition out of materials that we've discovered by chance, walking down Chance

Street and around the area. It's been an on-going project for the past two or three years.

TN: There was a kind of deliberate choice not to use such recognisable objects anymore and to start fracturing things up, splintering things. So the mind has to wonder in a different way, like you're giving and taking and it's as much about the gaps and the holes in between.

HUO: Is it a mapping of the city? Through these different found things, it's a kind of a cataloguing of it?

TN: It might be a mapping, like an ant would go out so far and bring things back, but it always has a consistent route. Even though you think you're taking many different routes you're actually circumnavigating a certain area.

HUO: So you go out every day - it's like a *flânerie*?

TN: We don't go looking.

HUO: No?

TN: No, we just walk.

HUO: Gilbert & George always walked. It's very related to when they walked through the streets of London. They found a lot of the things in their practice through walking.

SW: Yeah, like the newspaper posters for their recent show [*London Pictures*, White Cube, 2012].

HUO: The photographs they took of chewing gum in the street, very beautiful now, or the spitting.

TN: Yeah, the spitting.

SW: It's about the environment you live in, you exist in. So we're just accumulating the remnants of that and bringing it back.

TN: Incredible human presence, extraordinary resonance of human presence.

HUO: Can you say a little more about the title for the show?

SW: Well I suppose it represents the two opposites in our work and in our lives.

HUO: And that is something you've said previously – that much of your work derives its power from the fusion of opposites. Can you talk about this?

SW: I think we've done nothing but talk about it, haven't we? I mean you know the environment that I grew up in was completely without any influence of art. The environment that Tim grew up in was only about artistic influence.

TN: Yet that was such a huge block as well because it seemed stuck in many ways. So you had to free up another whole avenue. If I'd gone on with my ideas about what I thought art was, I think I would have become very trapped, whereas

Sue said let's just do stuff. So we did – there wasn't any feeling of, oh my God this is right or wrong, it was just about releasing stuff.

SW: Yes.

TN: For better or for worse. But then you start forming an intellectual kind of structure don't you.

MY BEAUTIFUL MISTAKE

HUO: Tell me a bit more about the work in the show.

SW: Well, we went to see Gustav Metzger because I knew that he was quite interested in our work, and we asked him to do something for the new catalogue.

HUO: So there's going to be something by Gustav also, how wonderful.

SW: We gave him a copy of our book, *British Rubbish...* here's a guy who's into the Art Strike and auto-destructiveness, and he was very concerned about the intentional rips on the cover of the book and going, 'Oh my God, how is this going to preserve in future years?'

TN: He's into conservation.

SW: He was bothered about the conservation of the book.

HUO: Which images did you show him?

SW: We showed him images of the new shadow pieces that are in the show and he just looked at us and said, 'If you got rid of the shadow then it might be interesting, critically.' And so we thought, now is the time to eliminate the shadow.

TN: Which is really great because we've thought about getting rid of the shadow for a long time.

SW: We became very concerned with making a sculpture that would exist without a light source; although the line of a figure would be integral to its creation, we would never expose the shadow. But then we realised that somebody one day won't be able to resist and they'll ruin it, so this is how the new work came about – *My Beautiful Mistake* – the only sculpture in the show without a shadow.

TN: It's very informed by the height and the space [of the studio] you know, because instead of going outwards it suddenly started going up and up and up.

HUO: And it's amazing that it grew out of the conversation with Gustav ... Is it very fragile or does it just appear to be fragile?

SW: I don't know – is your heart racing?

HUO: Is it dangerous?

TN: I think it's brutally honest... In the sense that it has all the marks of its making, and all the mistakes were left in. Do you know how refreshing it was to be able to do that? To just leave it, so the higher it got the more I kind of ...

SW: ... the more liberating it was not to actually follow the line of the shadow.

HUO: And so through the light you discovered the shadow and then in a conversation with Gustav you could liberate yourselves from the shadow, something you'd wanted to do for a long time.

TN: It's almost like you need someone to tell you, isn't that weird?

HUO: Well, this has been a great interview.

SW: It was good for a Friday night.

HUO: It all just fell into place. When I drove up Chance Street it made me think of Duchamp and chance and I suddenly thought – we need to talk about chance.

SW: Yeah, I think that was the common place wasn't it.

HUO: So, do you think I can find a taxi?

SW: Yeah, yeah, come on we'll get you one.

HUO: Ok great. By chance I'll get one ...

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