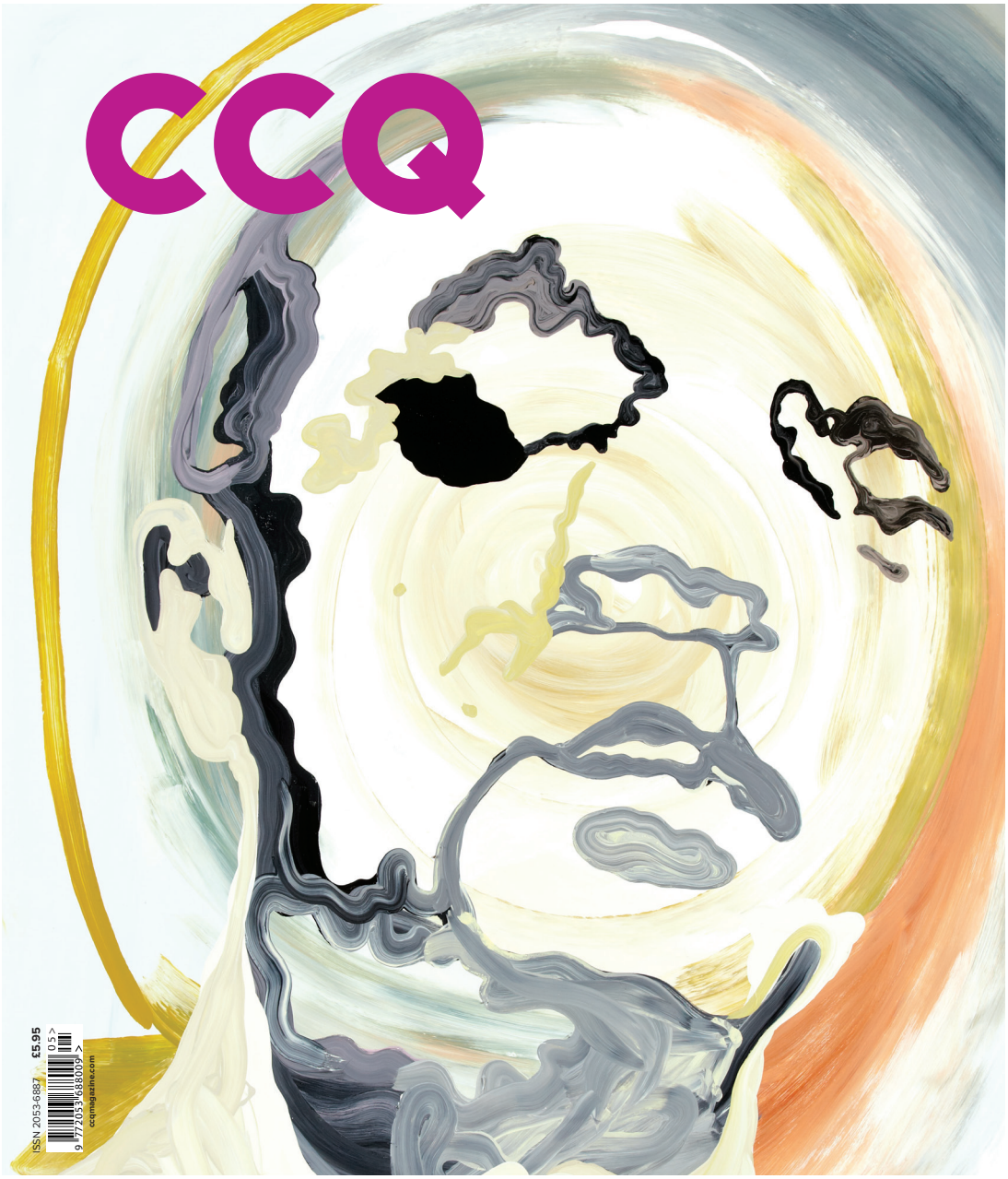
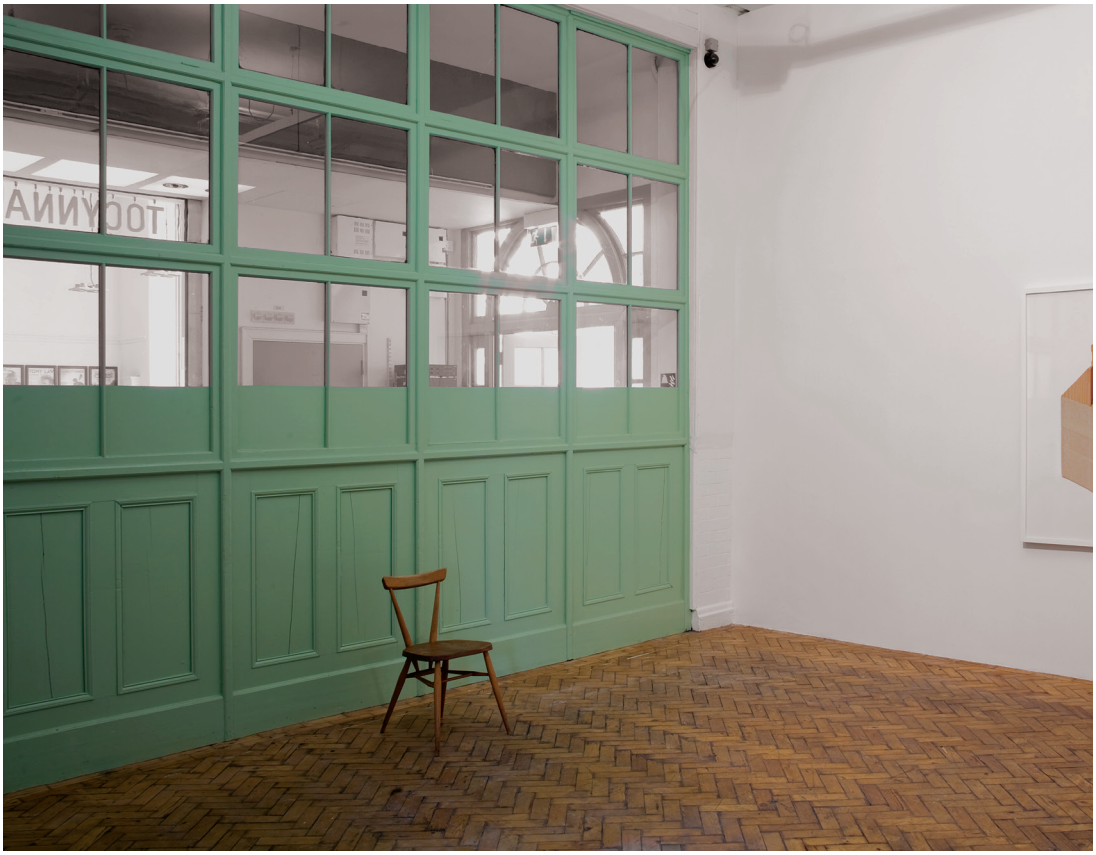
TANYA LEIGHTON

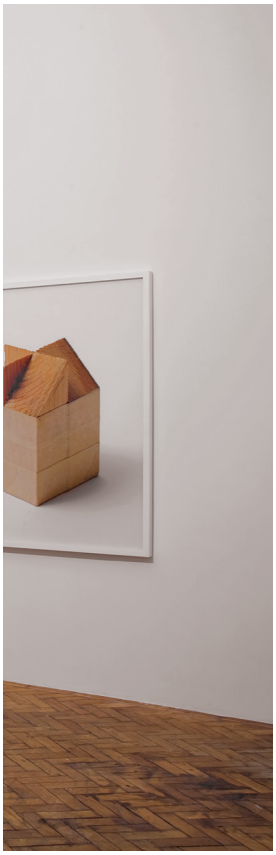


CCQ, January 2015



The Moment of Making

Sean Edwards' artistic practice crosses media but is rooted in a conceptual minimalism, where the detail of a millimetre gap is as important as the commentary on failed urban planning. **Sam Hasler** talks to the 2014 winner of the National Eisteddfod Gold Medal for Fine Art about sculptural objects, Bruce Springsteen, Ghostbusters and transubstantiation.



Sam Hasler: When did you first think of yourself as an artist?

Sean Edwards: I think that, unconsciously, I learned very early on that I could communicate through visual language and I always found that expression through visual language was natural and comfortable to me, but I wouldn't have said I 'knew' this until much later. As an eight-year-old kid, I liked the *Ghostbusters*, so I made myself a proton pack. In some ways it was as simple as that. The arts were not a part of my upbringing. I wasn't really aware of the wider possibilities for this visual expression to be a legitimate way to communicate ideas, I guess, beyond commercial means, like advertising, illustration, etc. A wider set of possibilities began to open up slightly through GCSE and A Level as I started to look at art more closely. It wasn't really until Foundation level, studying under Brendan Burns, that I found out what it was I'd been doing and looking at. I think that there's a trajectory that can be seen though my formal art education. In some ways I feel like I came to contemporary art quite late, but I think it was helpful to have a certain naïveté at those early stages. It was art education that gave me a structure, learning about art history and art theory. This was the way I became aware of what that visual language was. I probably didn't consciously think of myself as an artist until I'd graduated from The Slade.

SH: Why are you specific in describing yourself as a sculptor?

SE: It's largely that my education was focused specifically on sculpture. At Cardiff, the fine art course was split into specialisms. I studied sculpture, so all my lectures and tutorials were structured around a sculptural language. There was a focus on the manipulation of objects in space, which is arguably the main concern of sculpture; so, I describe myself as a sculptor to reflect this sculpture background. It's a shame that that specialist nature has gone from the course.

SH: Is a sculpture background different from a painting background or a printmaking background?

SE: I think so. In the very beginning, it's a simple case of a different set of studios, equipped for different ways of working; then, it's the tools and the practical techniques you use and, then, it moves into a different set of conceptual concerns and theories. There are two core approaches to sculpture: one, a reductive method, starting with a block of material and carving, removing until you have the work; and, two, an additive method, beginning with something small and adding and adding, piece by piece. I think my work still comes from these two methodologies.

SH: That sounds like a very physical, hands-on process. People perhaps imagine a more conceptual approach to making artwork, particularly work that seems minimal in nature?

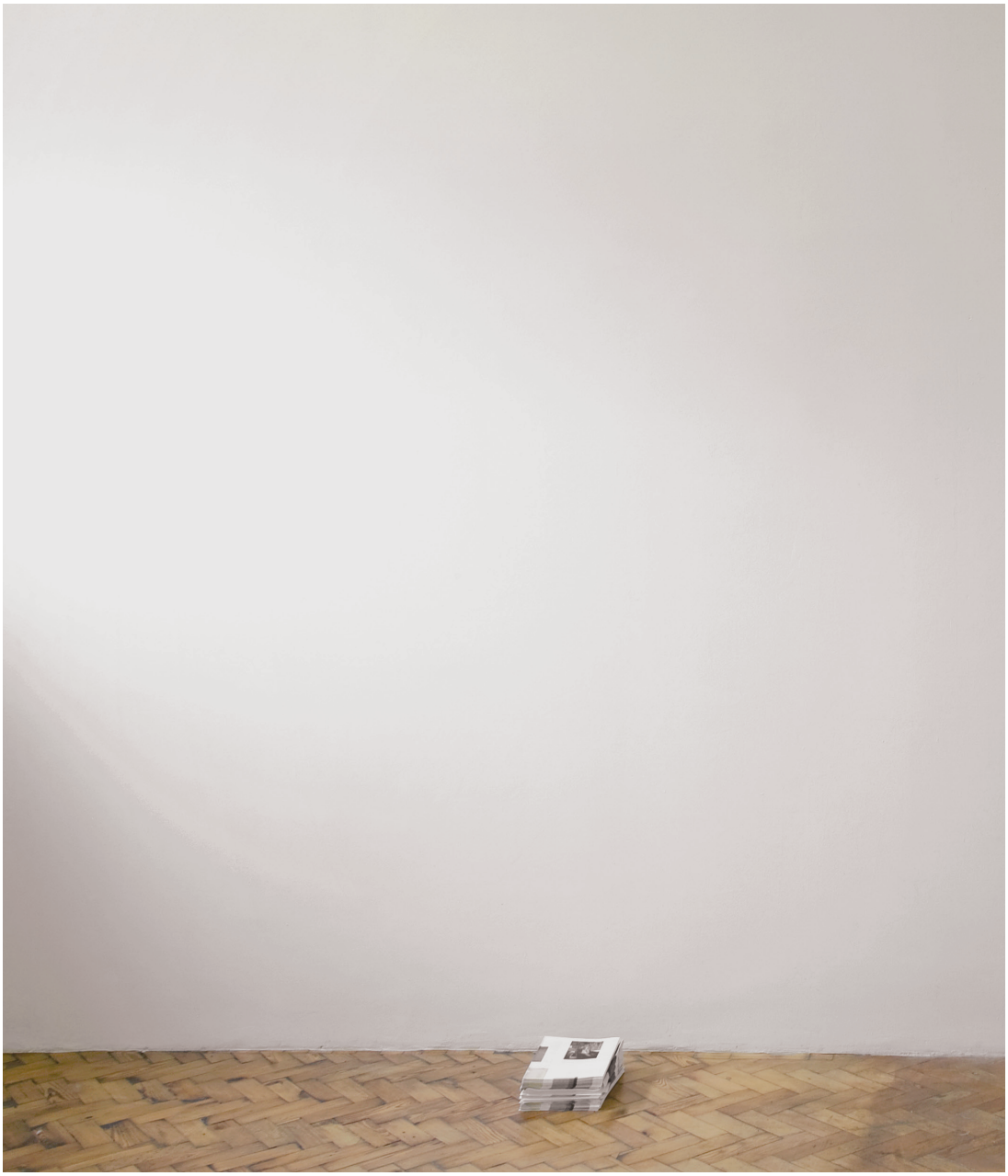
SE: Yes, it's a physical process in the studio. I wouldn't say that I'm a conceptual artist. There can be a crossover. I remember being given a Lawrence Weiner interview to read as a student. It's an early interview with him and he talks about a significant shift that took place in his work, from his physical paintings and sculptures to the text work. There was a sculpture he was making; he had a piece of stone, he kept turning it around, looking and looking, trying to find where he could make a start to his sculpture, what would be his initial approach. At one point, he realises that this process, everything he was doing, all the thought and the questioning, this was the work itself. He then began making the text works we know now. There's still a physical root to this thinking. So, very early on, it was through this process-driven, conceptual art that I began to develop my understanding of sculpture: the possibility that the making is never complete, that sculpture is a process. It places a great deal of importance on the viewer. The moment of making, I hope, is always present in the work, so that the viewer can enter into that process.

SH: The viewer should enter into the process of making the work?

SE: Conceptually, yes. The receiving of the sculpture is a part of its making. They literally complete the work when they engage in the process of its making. For me, that moment of exchange is the work. It's hard for me to articulate these ideas in words. The fact that I find this so hard to explain is the reason I keep on making sculpture.

SH: There's a Kurt Vonnegut quote where he says that asking someone to read a book is like asking someone to turn up at a concert with a violin, sit in the orchestra and play their part. Is this similar to how you think people should engage in sculpture?

SE: Very much so. It's in that way that there are demands on the viewer to do more than merely accepting it. They play a part in the creation of the work much the same way as reading. The viewer has a responsibility, but this comes from the way I do things. I ⟶



think in a visual, sculptural language – objects and their relation to space, the materials things are made of, and the way they've been built – it's just the way I view and understand things. That's the reason I've ended up making. I think the viewer needs to be coaxed into that way of thinking to be able to receive the work. I'm attempting to set up a situation where that can happen.

SH: You have spoken about bringing the studio to the gallery, or exhibitions being like a studio. Your exhibitions don't look like this room, your real studio, so how does that work?

SE: It's an approach towards being able to make exhibitions. It's something I've been thinking about over several years. I try to bring something of the studio into the gallery space. The studio in this case represents an intuition, or intuitive way of thinking; whereas, the gallery seems to represent a set of more definite ideals and intentions. I've been trying to find a way to get a balance between intuition and intention.

SH: Are you playing around with the status of the objects? At first, it seems as if you are grandly lifting the status, calling a chair a 'sculpture', and at the same time diminishing the status saying the space is a 'studio'.

SE: No, I don't think that's my intention. I very seldom refer to the things I make as 'sculptures'. I prefer to call them 'objects'. The problem with thinking about status in my work is that I never think of the objects as being completed. The studio activity is the sculpture and I want to take that activity and the unfinished status of the objects into the gallery. With my show at Chapter, the objects might have seemed complete, but they were, for me, a massively incomplete set of propositions for my practice. It's all the ideas we've discussed, about the viewer and the process of making. That's what I'm trying to figure out.

SH: Let's talk about the Chapter show. I remember at the time thinking of a famous story. There's a guy who works at a scrap yard and the guards think he's stealing. So, every day they search his wheelbarrow and can't find anything but rubbish and scrap that he can take. It turns out in the end that he's stealing wheelbarrows. I saw your show at Chapter as an exhibition of wheelbarrows. There were as many objects in the gallery as most other exhibitions in Chapter, and yet it still looked virtually empty. Was that intentional?

SE: Yes, it was intentional to make the space look empty; or, at least, appear empty at first. It was a space that I knew very well and very personally. I wanted to work with every part of the building, including the people there and the way things are done there, and the history and previous uses of the building. I was thinking about people's expectations, what people are used to and comfortable with, and I wanted to challenge that. I think I pushed things to be more intuitive. I wanted to push that idea of the audience completing the work to an extreme.

SH: The exhibition was designed to appear empty in a certain way, but it doesn't seem to me that your exhibition was about emptiness or nothingness; not in the same way that some artists are dealing explicitly with those concepts.

SE: No, it wasn't about nothingness. The gallery, the building and the people that use the space were a set of things that I wanted to work with; I wanted all of that to become an object. I wanted these things to be sculptural material in the exhibition. My way in to thinking about the installation was to treat the building in the same way that I treat one of my small 'practice objects'; to offer it up to the same set of questions and circumstances that I would a practice object in my studio. The emptiness of the objects in the exhibition and the other interventions I made, like the panels that were removed from the wall to expose the windows, I wanted those things to present the building as an object. The objects I did make were there to support the building itself. I wanted to confound people's expectations and in some way I wanted it to be a difficult exhibition.

SH: It was difficult; it seems as if it was quite mischievous too. Is there humour in your work?

SE: Not really. I don't think that I intend to set up humour. I never think to myself 'I'm going to do this like this because I think it will be funny'.

SH: But what about the way that the work is provocative, is that not humorous?

SE: Maybe it's with an intention of annoyance more than humour. [*Laughs*] No, it's not really annoyance or humour that I think of when I plan and make the work. I think there is an intention of friction and that can lead to many possible reactions. I want the work to have life. I don't want it to seem dry or dead. This could be humourous at times, but in other works, *Maelfa*, for example, it's something else. There were specific shots that we looked for when we filmed that: the glimpses of people and elements of colour that would bring some life to it.

SH: The recurring motif of Bruce Springsteen within your work seems to occur with a little humour. It carries elements of teenage fandom, personal obsession and human warmth into view. How did that motif develop?

SE: I guess sometimes I've played on it in a humorous way. Since about 2009 he's been present in several works, but mostly in small episodes. I wasn't a huge Springsteen fan before then. I only really started listening to him because of my *Nebraska* project and the interest in him grew from there. I'd found out about Springsteen's *Nebraska* being this four-track demo tape that was released as an album. It's the looser, unfinished, demo-tape qualities that I really liked and the idea of a 'sketch' being presented as complete. *Nebraska* had such a specific tone, both its musical tone and its political tone. At one point, he is almost howling like a broken man. It's not his grand epic records that I'm so interested in. I took a quote from him in an interview where he said, "I want to write small and with just the details". It's that side of his work that I'm most interested in.
The work started out as a research project. I was going to the British library and digging out all the reviews I could find from the time when *Nebraska* was released. It's just before *Born In the USA*, from where he goes on to become a global superstar. *Nebraska* was a record where he didn't do what was expected of him and it surprised the fans and critics of the time. I had a notebook where I was working through all this research and, in the end, it was my notebook that was presented in the gallery. My notebook was my version of *Nebraska*; it was a work presented at that early stage of production, trying to keep all of those looser, unfinished, demo tape qualities.

SH: You were brought up in a Catholic background. Do you describe yourself as Catholic?

SE: No, I'm not practising.

SH: Does your background in Catholicism influence your work?

SE: There are all sorts of ways that it influences the work, but most of those are left in the studio. It's not very often explicit in the work. Just over there, I have a box of material that I've collected in relation to Catholicism. I often think about making more explicit work about it, but it's not happened yet. Maybe it never will. Catholicism has had an influence on the way I think about sculpture, particularly in the idea of the transubstantiation of the sacraments.

SH: Transubstantiation is quite a complicated concept: the idea that, during a specific part the church service where bread and wine are distributed to the congregation, the bread changes into the 'body of Christ' and the wine changes into the 'blood of Christ'. So, I can see how this might influence your thoughts about sculpture. Could you say a little more about it?

SE: It's the way that you can take something and not have to do a massive amount to it to change its intention. I think this is relevant to sculpture, the idea that something can be significantly changed without its physical form being altered at all. But, importantly, the Catholics believe that it's not a purely symbolic change. It's not a metaphor; it's an actual, real change. The bread is flesh. The wine is blood.

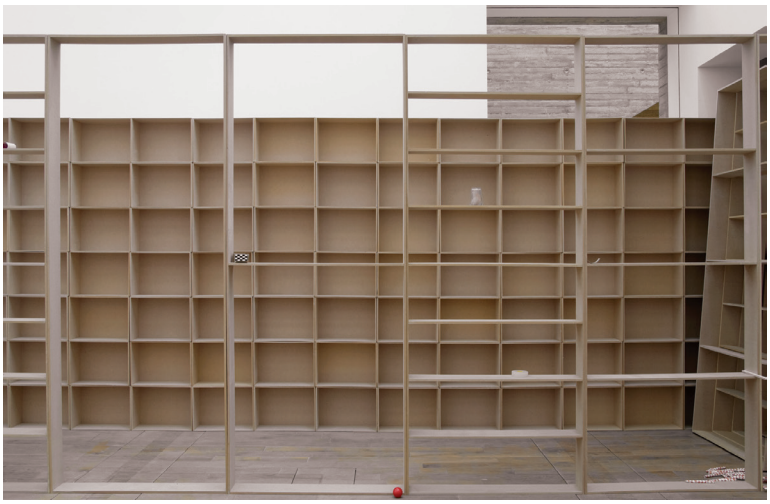
SH: That sounds quite gruesome.

SE: Not at all. This change is to do with the offering and receiving of the bread. The bread becomes a 'host' of a declaration. When Christ offered the bread at the last supper and said 'this is my Body', the belief is that the bread became his body. It was his body that was offered, but the object retained the physical properties of bread. The change was a change in relationships to the 'substance' rather than a change in the atomic, physical properties.

SH: I'm interested in the relationship between an artist's identity in a religious, political, national way and its presence in an artist's work. I'd like to ask about your Welsh identity. Is that something that has a presence in your work?

SE: It quietly exists in the sculpture. There's a sense of tone, a Welsh tone; but in a similar way to the Catholicism, it's present in the work in one respect, but the work is not about Wales, Welshness, God or Catholicism. You don't need to know about these things to understand the work. Working in London felt very different. I made a different kind of work when I lived there. The studio here is influenced and affected by the Welsh landscape; by that, I mean the physical landscape, the industrial landscape and the cultural landscape. For me, politically, it's also important to be a practising artist based in Wales. I want to contribute to something here. I want to contribute to Welsh culture. **—CCQ**

Drawn in Cursive (Part 3), a Chapter Touring Exhibition, is at MOSTYN, Llandudno until 01 March 2015, mostyn.org



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Drawn In Cursive (part one), **Sean Edwards**, 2013
Installation view Chapter, Cardiff , Image courtesy the artist, Limoncello, London and Tanya Leighton, Berlin, photo: Jon Fallon

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Drawn In Cursive (part three), **Sean Edwards**, 2014
Installation view MOSTYN, Image courtesy the artist, Limoncello, London and Tanya Leighton, Berlin, photo: MOSTYN