



John Newling, still from *Singing Uncertainty*, 2011. Courtesy of the artist

## John Newling Ecologies of Value

### Introduction

John Newling is a pioneer of public art with a social purpose. His works explore the natural world and the social and economic systems of society – such as money or religion. He belongs to a generation of artists whose work evolved from Conceptual Art, Land Art and Arte Povera – art movements occurring during the 1960s that placed emphasis on the concept, process and site of the work, alongside material and aesthetic characteristics. This is Newling's first major survey exhibition. It presents a selection of his work from the 1970s to the present day.

The exhibition begins in the foyer, with *Singing Uncertainty* (2011). The film documents a live artwork in which twenty-three members of the public performed an acapella choral piece at St Mary's Church, near Nottingham Contemporary. *Singing Uncertainty* explores the nature of doubt and the struggle for faith expressed in the Methodist Church's hymn book. Newling asked each participant to sing a question he had identified in the hymn book, in its original musical notation. The performance culminated with all participants singing their questions simultaneously, the numerous melodies and abstract questions creating a jarring, discordant sound.



John Newling, New Architecture Midland Cashpoint (positive), 1991. Courtesy of the artist

## The Chapel of the Bank

The first section of the exhibition plays with ideas relating to money and religion. Copper and the two pence coin recur as symbolic motifs throughout many of the artworks. Three replicas of high street cash machines made from copper form *New Architecture* (1991). Turned inside out and laid flat, their abstract forms are reminiscent of industrial buildings. *Weight* (1998) consists of ten large glass bowls containing the dirt and debris cleaned from the surface of 50,000 two pence coins. When coins are weighed at a bank an adjustment is made for this thin layer of dirt that accumulates when coins are handled. Newling has calculated the extra weight of the dirt has, in theory, added seven pence to the value of the coins.

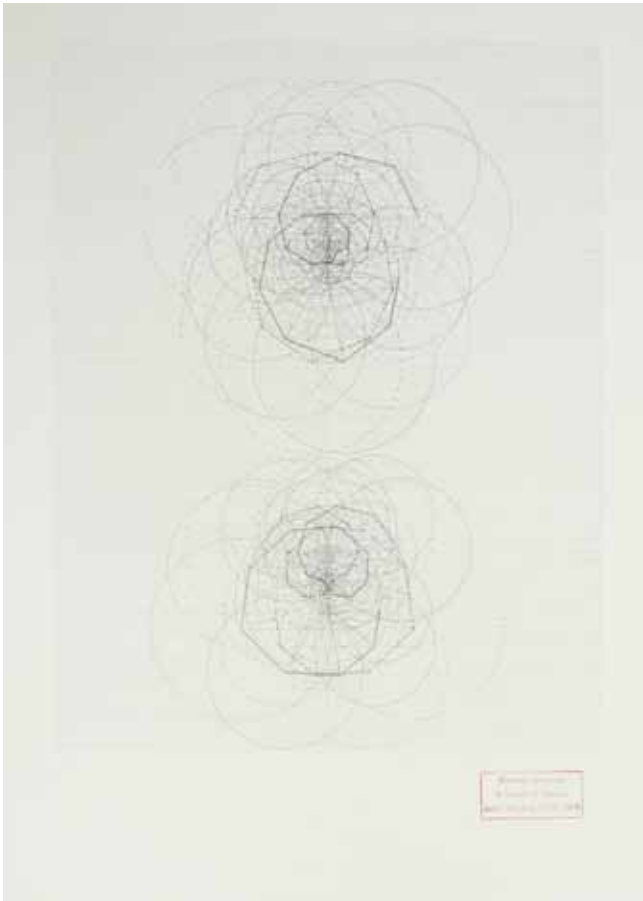




John Newling, Chatham Vines 2004 – 2006. Courtesy of the artist

Wishes (1998) and Well (1995) are copper bowls stained with the dirt and debris washed from two pence coins. Coins are often thrown into wells or ponds as wishes. This tradition has practical as well as superstitious origins. Still bodies of water breed dangerous bacteria and the movement of the tossed coin prevents stagnation. A related work, Coated Wish (1995) takes the form of a light box illuminating the image of a copper disc coated with crushed paracetamol. Pain killing drugs relieve symptoms rather than dealing with the causes of illness. “Wishes tend to address symptoms of a need, not necessarily the cause of that need,” Newling says.

Between 2004 and 2006 Newling undertook a major site-specific installation, Chatham Vines. He created a fully functioning hydroponic vineyard in the disused St John’s Church, Chatham. Thirty-two Pinot Noir grape vines were planted in the central aisle either side of a 15 metre steel construction to support them as they grew using hydroponics technology. Two cameras continually streamed images of the project to a dedicated website for a year. Before the vines were removed, the grapes were harvested and made into wine, some of which was used in the Easter Sunday Eucharist Service at Rochester Cathedral.



John Newling, 9 Twists of Nature, 1978 – 1979. Courtesy of the artist

Two glass cabinets display items related to the act of taking communion in the Christian church. One has a membrane of red wine, through which a chalice can be viewed. The other is lined with the left-over material when communion wafers are pressed from a sheet, leaving two pence sized apertures through which an object called a monstrance can be seen. Derived from the Latin word that means “to show” the monstrance is used in the Catholic Church to display the communion wafer during a blessing. Immanent (2000) draws on Newling’s interest in the significance of the wine and bread in Christian Church services, and the idea that these materials are either literally or metaphorically transformed through ritual acts.

Early works from the 1970s reveal an enduring interest in circular forms as both graphic motif and metaphor, echoed in works throughout Gallery 3. In the set of eight pencil drawings that make up the series *Nine Twists of Nature* (1978-1979) and the three ink and pencil drawings of *Seed* (1978), overlapping circles represent an abstract Venn diagram of intersecting ideas. They also make reference to the cyclical rhythms of nature explored by Newling in various later works.



John Newling growing "walking stick" cabbages, 2012. Courtesy of the artist

## The Garden of the Bank

The second section of the exhibition features new artworks inspired by the natural world and its ecological systems. Newling has previously produced sculptural artworks through horticultural processes, working with two plant species that have extraordinary properties. He grew over eighty Walking Stick Cabbages (*Brassica oleracea*) for his work *From A Garden of Walking Sticks* (2011 – 2012). Installed in the gallery, these change physically over the course of the exhibition, as they dry and harden. Newling became interested in the uses for Walking Stick cabbages - they have the potential to grow to enormous heights (up to 5 metres) and were traditionally cultivated as cattle feed. Once their leaves have been eaten, their trunks can be stripped and dried to produce very strong yet light walking sticks.



Newling has transformed the leaves of the cabbages he grew for this exhibition. By ironing them to fix their colour and drive out moisture he has created a pliable material from which a number of new artworks were produced. A collage of 500 leaves forms *Blanket* (2012). The shapes of twenty pound notes and two pence coins were cut from the leaves. Gilded and stacked they form the series *Value; Coin, Note and Eclipse* (2011–12).



John Newling, *Fall*, (detail) 2012. Courtesy of the artist



The Miracle Trees (Moringa Oleifera) 2011 Nottingham Contemporary

In our large, street facing window two silver-lined hydroponic growth tents contain young Miracle Trees (*Moringa oleifera*). *Generosity* (2012) is a continuation of an earlier project in *The Study* at Nottingham Contemporary. Through carefully regulated levels of light, carbon dioxide and water, the tents simulate the trees' native climate conditions in the Himalayan foothills of north-western India. Newling became interested in the plant when researching the species' uniquely generous properties for healing and nutrition. Moringa leaves are richer in vitamin C than tomatoes, and as rich in vitamin A as carrots. They contain more protein than milk and more potassium than bananas. Moringa is also resistant to drought and has the potential to relieve famine. For Newling, the Miracle Tree signifies an abundance of value. Through this work he encourages us to reflect upon our relationship with the natural world and the potential of the earth's resources.



John Newling with Riddler Ribbon, 2013. Courtesy of the artist

*John Newling lives in Nottingham where he is currently Emeritus Professor of Installation Sculpture at Nottingham Trent University. In 1985 he was awarded the first Fulbright Fellowship in Visual Art and he has installed works across Europe and the USA. His large scale public artworks include major commissions for the Post Office and The Inland Revenue.*

*John Newling staged a performance at the Broadmarsh shopping centre on the first day of this exhibition where he collected values from passers-by. They will be the subject of a reading in the gallery on 28 March.*

*The publication *Spinning: The Organic, Cultural and Etheric in the work of John Newling* accompanies this exhibition and can be bought in our shop. It was written by Dr Reverend Richard Davey and produced by Nottingham Trent University and Nottingham Contemporary.*

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