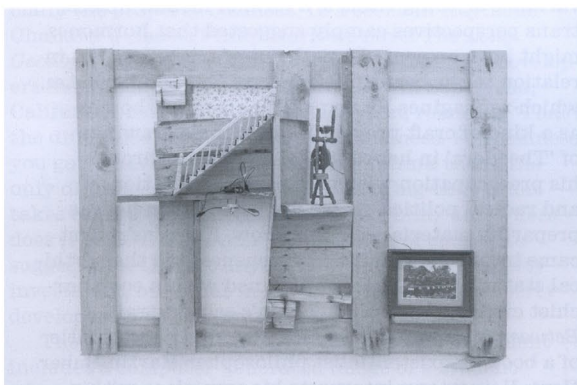


Glorie #1, 2022



Grandfather's Axe, 2023



Festival of Light, 2022, Cabinet Gallery, London

Profile

Caspar Heinemann

The Glasgow-based artist and writer extracts meaning from the lowliest of materials and deploys them in a deceptively random manner to undermine received ideas.

Caspar Heinemann was born in London in 1994. I am eight years older than him, and we both developed a total embrace of punk in our early teens. This supported a burgeoning interest in left-wing politics via zines, such as *CrimethInc*, and distro tables at gigs that sold tapes and patches alongside copies of Alexander Berkman's *ABC of Anarchism*. We were also fortunate to experience and become attuned to signs of what I call 'old London'. This is perhaps an embarrassingly nostalgic, psycho-geographic concept that relies on catching glimpses of how a life might otherwise be lived, places and signs such as the faded GLC murals, warren-like second-hand bookshops, adventure playgrounds, Rastafarian health food shops, mosaic schools at the bottom of housing estates, city farms and street parties. Distinct from a diet of Pret a Manger, reformer Pilates classes at lunch before going back to your so-called 'affordable' new-build home to watch Netflix and order a Deliveroo poke bowl, these signs feel important in a city in which an increase of visual and cultural monotony keeps breakneck pace with hostility to life beyond the pursuit of profit. I know I sound like I swallowed a copy of the millennial anti-consumerist magazine *Adbusters*, but Heinemann's work makes me unembarrassed in believing in the necessity of subculture, the handmade and the DIY, because his work, too, acts like a portal that opens up the world and its possibilities. This takes place not only through his investment in mining the formal qualities of holes, little worlds and apocryphal forms of storytelling, but also through his overarching commitment to technical processes that seek to 'convey the infinite with the least possible means'.

For his forthcoming solo show at Studio Voltaire, titled 'Sod All', Heinemann presents a series of sculptures and installations. In Biblical Hebrew, 'sod' refers to a secret council or circle as well as esoteric modes of religious interpretation. It also conveys ideas of luck and providence – the title 'Sod All' conveys a total nothingness or zero effort, while the phrase 'lucky sod' means the opposite: fortune where it is perhaps undeserved. 'Sod off' dismisses, while 'sod it' might indicate an obstinate sort of yielding. Sod also means soil or ground, a piece of land, sliced up, connecting with ideas of nativity. Sod can also refer to a gay man, usually assumed to be a shortening of 'Sodom', as in Sodom and Gomorrah.

This multiplicity of meanings, ranging from the colloquial to the divine, is characteristic of Heinemann's pursuit of the hermeneutic possibilities of seemingly prosaic materials, objects and language. In the exhibition, these include decoy mallards and scarecrows, united in their role as 'scarers', the umbrella term for devices designed to protect agriculture and ward off pests. The ceiling-mounted sculpture *Dead Ducks* consists of a flock of mallards hanging upside down, attached by black rope. Heinemann is uninterested in creating an illusion that furthers the intended trickery of these objects;

instead they are, he explains, floating on top of a pond that hovers above the viewer. Through a process that openly embraces its limits, Heinemann flips the spatial dimensions of the gallery. Because of the black rope, there's no effort at concealment, rather an embracing of rudimentary stagecraft, a feature of his practice that was gloriously present in the exhibition and play he produced with Alex Margo Arden for Cell Project Space in 2019, entitled 'The farmyard is not a violent place and I look exactly like Judy Garland' (Reviews *AM*433). At Studio Voltaire, a trio of scarecrows similarly summons up a theatrical approach to the sculptural: sawhorses mounted with stuffed shirts and adorned with an oversized, fake crow head, or with the crow head contained under a cream cloth, or fallen, its stuffing spilling out. Like the decoy mallard, the scarecrow has a straightforward function, but what Heinemann draws our attention to is the excessive qualities that emerge in the making and display of these items – the embellishments and flourishes that occur, a folk art quality that has long been a central feature of his practice.

In his *Time Machines*, also part of 'Sod All', Heinemann has taken glass reptile tanks and filled them with readymade ornaments within the ancient ruin genre – here a miniature Colosseum, there a Greek temple. The transparent walls of the tanks are covered in a thick layer of black duct tape, but small cracks permit a view inside. Each *Time Machine* is illuminated by a 'basking' light bulb, coloured light/heat systems with dimmer switches that set the temperature and variable brightness for different reptiles. These miniature worlds, uninhabited, set up possibilities for thinking about the meaning of sod as a word for soil or land; these long-dead ancient civilisations still resonate across a range of cultures to the point where they are seen as appropriate decorations for domestic reptile enclosures. This evokes the way that the ancient world exists as a generic set of fantasy images (Gladiators! Egyptian Mummies!), compressing and distorting the past in ways which can provide gateways to the pseudoscientific theories popularised by Erich von Däniken and, latterly, the television show *Ancient Aliens*. Such accounts posit that only extraterrestrial creatures could have been capable of building the Egyptian pyramids or Teotihuacan, perpetuating racist beliefs that 'civilisation' is the property of the West alone. Most troublingly, these conspiratorial fabrications relate to the pursuit of pseudo-archaeological 'evidence' through amateur digs in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. These digs seek to bolster the extreme Zionist ideology of an exclusively Jewish right to Palestine, as well as providing proof that the rapture is imminent for American evangelical Christians who join in the hunt for such 'artefacts'.

Heinemann's *Time Machines*, with their partly occluded views into hyperreal ornaments of ancient civilisations, seem to suggest that the desire for 'uncovering' an obscured truth can only exist as dangerous kitsch when interpretation is forsaken, when the layers of the human past are swept aside in favour of a singular, readymade truth.

The view into *Time Machines'* interior also recalls Heinemann's 2022 exhibition 'Glorie' at Cabinet Gallery, which featured a series of structures made in cardboard and decorated with sticks, string, white paint, tape, lollipop sticks, as well as cuts to the

primary building material that revealed the corrugated interior. The sculptures' titular little holes summoned up birdhouses as much as glory holes, signalling Heinemann's continued engagement with queer histories. I was sufficiently enamoured by these works to ask Heinemann if one could feature on the cover of my most recent book (despite it being completed before I had a chance to incorporate any discussion about them). I imagined Heinemann's works extending what I discussed in the last chapter, how art could act like a conspiracy – in the etymological sense of breathing together – and how this could convey a kind of leap, or collective commitment to transformation. Heinemann's work does exactly this: through his dogged pursuit of unearthing every possible connection, his work acts precisely at the opposite end of bad conspiracy thinking which churns out a foreshortened sense of fatalism.

In his show 'The Frayed White Collar', held at Édouard Montassut in Paris in 2024, Heinemann displayed a series of drawings concerning a proper conspiracy subject: the Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski. Turning to the subject following a spate of online speculation about the fact Kaczynski had spoken to a psychiatrist about a desire to transition to a woman, Heinemann developed a more complex perspective on this story than the split perspective that dominated online discourse. While anti-trans voices situated the story as evidence that gender variance or being trans is a form of mental illness, trans perspectives campily suggested that hormones might have presented a path out of terrorism. Set in relation to the beautiful sculpture *Grandfather's Axe*, which reimagines Kaczynski's homemade bombs as a kind of craft project, Heinemann's drawings of 'Theodora' in her cabin deftly weaves through his preoccupation with nature, interpretation and radical politics. As we discussed when he was preparing materials for this show, Kaczynski first came into Heinemann's consciousness via the mythical status the Unabomber attained within eco-anarchist circles. Hence Heinemann's self-portrait, *Between Man and Man*, which also refers to the title of a book by existentialist philosopher Martin Buber. Here, Heinemann interprets his own place within this speculative reimagining of Ted as Theodora, pottering around her cabin, examining his own transition, as well as the limits within his personal history of political commitments. The project thus asks us to consider how the definition of nature might slide towards nativism and essentialism, a problem which in the *Time Machines* is reversed to examine how 'civilisation' becomes nature.

Heinemann's work matches the interpretative range offered by the word 'sod', constantly turning over ideas, techniques, objects and materials to examine their possibilities and consequences. Nothing is there without a reason and no decision is left unthought – his is a practice marked by an absorbing and unusual doggedness.

Caspar Heinemann's exhibition 'Sod All' is at Studio Voltaire, London from 3 May to 3 August.

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