

*Natural Selection*, Andy Holden & Peter Holden

Former Newington Library, Walworth Road, London

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Though outlawed in 1954 in the UK, egg-collecting retained an air of legitimacy well into the 1970s. I remember coming home one day as a six-year-old with my own first egg (a song thrush's) expecting no admonishment from my father, and none was meted out. On the contrary, he showed me how to blow it. First, you had to place the egg in a sink of water. If it floated, that meant there was an embryo inside and you could expect difficulties when, having pricked both ends of the shell with a needle, you tried to force the half-formed bird through the tiniest of holes. The sink test was grim, the degree of buoyancy indicating, as it were, how alive the thing you were about to kill was, *had* to kill in order to preserve your trophy. And what came out was hardly ever pure yolk, even from those eggs that sank.

This principle obsession of my youth is the subject of much of the work comprising *Natural Selection*, Andy Holden & Peter Holden's father-son collaboration, currently showing at the former Newington Library in south London. The 'oological' material is located in the basement, under the heading *A Social History of Egg Collecting*, where it presents very much as ornithology's unconscious. But let us begin on a lighter note, on the ground floor, with *A Natural History of Nest Building*.

Two video installations form the spine of this Artangel commission, augmented with photographs, prints, drawings, sculptures and found objects. The centrepiece of the upper section is the 3-screen video installation *A Natural History of Nest Building*. It's here that we meet our didactic hosts: on the right-hand screen, Peter Holden MBE, a renowned ornithologist in his late sixties whose 40-year tenure at the RSPB engendered the Young Ornithologists Club and also involved regular TV appearances; on the left-hand screen, his son, Andy Holden, an artist in his mid-thirties. The central screen shows a mixture of archival footage and diagrams, various evolutionary theories being offered to account for birds' nesting habits, both men talking directly to camera. We learn why the funnelled entrances to weaver birds' nests are getting longer (because snakes are also getting longer); why the reed warbler continues to feed the cuckoo after it has ejected the other eggs (because its parenting instincts respond to its crimson gullet); why the beguiling tent-like constructions of the bower bird, made from twigs and surrounded by objects collected by the male and grouped

according to colour, could be seen as evidence of non-human 'art' (because this behaviour appears to demonstrate the ability to see an image of the bower in advance of its construction, the bird repositioning any items moved by human hand back into place in an apparent attempt to conform to the original blueprint). In the main, it falls to Andy to parlay these scientific assessments into more metaphysical assertions. For example, the sharply pointed eggs of the guillemot are able to roll within a tight circumference. Given that guillemots build no nest, this is crucial, as it stops them falling off the narrow coastal ledges the birds favour for breeding. In other words, Andy informs us, with no little excitement, the egg *is* the nest, protected by its own morphology. It's a poetic leap of the imagination, like something out of Magritte, and not everyone will buy it, but it's moments like this – set up with painstaking scientific reasoning – that lift the film beyond a faux-televisual treatment.

The two presenters appear to flip roles to prevent their delivery becoming predictable, Holden Sr at times less patrician, Holden Jr more steely in his determination to match his father's ornithological prowess. Long-haired, bespectacled and wearing a suit-and-tie combination reminiscent of Open University presenters circa 1982, Andy initially appears as an ironic counterpoint to his father's authority figure, but this is soon dispelled by his autodidactic intensity, which, if anything, adds to the High Pedagogic mode. Despite the archive footage and Reithian educational approach, more Structuralist elements remind us that this is not television. At one point, clips of the courtship display of the great crested grebe on the central screen are flanked by static-camera shots of two lumps of concrete poking from the water – a momentary correlation between the angular beaks of the birds and the shards of a demolished building. And the fact that both presenters are frequently seen against a background of enlarged details of paintings by Paul Nash contextualises the sometimes bizarre products of nest-building as much within the latter's 'vernacular Surrealism' as within the canon of nature documentary. A critique of television is perhaps inevitable given Peter Holden's long association with the medium, which clearly taught him much about verbal timing, how to speak to – and write for – the camera. The ease of his presentation compared with his son's more raffish approach is a strength of their film, most apparent when one hands over to the other, sometimes passing him a nest or an egg, which disappears behind the central screen into the other's hands, disrupting the transitive delivery of information characteristic of TV. These props also form part of an adjacent glass cabinet display of nests, some made by birds, others by human hand in an effort to understand the technical aspects

of their construction. The Holdens have also fashioned a gigantic bower from twigs, based on the aforementioned bower bird's, through which can be viewed the central screen of their video.

While there are stand-alone works here – six lathed wooden sculptures based on sonograms of bird songs; cartoons drawn by Andy for the magazine *Bird Life*, in which his father is characterised as 'Mr Holden', tasked with controlling the unruly 'Rook'; and some blown-up photographs from the family album – most things operate as grounding material for the films. The mood darkens considerably in the basement, where *How the Artist Was Led to the Study of Nature*, a replica of notorious egger Richard Pearson's collection, amassed over forty years and numbering 7,130 eggs, is shown alongside the second video installation, *The Opposite of Time*, a story of egg collecting's transition from a scientific pursuit in the 1800s to a present-day crime. Pearson's original collection, destroyed after his arrest in 2006, is recreated in painted porcelain and presented in the same kind of cardboard boxes and margarine tubs he might once have used for ease of concealment, a far cry from the varnished cabinets of his 19<sup>th</sup> Century predecessors, the gentleman collectors John Wolley, Lord Rothschild and the Reverend Francis Jourdain, founder of the British Oological Association (later to morph into the more squalid Jourdain Society). This social history is told mainly by an animated crow, which flaps lugubriously across a background of images culled from landscape paintings by Constable, Hockney and Turner. Voiced by Andy, Crow's narrative, recounted on the larger left-hand screen, is accompanied by interjections from Peter, on the smaller right-hand screen, with news archive footage from the last fifty years detailing significant arrests, the key question being how it is that eggers can ignore the perversity of killing the thing they love in order to own it for aesthetic pleasure.

This fusion of Eros and Thanatos is not the only thing of interest to psychoanalysts here. In an interview towards the end of the film, Richard Pearson, now in his fifties, reflects that if he'd only had 'a female' in tow on his many excursions, he could have 'showed her a thing or two'. Given that egging is an exclusively male pursuit, it isn't easy to picture this putative companion as anything other than an idealised female version of Pearson himself, and the sympathy this elicits is *The Opposite of Time's* finest moment. The Holdens don't join the Freudian dots, but Pearson himself seems to acknowledge that egging may have been counterproductive to his psychosexual development. There is a poignant sense, here, of his finally emerging from the illusion that many boys harbour up to the age of 11 or 12: that it

might be possible to somehow forestall adulthood, or deflect it with a pursuit that is sufficiently hermetic. This attraction to remaining on the cusp of adolescence – strong enough and smart enough to get what you want, but not yet old enough to answer for the consequences – is the province of the manchild, and it's not difficult to see how egging feeds this impulse, how the activity's youthful origins give it an imprimatur of innocence long into middle age. If the Holdens' replica of his collection is numerically and taxonomically faithful, then Pearson took clutch after clutch of the same species. I recall that I and my reprobate friends took just a single egg – as though willing to let it stand metonymically for the more deep-seated pathology to which we too might have succumbed.