

# IKON

Ikon Gallery  
1 Oozells Square, Brindleyplace, Birmingham B1 2HS  
0121 248 0708 / ikon-gallery.org  
Open Tuesday-Sunday & Bank Holiday Mondays, 11am-5pm / free entry  
Registered charity no. 528892

## John Newling

### *Dear Nature* 🌿☀️🌱🍀 🌿🌱🍀🌿☀️

## 4 March – 31 May 2020



John Newling, *A language from the garden (Nymans language)* (2017). Courtesy the artist.

Birmingham-born artist John Newling (b. 1952) is a pioneer of public art with a social purpose. This major exhibition exemplifies his strong environmental proposition, whilst pushing at the boundaries of what defines art.

At the heart of Ikon's exhibition is *Dear Nature*, a book published in 2018, comprising letters Newling wrote to nature every day for 81 days. The letters explore our relationship with the natural world – “part truth and reconciliation, part advocacy of an urgent need, part thoughts for future social ecologies”. In one letter he quotes from the first chapter of Genesis, after Adam and Eve are introduced: “God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’” He then reflects on the implications:

This is my guilt and worry. We have filled the earth. We have subdued it. We do rule over it.

What is the cost to ourselves of subduing all that we seem to encounter?

Yours is a vast history, ours is a blink in that history. Perhaps that's where the hope lies in our geological youth; we are young and still learning.

I am sorry

Yours, John

Alongside the letters are photographs of a growing flax seedling, cultivated in Newling's studio. In *Dear Nature* we witness a miracle of life while reading about our downwards spiral into the "strangest nihilism without purpose and feeling".

Such a philosophical twist is characteristic of Newling, an artist who belongs to a generation that grew up with Conceptual Art, Land Art and Arte Povera in the 1960s, emphasising the importance of concept and context. During his time in America (1985), as the first recipient of a Fulbright fellowship in visual arts, he produced works of art in hotels, swimming pools, burnt out cars and on the streets of Los Angeles, San Francisco, Washington DC and New York.

This experience marked the beginning of an interest in the meaning of 'place', informing his work now more strongly than ever - his place being a domestic back garden as much as it is the whole world. Recently Newling has produced *Soil Books* (2019), made with soil from his garden to embody the idea of the Anthropocene, our current geological age in which human impact is evident. He is determined to grasp "what is it to know that we have affected the effects of nature/our environment... you can trace our evolution to a point where we subdued nature, but to our own cost, because we will make ourselves extinct".

The *Soil Books* are sculptures, derived from Newling's everyday experience of walking from his house into his back garden, picking up leaves on the way: "It's like a ritual, so that every leaf in those books - the language of the books - is from my garden." The result is book-like stacks of panels of processed soil with the leaves, pressed and gilded, on the surfaces which are then stained with watercolour. The order of the books is crucial, indicating seasonal change, and once again conveying the artist's preoccupation with physical transformation.

A further work, *Waste Land Soil* (2018), involves the artist shredding several hundred copies of T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*, combined with coffee grounds and other kitchen scraps to make a soil that can sustain vegetative growth - thus the opposite of waste. In a reverse process, Newling used the soil to make paper for his *Eliot's Note Books* (2017), 434 paper sheets reflecting the 434 lines in Eliot's poem that, if placed in the earth, would grow and sustain life.

Newling's plea for a closer connection with, and greater understanding of, the natural world is evident in his 2016 development of a new alphabet based on leaves he found at Nymans, a National Trust garden in West Sussex. Pressed and photographed, he matched these plant forms to letters in the modern English alphabet. At Ikon, *Nymans Language* (2017) occurs in a grid of marble slabs on the floor and also exists as an officially registered downloadable font: <http://www.john-newling.com/nymans-typeface>

Newling's exhibition extends beyond the gallery space, with further works sited nearby in the cherry trees in Oozells Square, Brindleyplace.

The exhibition is supported by the Ikon Investment Fund.

Ikon's programme of events includes a live reading of *Dear Nature* by John Newling as part of the Launch Night on Wednesday 4 March; a digital broadcast with journalist Alys Fowler; and an outdoor performance by Birmingham Contemporary Music Group of John Cage's work *Ryoanji* (1984), composed for flute with electronic sound projections and percussion.

For more information, high-res images and to request interviews please contact Rebecca Small or Laura Jaunzems on 0121 248 0708 or email [r.small@ikon-gallery.org](mailto:r.small@ikon-gallery.org) or [l.jaunzems@ikon-gallery.org](mailto:l.jaunzems@ikon-gallery.org)

Social Media - Instagram, Twitter and Facebook: @ikongallery #IkonGallery

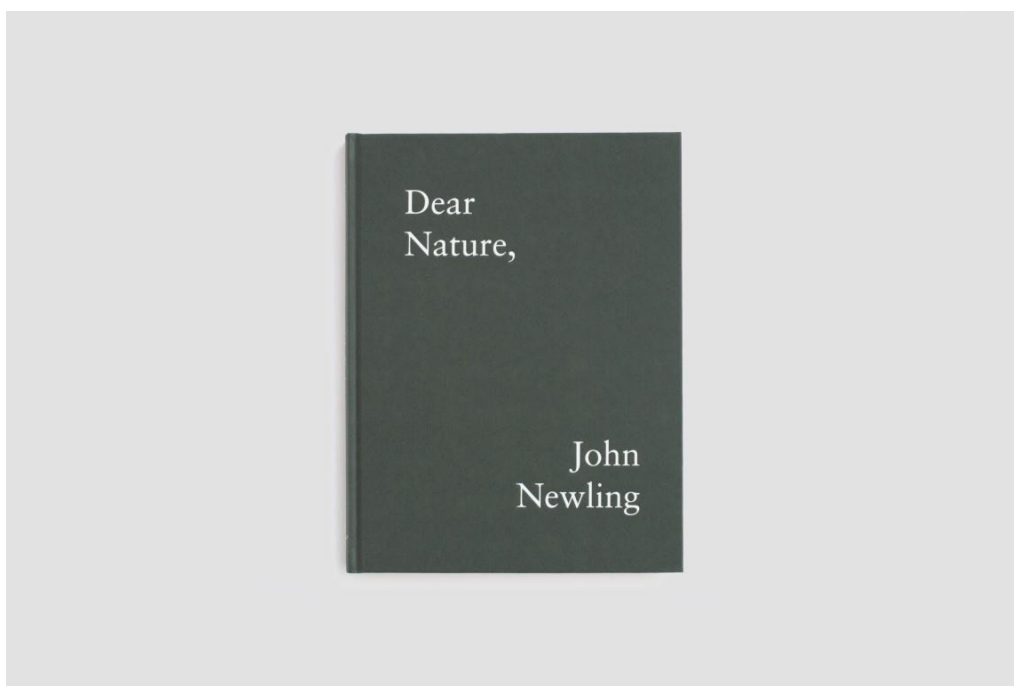
Links: [ikon-gallery.org](http://ikon-gallery.org)  
[john-newling.com](http://john-newling.com)

Note to Editors:

1. 🌿🌿🌿🌿 🌿🌿🌿🌿 *Dear Nature* translated in Nymans font
2. Ikon Launch Night: Wednesday 4 March 2020, 6-8pm.
3. Ikon is an internationally acclaimed contemporary art venue situated in central Birmingham. Established in 1964 by a group of artists, Ikon is an educational charity and works to encourage public engagement with contemporary art through exhibiting new work in a context of debate and participation. The gallery programme features artists from around the world and a variety of media is represented, including sound, film, mixed media, photography, painting, sculpture and installation. Ikon's off-site programme develops dynamic relationships between art, artists and audiences outside the gallery. Projects

vary enormously in scale, duration and location, challenging expectations of where art can be seen and by whom. Education is at the heart of Ikon's activities, stimulating public interest in and understanding of contemporary visual art. Through a variety of talks, tours, workshops and seminars, Ikon's Learning Team aims to build dynamic relationships with audiences, enabling visitors to engage with, discuss and reflect on contemporary art. [ikon-gallery.org](http://ikon-gallery.org)

4. Ikon is open Tuesday – Sunday and Bank Holiday Mondays, 11am – 5pm. Admission is free. Ikon Gallery is supported using public funding from Arts Council England and Birmingham City Council. For the latest news and events follow @ikongallery on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#).
5. Arts Council England is the national development body for arts and culture across England, working to enrich people's lives. ACE support a range of activities across the arts, museums and libraries – from theatre to visual art, reading to dance, music to literature, and crafts to collections. Great art and culture inspires us, brings us together and teaches us about ourselves and the world around us. In short, it makes life better. Between 2018 and 2022, ACE will invest £1.45 billion of public money from government and an estimated £860 million from the National Lottery to help create these experiences for as many people as possible across the country. [artscouncil.org.uk](http://artscouncil.org.uk)



John Newling, *Dear Nature* (2018). Courtesy the artist.



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John Newling, *A library of Ecological Conversations - Leaves and Me* (2017–2019). Courtesy the artist.



John Newling, *Eliot's Note Books* (2017). Installation at Coventry Cathedral. Courtesy the artist.