

Putting Space into Action Through Art

In 2015-2016, I collaborated with the artist film-maker Huw Wahl on his project *Action Space Film*.¹ The documentary focused on the 1970s radical art movement *Action Space*, founded by artist-educators Ken and Mary Turner in 1968. Bringing together artists, performers, dancers, painters and musicians, the movement sought to produce cultural democratic spaces for art, education and creative play. *Action Space* became renowned for using large inflatable sculptures to create interventions in spaces outside of the gallery system.

Ken Turner's book *Crashing Culture: 1954 to 2016* is an artist notebook which covers the terrain of his practice, from the inception of *Action Space*, through to his paintings and philosophical sojourns into continental philosophy, alongside contemporary reflections on performance art and the building of the inflatable for Wahl's film project. In the book he reflects on space as a sculptural performative act:

*One is moving through a "thick space" and the thickness is defined by the people in that space. By thick, I mean the way through is as if one has to carve through, sculpturally making space, a decisive cut, or thrust: as a kind of action in solid matter liken to an object. To me that is exactly what performance is like. It has to seem like this to be able to rise to a level of awareness that in itself resembles the semblance of making something real. Making it happen is of an action, but this action is more than making something move. It is as if the space itself moves; moves apart, away to one side, is constructed, forming another shape, another form, being restructured and reconstituted as another substance.*²

To coincide with the launch of Wahl's film, the School of Art, Design and Architecture hosted a symposium at the University of Huddersfield on 30 September 2016, entitled 'Putting Space into Action'.³ The event sought to explore how space is put into action through art. The papers presented provided instances of artists and art projects that have occupied vacant buildings, public spaces, small towns and even televisual media. For example, Dawna Schuld (Texas A&M University) discussed the work of the sculptor and conceptual artist Maria Nordman through the theme of 'happenstance', which she suggested was deployed by the artist as an aesthetic device operating at 'the conscious and literal threshold between public and private space'.⁴ Ana Torok (Courtauld Institute of Art) examined P.S.1



[Top] Joe Hancock,
Rosary, 1991.

[Right] Simon Woolham,
Performing Paper, 2014.



and the work of the Institute for Art and Urban Resources (IAUR) in 1970s Queens, New York, with a particular focus on the launch of the exhibition *Rooms* which featured seventy-eight artists who ‘used the building as physical and conceptual material for their site-specific interventions’. This exhibition created a space for creative exchange rather than economic ends. Anna-Maria Kanta (University College London) examined the German mixed-media artist Ferdinand Kriwet’s broadcast installations TV-LIVE and considered the transference from the public space of installation into mediations of the TV set. Elisabetta Rattalino (University of St. Andrews) considered the work of the Italian artist Maria Lai, who in 1981, staged a local community collaborative performance in a remote village in Sardinia. Legarsi all Montagna (Connecting to the Mountain) was the outcome of many years of social engagement by the artist with local inhabitants in the area. Other speakers included artists experimenting inside the frames of different locations and environments. Rose Butler and Becky Shaw (Sheffield Hallam University) presented their project *Utopia* (2016), a collaboration with Kings College London and Somerset House, which investigated the exchanges between artistic researchers and nursing and midwifery practitioners in the context of a medical ward simulation centre, and Boris Oicherman and Laura Steenberge (Stanford University) accounted for their sound and musical play experiments in the public spaces of Stanford University.⁵

All of these investigations into the activation of space through artistic and creative activity resonate with Turner’s account of how space moves, is moved, constructed, given shape and form by performative interventions. Bodies, objects, activities, atmospheres sculpturally make space in concert and sometimes in discord with each other. The ideas presented at ‘Putting Space into Action’ and the conversations arising from this symposium have continued to preoccupy my thinking about the ways in which art and cultural activities enliven spaces in different ways, and in retrospect, these fascinating projects, many of which hail from the 1970s and early 1980s, seem to exemplify the scope and potential of what *Temporary Contemporary* has been trying to enact since it was first launched in 2018.

Both ‘action’ and ‘space’, as understood by *Action Space* and the artistic examples presented above, provide opportunities to make sense of two terms currently in use by *Temporary Contemporary* as an initiative: ‘live action research’ and ‘place-based making’. They have served as underlying principles for the collaborations we have sought to develop between the Arts & Creative Development Team at Kirklees Council, creative practitioners,

community groups and cultural organisations within the region. Some of the exhibitions featured in the Market Gallery as part of the first year of *Temporary Contemporary's* programme resonate with these principles and modes of approach, in and through the works developed and displayed within the exhibition environment. In order to explain how 'action research' and 'place-based making' may be understood in this context, it is important to explain where these terms come from, why they are important, and how they have played a role in shaping some of the curatorial intentions for projects at the Market Gallery, Queensgate Market, Huddersfield.

Action Research

Action Research is often understood in research contexts familiar to the social sciences. It was first coined as a term by Kurt Lewin, a Professor in Social Psychology at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the 1940s. Lewin was primarily interested in seeking out practical solutions to issues of social isolation, segregation and division with minority groups in America. In his 1946 publication 'Action Research and Minority Problems', which featured in the *Journal of Social Issues*, he explains the difficulties of '*intergroup relations*' between workers in Connecticut, of their lived experiences and perceptions of economic and social discrimination. He suggests that the social research needed to address the issues faced by different groups in a real world context requires '*comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action, and research leading to social action. Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice*'.⁶ For Lewin, '*intergroup relations*' need an integrated approach; an amalgamation of different research specialisms from psychology, sociology and cultural anthropology in order to really explore problems of stereotyping and attitude in all spheres of our lives: experiences in childhood, adolescence, housing, legal structures within communities, status and economic discrimination, social relations in families, clubs, friendship groups, schools, the school system, neighbourhoods, communities, the locale in which we live, the region around us, the national picture and the international climate. In this respect, action research is part of the complex entanglements of real world settings and as a set of methods, techniques and approaches, it seeks to improve problems or issues through participatory action. This is not about proposing a change and expecting people to readily accept it and its implementation. Rather, action research works to identify the lived experiences of a problem, to find ways to experiment, seek out approaches to support the

Jill Townsley, 9 Bundles of Daffodils, 2018.



possibility of enacting change, to improvise with others, to create spaces for sharing, communicating and understanding experiences. To do this, Lewin suggests we have to be out in the field and not in the controlled settings of a laboratory-like environment. We need to develop a more intimate understanding of the contexts we are in and how human behaviours are both situated by and informed by these surroundings. Our environment is made up of a force field of energies which can impede or facilitate progress towards certain goals or objectives. Therefore, when we think about action research and what it can do, we must consider how it is part of a process of working towards thinking about how to stimulate change with others; how to bring about shifts in ways of thinking and doing, in organisations, in communities and in the social actions of people in different groups, at different times and in different contexts.

Place-based making out in the field

This consideration of the field – of the locale within which action research may be enacted – is linked to the complexities of intergroup relations in place-based making. Lewin’s understanding of action research, in the context of social science and as part of a ‘tool-kit’ of techniques, methods, approaches for the professional practitioner ‘out in the field’ undertaking research with specific groups (organisations, communities, cultures), perhaps gives a clue as to what *Temporary Contemporary* might appear to be doing as a live action research project and how its own unique approach to being out in the field is aligned to visual cultural practices in the context of place-based making. These practices are as much about sociocultural processes between many interests and needs as they are creative and artistic processes in and of themselves.

Temporary Contemporary began as an initiative concerned with vacant spaces in Queensgate Indoor Market in the centre of Huddersfield. The town of Huddersfield is situated in the North of England with a population of around 160,000. The town, and the wider Kirklees region, have many positive attributes, including historic buildings, a rich textile heritage history, and an international reputation for music.⁷ However, 13% of residents hold no qualifications, and in the 2015 and 2019 Indices of Multiple Deprivation, published by the Government, Kirklees was identified as one of the most deprived districts in England for both income and employment summary measures.⁸ Many of Huddersfield’s fine buildings, relating to its industrial past as a centre for textile production, are vacant. It is experiencing, like

much of the United Kingdom, a change in the ways consumers use the high street, exacerbated by the credit crunch and austerity policies. Kirklees Council identified in 2016 that cultural production may be one of the ways to sustain economic benefits and prosperity in Huddersfield (Culture Kirklees, 2016).⁹ *Temporary Contemporary*, as a partnership project with the Arts & Creative Development Team at Kirklees Council, sought to consider how vacant spaces, as a result of a declining high street, might be 're-activated' in ways that would bring different cultural practices into visibility and to create conditions of opportunity for communities and groups to share in thinking collectively about culture, cultural activity and new ways of experiencing and making places. Our project has worked to generate, argue for and reflect on a mixed cultural ecology, by combining research, art, craft, music, 'greening', public meeting spaces, food, drink and opportunities for young people, entrepreneurs, artisans and retailers. By embracing a diverse spectrum of emergent values (social, aesthetic, educational, ecological) it has helped to generate, in collaboration, a vibrant cultural offer. This has involved us thinking about Huddersfield as a place of assemblages shaped out of an existing cultural infrastructure, policies and communities, many of which are rooted in the historic locale of Huddersfield, but which continue to develop organically over time in a mixed and growing ecology of different producers and users.¹⁰

This activity has evolved out of the research exhibitions we held in the Market Gallery in our first year of programming. We were preoccupied with the very idea of place-based making and how creative and artistic practices, as productions of visual culture, can present new ways of seeing and understanding local contexts and to consider how we might put space into action through cultural activity. From out of these exhibitions we were able to present a different mode of approach to place-based making. For example, by using creative artistic methods, such as photographic montage, existing perceptions and ways of thinking about our surroundings were challenged. By mapping urban spaces we were able to seek out what is often invisible to our habituated perceptions of place. By re-imagining historic and landmark buildings and monuments in the locale, with the use of new technologies, we were able to speculate on the possible futures of Huddersfield town.

Curatorial Action Research: rethinking place

The final section of this chapter considers six of the exhibitions in the Market Gallery that rethought place through underling research and in the situated context of Queensgate Market. *Place, Space, Action* (6-14 April 2018), the inaugural exhibition at the Market Gallery was a group show featuring 22 artists and designers (academic staff from the Department of Art and Communication in the School of Art, Design and Architecture). They were tasked with exploring the themes 'place', 'space' and 'action' and a range of media such as painting, illustration, photography, digital design, sculpture and video work featured on display. The exhibition presented stories, experiences and imaginary interactions, including engagement with the architectural structure of the market itself, the internal space of histories and memories attached to place, dialogues with different external stimuli, including urban landscapes and urban sprawls, architectural interiors and the intimacies of thinking in studio environments. The exhibition served as an example of curatorial action research prompting audiences to reflect on visual cultural activity live inside the context of the market. As the first exhibition launch of the *Temporary Contemporary* initiative, *Place, Space, Action* aimed to be a prompt for our times and for the creative opportunities in front of us. The ethos of the show is reflected in the open call for artworks in the exhibition:

ACTION: To initiate, to be swift and prompt, to spur, to swing, to plan, to effect change, to transform.

The activity of rethinking place through curatorial action continued throughout the first year exhibition programme of *Temporary Contemporary*, but was particularly apparent in some examples. *Uncanny Valley* (7-21 December 2018) was an exhibition of photographic images taken at the Gleadless Valley estate, Sheffield. Gleadless Valley is a post-WWII Sheffield housing development. Whilst estates designed by the same architectural practice have been critically acclaimed and redeveloped, Gleadless Valley on the periphery of the city, has not. Still without regeneration, it has been described as the 'city's worst area to live'.¹¹ The exhibition showcased photographic montages produced by Nick Deakin, using his own images and those of photographers Richard Mulhearn and James O'Hara. The compositions repeat the lyrical features of the estate (the hand rails, television aerials, windows, balconies, satellite dishes) and reinterpret them as a 'reality of fictions'. These new fictions make the estate's aesthetic potential tangible in ways that move beyond preconceived ideas and assumptions about estate

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NICK DEAKIN

UNCANNY VALLEY

NICK DEAKIN

2018

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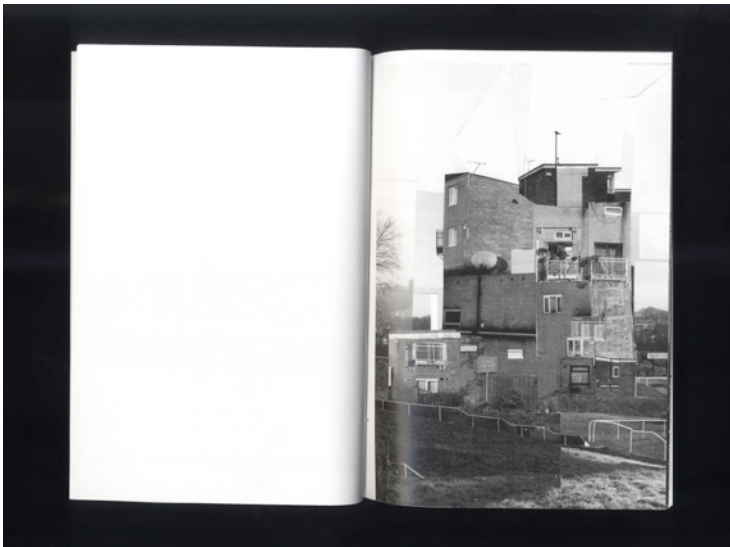
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living. The exhibition was accompanied by a limited edition artists' book.

Temporary Tactical Urbanism (13 March-6 April 2019) was conceived to address the questions: what do the terms 'temporary', 'tactical', 'do it yourself', and 'guerrilla urbanism' mean? How do these terms differ? Who benefits from approaches to urban intervention? What do these words mean in the context of the United Kingdom, following the 2008 financial crisis, and specifically in Huddersfield? The research underpinning this exhibition was developed by a team of postgraduate students at the University of Huddersfield, led by Dr Ioanni Delsante, Reader in Urban Design in the School of Art, Design and Architecture. The content of the exhibition included a range of visual materials developed through literature reviews, field trips, design workshops, research symposia and conferences. It examined specific case studies and tactics. By looking at precedents (such as Bologna, Rotterdam and Seville) the exhibition showcased an opportunity for further conversations about bottom-up transformations in Huddersfield town centre.

Uncanny Valley
Nick Deakin

7 - 21 December





What's this dull town to me? (13 March-6 April 2019) used psychogeographic methods to explore changes to Britain's high streets. Psychogeography encourages attention to the emotional and cerebral responses to exterior environments. Andrew Taylor and Katrina Whitehead's research focused on Huddersfield, with the aim of '*re-viewing the subtle spatial codes and signals that surround us*' in order to '*re-connect the liminal retail spaces with the town's people to collectively discover a way to create a new and novel vision of place*'.¹² The exhibition extended existing relationships the curators had developed with augmented reality (AR) and software companies, SilverboxIT and PCT.¹³ The result was a 'beta test' presentation in the Market Gallery that used AR to reveal archival imagery hidden within contemporary photography and an AR heritage walk. Both practitioners used material from a range of archives to render visible Huddersfield's past as a centre for textile production and to reflect on historical imagery of the high street.

The Temporary Tactical Urbanism team comprised Dr Ioanni Delsante, with Yreilyn Cartagena, Tabassum Ahmed, Eduardo Baldauf and Li Yue (Lucian).



[Above & right] Seed installation, design by Tabassum Ahmed and Eduardo Baldauf, set up by Temporary Tactical Urbanism.



Installation of actions curated and set up by Tabassum Ahmed.



Nic Clear and Hyun Jun Park selected and scanned three iconic sites in Huddersfield: Castle Hill, Queensgate Market and the Railway Station for their exhibition *Synthetic Spaces* (31 January-4 March 2019). The information produced by the scans is highly technical and yet the images themselves evoke a much more speculative response to these historic sites.

When used in combination with other techniques, the scans facilitate both an extremely precise mapping of the spaces as well as an opportunity to develop narratives around the potentiality of these buildings as part of Huddersfield's historic and cultural infrastructure. By manipulating 'point-cloud' data Clear and Park created synthetic spatial models that exist between the virtual and the actual and to combine the 'measured, the 'experienced' and even the 'practiced' in a way that no other form of spatial mapping is capable of. In this respect, Clear and Park manipulated the scan data to re-imagine familiar sites in Huddersfield in unique ways.

In addition to this, the group show *Situating Practices*, curated by doctoral student Claire Booth and funded by the University Graduate School Researcher Environment Development Fund, brought together the work of postgraduate research students Susan Carron Clarke, Adrian Evans, Laura Harris, Caitlin Kiely, Julia Mckinlay, Beth Morgan and Chrisitan Skovagaard Peterson. The exhibitors were from different disciplines and sought to explore the boundaries between social science and creative practice approaches to research. In this respect, engagement with the places and spaces of research across disciplines presented an opportunity to also explore the boundaries inside and outside of the Market Gallery environment. As Booth explains in her analysis of the exhibition process: '*Situating research practices within the indoor market made visible tensions between the curated inside and the non-curated outside, and the delimitation of space between instrumental and non-instrumental values*'. The exhibition was reviewed by Dr Louise Atkinson, co-director of Curator Space and independent artist researcher.¹⁴

These six examples show how art, design and architectural practices can play a role in presenting new ways of seeing and understanding place and local contexts. In this respect space is indeed activated by these forms of visual cultural experimentation. This is an engagement with challenging existing perceptions of place, by using a range of creative methods, technologies, techniques and visual narratives, and to communicate these alternatives to different audiences. In this sense our preoccupation with the very idea of place-based

making is embedded in the creative and artistic practices we have used as productions of visual culture.

¹ This collaboration was supported by a grant from the Henry Moore Foundation.

² Turner, K., (2016) *Crashing Culture 1954-2016 Artist Notebook Performance Artist and Painter*, California, US: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, p.33

³ For further details of the symposium *Putting Space into Action* see <https://research.hud.ac.uk/institutes-centres/ceada/ourprojects/psia/>

⁴ For an account of some of Schuld's ideas as presented at the symposium see Schuld, D. (2018) *Minimal Conditions: Light, Space, and Subjectivity*, California: University of California Press.

⁵ For details of the papers presented at the symposium *Putting Space into Action*, see after research.hud.ac.uk/institutes-centres/ceada/ourprojects/psia/#!#papers

⁶ See: Lewin, K. (Nov 1945), 'Action Research and Minority Problems' *Journal of Social Issues*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1946.tb02295.x>

⁷ Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, established in 1978 has featured major international figures of experimental and avant-garde music.

⁸ See: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019 [accessed 11 May 2020]

⁹ See after: www.kirklees.gov.uk/beta/arts-help-and-advice/pdf/culture-kirklees-our-vision.pdf

¹⁰ See Bailey, R, et al (2019) 'Cultural Ecology and Cultural Critique', *Arts* 8(4) 166 special edition *Reconsidering the State(s) of Criticism*. MPI - <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts8040166>

¹¹ The Star (2008) quoted in research.hud.ac.uk/art-design/temporarycontemporary/marketgallery/deakin/ [accessed 6 February 2020].

¹² Taylor and Whitehead (2019) research.hud.ac.uk/art-design/temporarycontemporary/marketgallery/andrew-katrina/ [accessed 6 February 2020]

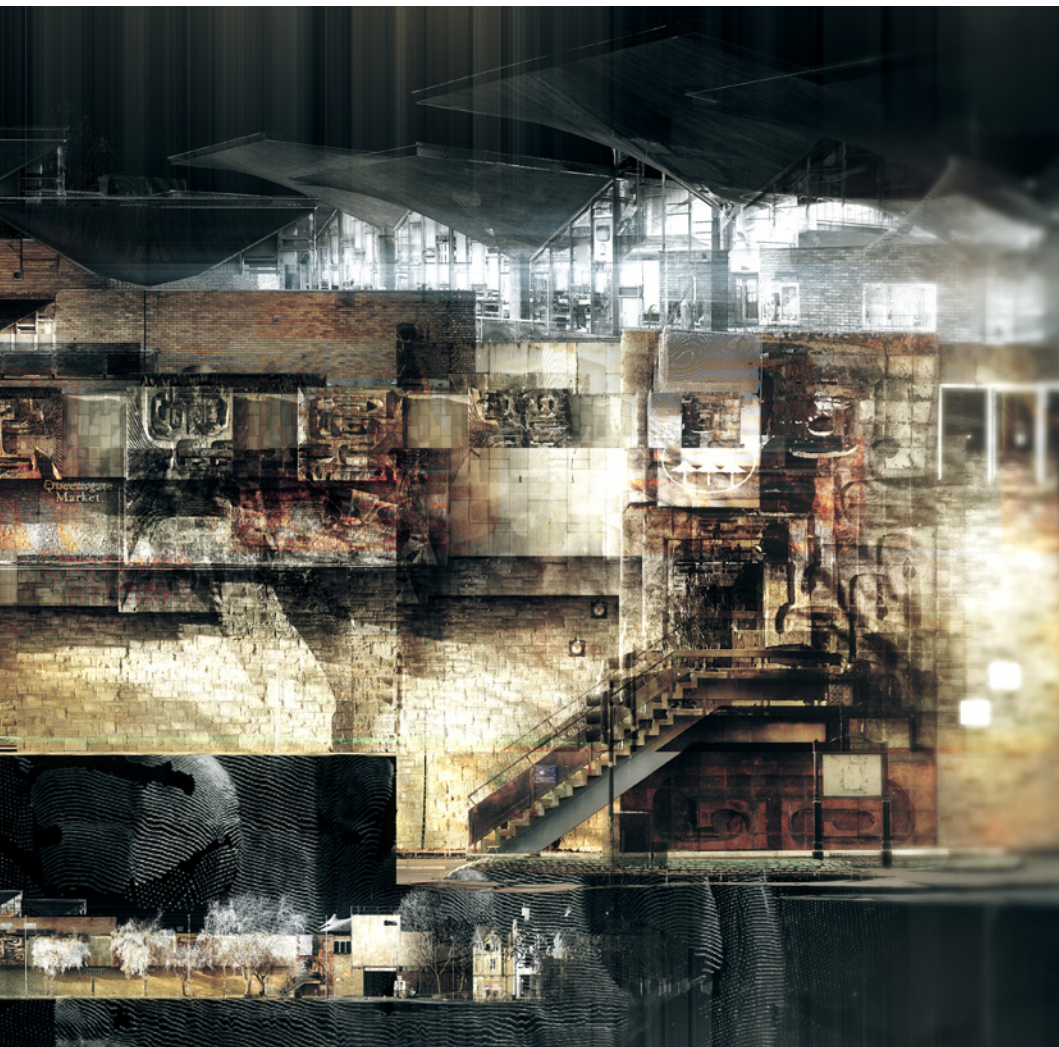
¹³ To find out more information about the companies that supported the project see: ptc.com/en and silverboxit.uk/

¹⁴ For further details of the exhibition *Situating Practices* see the forthcoming publication Claire Booth-Kurpnieks and Louise Atkinson, 'Situating Practices: An Ecological Approach to Exhibition Making', *RUUKKU- Studies in Artistic Research*, Vol.14. Special issue on Ecologies of Practice.



Synthetic Spaces
Professor Nic Clear and Hyun Jun Park

31 January - 4 March 2019



Situating Practices exhibition featuring *The Body as Landscape*,
Landscape as Archive (2018) by Catilin Kiely.





[Above] Situating Practices private view.

[Below] Situating Practices exhibition featuring *The girl with the Paua Shell Eyes* (2019) by Susan Carron Clarke.

