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### What is the art of Birmingham?

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# AN ENDLESS SUPPLY

What is the Art of Birmingham? Is there an accent to Birmingham's art making?

The use of comparatively cheap ~~steam power~~ space gave tremendous momentum to the development of ~~British industry~~ art in Birmingham; it can be said that during the ~~hundred years from 1780 to 1880~~ seven years from 2008 to 2015 ~~men~~ artists were too occupied in ~~business~~ studio building and exploiting the new ~~power~~ project spaces, and too busy ~~supplying the new markets~~ updating their websites to have much time for reflection and to think very deeply about the look of the things they made.

How is Birmingham useful for the production of art?

John Baskerville was born in 1706. He was forty-five before he addressed his talent to punch cutting and printing. The type he designed was clear shaped and elegant and had a precision which one would expect to find from a craftsman writing master cutting letter shapes on steel punches. He was determined that his clean cut types should not be vitiated by imperfect press work or unsuitable paper surfaces. He therefore made plans for manufacturing his own ink and 'hot pressing' his paper so that the surface should be receptive of a crisp impression. With rare judgement he avoided ornament, considering that fine type, superbly printed, was the foundation of a beautiful and legible page. We all know how well he succeeded. In 1757 he completed his fine quarto *Latin Virgil*: it went forth to astonish all the librarians of Europe.

TYPE

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PAPER — INK

The texts above are taken from 'Opportunities', a lecture delivered by Herbert Simon, Director of the Curwen Press, at the Birmingham School of Printing, Margaret Street, on 1st November 1951.

# MOHAMMED ALI

Birmingham can be a grimy old place. Where I was born in the 80s, I walked past all the factories on the way to school. You could see dirt collecting on these concrete walls that had seen so much, seen the industry that had come and gone in this neighbourhood. These metal factories were where my father worked back in the 60s. When he first migrated here, this was his livelihood.

If these walls could speak what would they speak of? I yearn to learn more of those stories of this city's past. I want to learn more about his struggles as an immigrant and a man of colour, who had left his home and family many thousands of miles away. For too long I suppressed my own ethnic identity as well as my faith. I was too busy trying to fit in, as a second generation british muslim – or Asian – which is how I described myself back then.

What I regret is, when my father used to tell these stories, I wasn't interested. He'd tell me about his struggles, but as a teenager it would go in one ear and out the other. Now, decades later I have a passion to understand how I ended up in this city, I want to know about the struggles that he went through that are often parallel to those of today, how that generation fought racism which continues to rear its ugly head today in different forms.

But it's too late now. I visit him in Handsworth cemetery every few months and think of all the stories I missed out on. How he loved to tell them, but nobody listened.

I want to bring those stories to life today. The son of an immigrant, I can shape those stories to pass onto those that want to listen and more importantly to those that don't.

I loved the grime of the city and its industry, it was like the city had a soul – hard work, grafting, an energy in the city that drew immigrants here in droves, people who knew what hard work and struggle was. My father had come to the right place, you want to make something of yourself here you have to graft, work long hours, nightshifts and be prepared to get dirty. That's what my father's generation of immigrant workers brought here. They brought new energy that, through the test of time, would prove that we are here to stay, not some transient people who were passing through. 'Go back to where you come from' is what I heard growing up in the 80s. Well I have one message, 'I ain't going nowhere.'

Those grey walls, I longed to give them colour. They needed new energy to bring life to those facades and I tell you what, I enjoyed those explosions of colour being splashed across those dirty bricks. Those walls couldn't speak much of what they had seen, but I could make those walls speak, with the stories they are now covered in.

# Birmingham's

MARK BEASLEY

## What I Think With

A few years back I was introduced to the work of Birmingham poet, Roy Fisher, by writer, author and fellow New York émigré Sukhdev Sandhu. Admired in the United States but more or less ignored in Britain, Fisher spearheaded the sixties British Poetry Revival and spoke, alongside 'the very un-English' Allen Ginsberg, at the first British happening, the Albert Hall Poetry Incarnation (1965). Fisher, a professional jazzman, applied the structural flow he'd assimilated from American poet William Carlos Williams to his first epic poem, *City* (1961). An ode to his native Birmingham, *City* was praised for its directness of feeling as much an inner perceptual field, as a reflection upon a post-industrial Midlands wasteland. Fisher's decision to not once mention Birmingham by name was made on the basis that for outsiders the name alone was enough for people to switch off. That was the Sixties but here lies the rub, or some small part of it, Birmingham has had over time a cultural image schism, distorted or simplified to the point of numbness: concrete, heavy metal and curry. Birmingham is of course much more nuanced, more off-kilter than it's ever given credit for. To zero in on music alone, from Fifties bebop and jazz (Fisher played with the Andy Hamilton Caribbean Combo) to brumbeat, electric blues through punk, reggae, two-tone, post-punk and yes, heavy metal, as a city it's been at the forefront of musical innovation. It's always been self-evident to me that music is the most keenly felt art form of Birmingham. But more recently it's someone like Fisher – a largely unacknowledged Birmingham figure – that connects me to the city, he seems to fill in the historic blanks of a genuinely curious and multi-faceted culture that in short connects the dots between the words of Birmingham's popular musicians (Kevin Rowland, Ranking Roger and Geezer Butler) back to Sixties radical Birmingham poesy.

In later poems Fisher outright gets to it and it's the opening line of *Six Texts for a Film* (1988), 'Birmingham's what I think with. It's not made for that sort of job, but it's what they gave me,' that's been running around my head. It insists, or at least recognizes the indelible print of a city, and, as Fisher has it, informs the list of 'what you root for and what you snarl at.' It's also kind of funny it's a making do and getting by sensibility, a Brummagem screwdriver. Fisher's poetry pulls no punches, it's not easily palatable, it's a productively strange hybrid, a social-realist-psychedelia covered in brick dust but don't take my word for it – pick up his collected works *The Long and the Short of It: Poems 1955-2010*, it's going to tell you more about the limitless shades and material of your city than any public sculpture.

Brooklyn, New York, December 2014

## TOM BLOOR

WHAT IS THE ART OF BIRMINGHAM?

I don't think the Art of Birmingham exists, the Art of Birmingham should be the art of the world.

IS THERE AN ACCENT TO BIRMINGHAM'S ART-MAKING?

I don't think so, there are lots of accents which is a good thing, apart from when they are unintelligible. Sometimes Birmingham's art-making fails to enunciate properly, stammers, and uses poor grammar. Sometimes it's like an episode of *Peaky Blinders* and doesn't sound like a Birmingham accent at all.

HOW IS BIRMINGHAM USEFUL FOR THE PRODUCTION OF ART?

The meta-tag for [simonandtombloor.com](http://simonandtombloor.com) reads 'Artists. 100% Birmingham, anywhere in the world'. Birmingham is useful as a source and resource, from its history of riots and dissenters to its post-war landscapes and structures. It's also got the potential to be useful as a place of manufacturing artworks. It would be great to have 'made in Birmingham' stamped on the bottom of things we produce. In his 1793 book *An History of Birmingham* William Hutton wrote 'The places where our athletic ancestors performed these curious productions of art were in the shops fronting the street: some small remains of this very ancient custom are yet visible, chiefly in Digbeth, where about a dozen shops still exhibit the original music of anvil and hammer.' I enjoy the idea that like our athletic ancestors we are still able to perform curious productions of art to the music of anvil and hammer.

# KATHRIN BÖHM

Hello Eastside Projects

From what I know about Birmingham and artists in Birmingham (which is actually very little in both cases) I can only really reply to the last of your three questions:

## HOW IS BIRMINGHAM USEFUL FOR THE PRODUCTION OF ART?

Short answer:

‘Because it has Eastside Projects.’

Slightly longer answer:

The things I find most useful for the production of art are curiosity, working together, being able to say what you think without the fear of being made to look stupid, aka patronizing-free zones, spaces which can take a lot of mess and structure, determination to actually make things mixed with the ambition to test art within the everyday, generosity.

JASON E. BOWMAN

WHAT IS THE ART OF BIRMINGHAM?

It doesn't have an art. It has conditions, affected by the constant negotiation of different notions of value and of values.

IS THERE AN ACCENT TO BIRMINGHAM'S ART-MAKING?

Probably not, but there seem to be multiple accents to its exhibiting of it.

HOW IS BIRMINGHAM USEFUL FOR THE PRODUCTION OF ART?

In its obstructive, reticent and antagonistic relationships to it as much as in any of forms of support. It's how its cultural workers respond that is the productive qualification.

JO CAPPER

# The Flavour of Birmingham Art: Soup

On Monday 3 February 2014 at the event Midwest to Midville: Repositioning the Visual Arts in the Midlands, a discussion took place about 'not London-based' art activity. Gavin Wade talked about Birmingham offering an opportunity not limited by scale, 'being a small pond with big fish'. I related to this conflicted position by thinking about French onion soup and the scale of the cheesy crouton – too big and it will suck all of the stock right up, becoming flabby and unappetizing. Soup making is a way of turning leftovers, scraps and humble ingredients into a satisfying meal: a testament to the transformative powers of passionate and thoughtful cookery. It sits there simultaneously form and formlessness. It has potential for many flavours, it has origins and similarities that are reminiscent of others, but each time it is made, can offer something unique to itself and its conditions, a true variant. The following reflects my ambivalent readings of the Birmingham art world.

In the beginning Birmingham art's flavour was like a packet soup; cold, dried, a poor substitute, closed off, waiting to be hydrated, rejuvenated: the inside at conflict with the image presented on the packet. There were individual bowls of soup being consumed, but these were restricted to singular experiences, they did not develop and build upon flavours and create further new tastes and recipes that others could follow, they could be recognised as tins of soup, steeped in their uncertain industrial mass manufacture, each time offering the idea of the beauty of soup yet unable to offer more than that single processed experience. I take you back to 1999 the year

that I graduated, the time when end of the world predictions were rife, a time for imagined new worlds, a time when I had ambitions for creating a recipe alongside others for Birmingham, a soup that was richly flavoursome, that had provenance, that like a good soup would be economical, nutrient rich and transformative. Sat round the cooking pot, myself, Ruth Claxton, Simon and Tom Bloor began to consider recipes and inflections. We considered the legends and flavours of Birmingham and other places; we began to create a 'foundation' stock. Attending cookery classes with Midwest and Self Service, artists the beginnings of a stock were created. Over time others contributed to this stock making process. Eastside Projects bought cooks from far and wide. Springhill Institute, VIVID, Friction Arts, Fierce Festival, Edible Eastside and Companis developed performative culinary elements. Colony and Insert Space searched high and low for new kitchens and dining rooms. The Event created a dining experience that was not bound by geographical origin. The celebrity chefs, institutions – Ikon, Arts Council and Birmingham City University provided some liquidity. Grand Union made new cooking pots that enabled cooks to create new recipes. Others such as Lombard Method and A3 developed further these forms and too began making pots. Together they created conditions for the intermingling of flavours and the simmering beginning of a Birmingham stock.

So what is stock? Stock is the substance that combines alimentary figures, it brings together space and time, creating a new and unique flavour. It is not a pure unalloyed blissful



substance. It is a token of strength, which is not repulsive, not congestive but calm, lucid and equal to reality. So those cooks began roasting bones seeking the Malliard reaction. (The Malliard reaction is a chemical reaction between amino acids and reducing sugars that give browned foods their desirable complex flavours.) However a word of warning should be given here as the Malliard reaction can have an adverse effect. This process, which also takes place in the human body, can adversely affect the eye – the way we see – causing a build up of calcification.

Another critical element of the stock is the extraction of nutrients from the bones and the removal of impurities or scum, this is especially important for the nutritional value of the soup. This extraction is not a restrictive ecology, it is the cure-all healer, magic ingredient in gourmet classic cuisine, the elixir that is flavour and nutritional substance. The significance of the conditions of production cannot be taken lightly, without this you have soup that is weak, lifeless, tasteless or one that has strange unpalatable flavours. This slow simmering releases the gelatinous, malleable substance, which stimulates appetite and enables better digestion.

Finally we consider the addition of fresh ingredients, new perspectives and flavours. Recently I have been engaged in an on-going philosophical debate on the best way to prepare and cook the humble leek. One school of thought is that you slice the leeks into rings then sauté. This I find sacrilege and allows for far too much liquid into the vegetable and stops an adequate Malliard reaction. I believe that you should always cut lengthways along the root, carefully washing and drying the leek before slicing, concentrically, before sautéing very, very slowly in butter. This difference in methodology is important, allowing for different flavours, thoughts, voices and cultures. There isn't really one way of preparing a leek, like that of the addition of any other soup ingredient, and really comes to personal preference and perspective of a history. There isn't one history

and therefore all histories have to be presented together, much like a soup presents all its flavours together.

Having taken a back seat in the kitchen of the Birmingham Art Soup, I prefer to consider cultural connections to different spaces for soup art production. This I believe is possible in Birmingham – the place of constant re-invention, a place of eternal becoming, a place to make new histories.

'From at least the mid nineteenth century, artist's and intellectuals have demonstrated a conflicted, some might say Oedipal, relationship to the institutional spaces of the city. Art academies or schools, galleries and museums have nurtured innovation, promoted diversity, generated artistic community and acclaimed brilliance. They have also stifled all of the above, to such a degree that they have triggered revolt. When institutional ossification sets in, creative dissent is not far behind, finding an outlet through the invisible academies of studios, artist run spaces and bars.'

Extract from *Century City: Art and Culture in the Modern Metropolis*, London, 2001, Edited by Iwona Blazwick

SIMON CHAPMAN

# Birmingham Arts Lab: The Early Years

(EDITED VERSION)

This is an attempt to recall and record my involvement with Birmingham Arts Lab, it covers a relatively short period of between mid-1968 and early 1972. It is not intended to be a history of the Lab, which continued in various forms for another twenty years beyond my leaving to join the Ikon Gallery.

It began in the late summer of 1968, when living in Worcestershire I was watching the BBC TV regional news programme Midlands Today which carried an item featuring five members of the Midlands Arts Centre in Cannon Hill Park forming a splinter group. A spokesman for the five said they found it impossible to do the sort of things they were interested in at the Centre because of its inflexible and bureaucratic management. Representing the Centre, its founder and director John English remarked something along the lines that members wanting to branch out on their own fulfilled one of the objectives of the Centre, to instil in youngsters the vision to follow their dreams, and he wished them luck.

Soon after I moved to Birmingham where I went along to the first of several music events called *Strange Days* and which were fund raising events organised by the five Arts Lab founders under a slogan of 'We Want Your Bread'. Mark Williams and Tony Jones tended to be the main drive behind organising these promotions and selecting the groups, negotiating with their management and the venues. Fred Smith and Dave Cassidy provided technical support and Bob Sheldon was responsible for publicity. I cannot recall the individual gigs, but the bands

included Chicken Shack, Colloseum, Fairport Convention, Fleetwood Mac, John Mayall, Jethro Tull, and Spooky Tooth and would have taken place at venues in Moseley and Kings Heath, and Mothers in Erdington. The project operated out of the front room of Tony's family home and very soon was looking for an office.

An old family friend of mine, Peter Houghton, was the director of The Birmingham Settlement, a charity based in Newtown, Aston. Originally founded in Victorian times to provide assistance to single mothers in the Aston area, the Settlement was now involved in running a youth club, providing a meals on wheels service and a day centre for the elderly of the area. The youth club was on its last legs and Peter agreed to let one of the rooms in the youth club building to the Arts Lab on a monthly basis at a nominal rent. The arrangement with the Settlement proved to be jointly amicable, for over the next six months or so as the youth club activities decreased and its space requirements were rundown, so the Arts Lab activities increased and it expanded a room at a time until it occupied the full building.

For the first few years, Birmingham Arts Lab ran as a collective and while there was a core of regulars, anyone who wished to be involved was welcome. Decisions were generally the result of a majority view, which seldom led to disagreement. The people involved changed quite quickly. Mark Williams who had been the principal coordinator during the *Strange Days* era left to pursue a career in journalism. Shortly after, and at around the time I had become involved, Pete Stark, a recent sociology graduate, joined and

became the administrator. Pete left in 1970 and I replaced him as administrator.

The early publicity material spoke of the Lab as a collective formed to encourage the free development of artistic expression without the restraints usually associated with establishment bodies. Flexibility to adapt to what naturally developed and to incorporate new ideas without restraint from convention was an underpinning concept. This was within a climate of the 1960s counter-culture or the 'underground' as it became known. It had links with the American hippie subculture and in Britain was principally centred on the Ladbroke Grove and Notting Hill areas of London. The Arts Lab tended to lean away from the underground at around the same time it moved on from the Strange Days events and when it first rented an office in Tower Street. The emphasis was more on creating the right conditions for artistic expression and experimentation, although I'm not sure there was common understanding as to what exactly that might mean. While music continued to play a part, so drama and other performance arts began to develop, and to a lesser degree, visual art.

Visual art was always a slow starter at the Arts Lab, and while that was my principal interest, there were few others with similar concerns. There was some interest in photography which attracted Tony Jones, Bryan Brown, Prebble, Paul Costa and myself and we built and equipped a B&W darkroom in which we could handle prints up to 4 ft square and make photo stencils for silk-screen printing. While the technical standard of photography was good, I think I was the only person to have produced a body of work for exhibition. Bryan Brown and I set up a silk-screen poster design and printing operation under the name of Arts Lab Posters which had a heavy photo input and we produced posters for all Arts Lab promotions and a large number of the local university student union events. We adopted a series of different styles based on West Coast Psychedelic imagery, the current Op Art of Bridget Riley and Victor

Vasarely and themes based on the film imagery associated with the Arts Lab Cinema programme. The posters were of a high standard of design, frequently using half a dozen or more colours including surface tinted paper. In time, others joined the poster operation including Laura Mulligan and Terry Grimley. Offset-litho printing was also setup in partnership with a local cash and carry warehouse. They provided us with the press on the understanding we printed their price lists and promotional material and the rest of the time we ran Arts Lab promotional material which eventually, by the time the cinema was up and running, comprised a monthly booklet detailing the programme. Arts Lab Printing was run by Alan Wilkinson who also operated a lightshow.

At that time, there were few artists working in Birmingham and fine art graduates from Margaret Street just seemed to disappear. So, we decided to turn over the whole of the ground floor to six lock-up studios fully decorated and equipped with north-light fluorescent lighting which were available at very low rents. The extraordinary thing was that I had difficulty finding sufficient artists to take all the spaces and one or two of them tended to do very little work and use the space predominately for storage.

Under the leadership of Tony Jones who was later joined by Pete Walsh, Arts Lab Cinema started late 1970 and very quickly grew in popularity establishing itself as the leading independent art film-house outside London. The gymnasium on the first floor was converted to function almost singularly as a cinema with second-hand 35mm carbon-arch projection equipment and standard tip-up cinema seating. The programme was bold and imaginative and Arts Lab Cinema very quickly became the film destination in Birmingham. So successful was the cinema that it very quickly became the only source of self-generated income and, would in due course, outlive every other activity at the Arts Lab.

Financially, the Arts Lab was always in a precarious position. From the very early days when it deepened on the good will of its founders and well wishers, it struggled on an almost day-to-day basis. Amongst its early donors was the DJ John Peel who became the first life-member by donating £50. For perhaps 12 months or more, those of us that worked full time for it did so with little or no remuneration. The first break came in 1970 when the Rt. Honourable Michael Astor gave the Lab a personal cheque of £1,500, sufficient to pay rent and utility arrears and the seed money to start the photography and darkroom and the poster printing operations. At around the same time the generosity of Pinsent and Co enabled the incorporation of the Lab as an educational charity and it embarked on the path of becoming a publicly funded body. The organisation was changing and so were the people involved with it. We were becoming part of the very establishment against which the founding five had rebelled.

It is around this time that I left the Arts Lab to join Ikon as its first director.

In conclusion, it is important to record that the Arts Lab continued for many years after my departure and functioned in a variety of forms, meeting the interests of those involved with it at the time. It adapted with little difficulty to whatever was being demanded of it, which I believe, was the essence of its survival and longevity. Its mark on the cultural life of the city and beyond is perhaps best manifest by the contributions since made, by those of us who passed through its doors. In all honesty, I believe the contribution the Arts Lab made to the individual careers of the people who make art will have been quite limited, the evidence suggests that it may have been more influential amongst those who enable the arts.

## GRAHAM CHORLTON

Somewhere in the mid 80s the first city centre group studios started to appear. I was in one of the first, Bridge Studios, started by Monica Ross and situated in Fleet Street off Summer Row. Monica had a much broader, national outlook and network than other artists and was always proactive in encouraging events and activity. Studios grew, students at Margaret Street stayed in Birmingham, and by the late 80s, early 90s there must have been around 40 people in various studios in Fleet Street, others in St Paul's Square (Jim Byrne, Steve Payne, Kevin Harley), Northwood Street (Liz Lepa, Nicola Counsell et al) and Glover Street in Digbeth which I think incorporated the Birmingham Print Workshop, presses bought by the now defunct Birmingham Artists Group (BAT). All this activity demanded organisation to create exhibitions etc. and BAT came into being, partly through the very hands-on input of Paul Swales, visual arts officer at West Midlands Arts. BAT organised a lot of things, sometimes with myself as chair, including Inter City 88. This project involved links with the artists group in Sheffield, the borrowing of a warehouse in central Birmingham and part of a shopping mall in Sheffield to mount exhibitions. Damien Hirst's Freeze warehouse show was lauded as an original

concept in the 80s but it was common practice in the regions.

BAT at one point had around 300 members. It became a problem spending a lot of unpaid time working on behalf of all these people, a lot of whom weren't exactly serious as artists. It is often the case that young artists come together with energy to start things, but then in order to get greater funding get involved in complex settings up of groups, writing constitutions, accounts, memberships, funding bids etc, and so with BAT. This resulted in the employing of a part-time worker, and, as studios started to disappear due to gentrification, to liaising with the council to provide subsidised studio space. Old Union Mill in Grosvenor St West was the resulting complex (including a gallery, B16, for the first time) and later a number of group studios and a gallery in Lee Bank Business Centre. My own studio was forced out of Fleet Street and moved to Legge Lane in the Jewellery quarter, which was then sold for apartments and we moved to Lee Bank.

The focus in the 80s and 90s was on work space rather than setting up a gallery space. There were often opportunities to show at The Midlands Art Centre (MAC), under Judy Dames, which could host 3

or 4 shows at a time. BAT produced more or less annual shows in temporary venues; these ranged from the old Hudson bookshop premises to a large building near Curzon Street station (Chuck Works). There was a commercial gallery for a while in the early 90s (Midlands Contemporary Art, run by Clare Stracey, who subsequently moved to London as Artfirst). Clare hit a wall in which she was mainly selling work in Birmingham to the same six clients. Tessa Sidey at Birmingham Museum and Art Galleries (BMAG) was also very involved in trying to show Birmingham artists in that venue. Pre internet, West Midlands Arts managed a slide index of Birmingham artists' work as reference for a wide range of the public and art professionals. There were also annual Open Studio events to provide further public interface. The Ikon when it was in John Bright Street was quite a focus for the Birmingham art community. The pub next door, The Victoria, was a hub for meeting people, especially on private view nights. The pub's proximity to the Alexandra Theatre also gave rise to interaction between cultural workers of all kinds.

I'm not sure there is a particular accent to art in Birmingham. There has always been a spread of activity, with artists

making work of various kinds and showing across a variety of venues. There have been specialist venues such as VIVID as well as more general gallery spaces and temporary spaces. There may not have been enough critical mass between individual practices to achieve a distinctive voice. There has been a continuity in some ways in that a number of artists have been making work in the city for a long time. I guess Birmingham is not that different from most major English cities in that it suffers from proximity to London, and has struggled to establish its own art scene and identity the way Glasgow has. To make this happen there

needs to be a wider interest, market in the visual arts, and a lot of interesting outlets for art. In the centre there was a big gap between the old Arts Lab at Gosta Green, for instance, and the rise of venues in Digbeth in the last 10 years. Funding for making and distribution of art in Birmingham is necessary – Glasgow Print Workshop, for instance, was and is a very successful organisation but was well-funded in enabling artists to access facilities, technical help and a market.

The advantages of making art in Birmingham are partly economic as there is a fair

amount of affordable ex-industrial or commercial space around. There is a certain togetherness in the art community as it is small and manageable, but there can also be a lack of real interaction or impetus; there is something of a disconnect between generations and different art practices. For myself, I made a decision a long time ago to prioritise showing work elsewhere; this was partly to avoid the title ‘Birmingham artist’, or worse, ‘local artist’. This demonstrates I guess a lack of confidence in the image of art in Birmingham, and it would be a fine thing to move to a position where such a phrase was not detrimental.

## FAYE CLARIDGE

I didn't choose Birmingham – I was born there – but perhaps that makes the city an even stronger part of me. Certainly, my determination to follow a path in the arts happened there, with childhood visits to BMAG and early work experience at the (old) Ikon and MAC proving too much even for the influences of ultra-academic grammar school expectations.

Access to a high quality foundation course at Bournville was a major influence on me, and something I give the city full credit for, but so was exploring as far as I could on various global travels. Despite these, I've never made a permanent home very far from Birmingham and returned to the city to study for an MA, after advice from various experts suggested BCU's postgraduate offering was also very high quality. Like many artists and students I'm always, consciously or not, comparing options in London with those in the second city. As a Brummie I want the city to have opportunities of equal quality but as a pragmatist I know our (fortunate) proximity to the capital is also (unfortunately) a drain on our talent and attention. Many, many friends and colleagues move there, I spend many of my productive and research hours there, yet Birmingham retains an identity and a loyalty that is undeniable.

I didn't question whether art practice in Birmingham had any communality (or an accent) until a London gallery owner directly asked me that question about five years ago. Since then I've started to suspect it has a very subtle accent that speaks in tones of modest intensity. I've started to wonder whether Birmingham

as a place, a culture, a people, expects to be the underdog and is somewhat suspicious of straightforward success or luck. Our tastes are dark humour and deep knowledge. We are not afraid of change and we know our history. Integrity is in our genes.

Such a background, to my mind, is ideal for the philosophical demands of contemporary art production. Unfortunately it's perhaps not an ideal recipe for work that makes the headlines or for a community that wants to finance risk. Would a commission the size of the Angel of the North ever be funded in Birmingham? Would Tate ever open up a gallery in the city? I'd like to think these would be possible, if only to demonstrate a self-belief to Brummies that shy away from demonstrative acts. But as it's a city built on design, trade and export perhaps these are unnatural aims. It fits better with the local psyche to ask whether we can produce quality artists, support practice (critically and practically) and export exceptional art work. This we definitely can do (as exports like Gillian Wearing, Keith Piper and Richard Billingham show) but we need to do better. Artists need quality studios, peers, workshops, public support, exhibition spaces, critics and collectors. With the financial crunch pushing London life even further out of reach for many than ever before, Birmingham should be flooded with artists heading just an hour and a half north to find all this on a budget. Why isn't that happening? Because we need to fix our recipe – we need to finance this risky growth area and we need to promote it – however un-Brummie that feels.

# YASMEEN BAIG-CLIFFORD

Birmingham is a city of workshops. The workshop is useful for the production of art. One of the evident advantages of the workshop is collective endeavour. Trial and error. Creativity nurtured in a responsive environment. The workshop provides a peer space and eventually as the members disperse, a network. Often, these individual creative voices evolve into viable business propositions. Out of the Birmingham workshops, the labs, came some incredible creative forces working in the city of Birmingham today.

Established in 1992, VIVID, the trading name of Birmingham Centre for Media Arts (BCMA), emerged from the experimental workshop scene of the 1980s. In 1991 the Birmingham local authority funded group, TURC Video, amalgamated with the community arts organisation Wide Angle to become Birmingham Centre for Media Arts. The conjunction of the two entities created a hybrid resource, then unique in Birmingham: a film, video and photography workshop creating community access to what at the time was the dominant means of visual communications. BCMA, VIVID supported hundreds of Birmingham and West Midlands based artists, photographers, film makers, community and cultural groups through its membership schemes. The Centre's members regularly produced, programmed and presented film, video and photography with a particular focus on women's photography initiatives and from 1997, digital media. Being member-led, work produced during this earlier period varies in origin and depth of association with the Centre.

This is a chronological list of artists living and, or working in Birmingham recorded in the archive, as having been commissioned by and, or in receipt of bursaries from VIVID (Birmingham Centre for Media Arts) 1998–2012. This list is not exhaustive but it is a starting point for one strand of a Birmingham art history.

Surjit Simplay	Faisal Hussain
Jenny Moore	Scott Johnson
Jayne Murray	Saranjit Birdi
Helen Kelly	Simon Webb
Lisa Meyer	John Barrett
Colin Pearce	John Hammersley
Andy Robinson	Nikki Pugh
Paul Darke	Sean O'keeffe
Isa Saunders	Steve Bulcock
Richard Flint	Ian Upton
Joseph Potts	Steve Wilkes
Michelle Bint	Sian Evans
Blissbody	Helena Gough
Tom Ranahan	Karin Kihlberg
David Rowan	Reuben Henry
Mo White	Ranbir Lal
Ravi Deepres	Justin Wiggan
Surely?	Oona Luras
Jo Roberts	Chris Keenan
Ian Murphy	Ana Rutter
Phil Coy	Trevor Pitt
Jo Griffin	Polly Hudson
Anna Walsh	Zena Watts
David Osbaldestin	Feng Ru Lee
Jonathan Shaw	James Langdon
Karen Grainger	Trevor Woolery
Kate Green	A.A.S.
Pamela Wells	Ensemble Interakt
Jony Easterby	Shared Table
Talking Birds	Harminder Singh Judge
Mr & Mrs Ivan Morison	Ran Huang
Sadie Plant	Reel Access
Richard Billingham	Birmingham Film
Wanjiku Nyachae	& Video Workshop
Yoke & Zoom	Pogus Caesar
Rebecca Tolley	Companis
Lizzy Bean	Gene George Earle
Emma Macey	Sarah Farmer
Ivan Morison	Contingent Of
Julian Bull	The First Response
Juneau Projects	Filmficciones
Brian Duffy	Fizzpop
Funding Pending Live Arts	Bernadette-Louise
Myria Panayiotou	Matt Moore
Adele Prince	George Fleming
A2rt   Steve Crozier	Sian Macfarlane
Joseph James	Jenine Mcgaughran
Si Griffiths	Andrew Moscardo Parker
Harmeet Chagger	Trevor Pitt
Katy Connor	Mr. Underwood
Julie Marsh	Cathy Wade
Faye Claridge	Nicolas Bullen
Kate Pemberton	Mark Essen
Ed Lea	Antonio Roberts
Nigel Amson	Byob Birmingham
Sandra Hall	



# COLONY

COLONY was a not-for-profit exhibition space in Birmingham from 2004–2007. It was established by Irish artists Paul McAree and Mona Casey, who moved to Birmingham in 1996 to pursue an MA in Fine Art at UCE. They work both individually and collaboratively and presented their first collaborative project in Birmingham in 2002. COLONY's first official exhibition was in November 2004.

COLONY was initiated for two reasons. The first was to counter the lack of permanent art spaces in the Midlands. When the artists first arrived in Birmingham in September 1996, Ikon Gallery closed shortly afterwards before its relocation to Brindleyplace, leaving the city without any permanent space for contemporary art. Despite the best efforts of some organisations including the former B16 exhibition venue, artists and spaces did not establish any substantial cultural ground in the Midlands until somewhat recently.

The second reason COLONY established itself was to respond to current issues in art practice. We were interested in negating some sense of cultural value, voicing alternate strategies, or at least, to try to expand the borders of this culture within which we find ourselves.

COLONY bowed out in November 2007 with a major publication documenting all previous exhibitions and commissioning text and visual projects especially for the publication.

Possibly most significantly COLONY's legacy has been to contribute to a sense of permanence in the arts in Birmingham and to foster a sense of creative commitment in the city – in 2005, artists would come to the city to study and leave straight after, by 2007 this was already beginning to change. And it is heartening to see vacant spaces formerly taken on by COLONY continue to be used for creative purposes long after we have left.

Paul McAree, Ireland, November 2014

DR  
MARIE  
CONSIDINE

For me, when considering 'what is the art of Birmingham' I am intrigued by the connections between art made and seen in the city itself. I am particularly interested in how this can be reflected in portraiture.

Let's make this visual and look at one artwork as an example of the 'art of Birmingham', Robert Neil's Jeweller, selected for the RBSA Portrait Prize in 2013 and for the BP Portrait Prize in 2014 (now on show at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery until 12 April 2015 and then at Aberystwyth Arts Centre from 22 April to 30 May).



To me the development of this artist is an exemplar of 'Made in Birmingham'. Robert's family, economic migrants, came here to make a living, just like so many did and continue to do. They became suppliers to the construction industry as a result of demand in that sector, fuelled by Birmingham's constant demolition and rebuilding in response to rising land values. Hard work paid off and Robert and his brother continue to run a very successful business. This commitment and responsibility left no time for full-time art education – but it did create some freedom to make time to paint and to visit art institutions. A regular journey through the Jewellery Quarter, close to his business premises, led Robert to the Royal Birmingham Society of Artists (RBSA). Birmingham is one of the few cities in England, outside London that has been able to sustain a local art society with its own exhibiting venue, the RBSA, for over 200 years. Here the RBSA's first open portrait exhibition had been launched in 2008. Portraiture was already a serious interest for Robert, but perhaps the presence of the RBSA and this renewed vigour of portraiture, led by the then Hon Secretary Simon Davis, himself an internationally known portrait artist and illustrator, stimulated the development of the artist. Robert was elected an Associate Member in 2010 and Member in 2011, President in 2012, so perhaps this speaks for itself. Certainly the story demonstrates how useful Birmingham has been for the production of his particular art.

The painting itself reflects a production of art influenced by Birmingham's environment: one where social networks stimulate artistic output. Artist and sitter met at a party. Birmingham provides spaces for creative people to meet, such meetings provide the catalyst for further creativity. The sitter is a local jeweller, again a reflection of Birmingham's industrial and often craft-based heritage: it is a city where jewellery making was and continues to be a significant local industry. Robert has said that it was the jeweller's distinctive style and manner that stimulated the portrait and, for me, the very relaxed pose captivates the viewer. It reflects contemporary life in terms of the informality of posture and dress. We wonder about that beard ... casual, or is it political, perhaps? Yet the solemnity of the portrait painting occasion remains in the thoughtful, direct gaze. Could this be the accent to Birmingham's art making?

## JESS DAVIES

My close relationship with Birmingham's art community began to develop in November 2013. Having grown up in Redditch, a town just south of Birmingham, I could be considered one of the new kids on the block (so to speak). Not that I was a complete stranger to the city. Redditch and Birmingham actually both share libraries that were designed by John Madin, ever more relevant to me now as Birmingham's Madin library will soon be demolished.

After studying at York St John University for three years, I returned to the West Midlands determined to familiarise myself with a new group of contemporary galleries. Initially I was unsure of where to start, originally using my Tumblr blog to record all of the creative projects running in the city. After reading some of these posts I was invited to meet with Andrew Jackson from Some Cities CIC. This photography based project worked on the premise of inviting the residents of Birmingham to submit their photographs of the city to a Tumblr and Twitter feed. The process has created a unique online visual archive that represents the city. After being asked to write some material for them in November, I started to follow the project much more closely. Subsequently I have attended several of their talks at MAC, for which they asked different artists and photographers to discuss their work in front of an audience. These talks also gave the public an opportunity to voice some of their own questions about how photography can be curated, as well as varying opinions on different exhibitions and series of works. Artists have included John Myers in conversation with Jim Mortram (2013) and Stuart Whipps in conversation with Daniel Bosworth (2013).

However, my first introduction to the artists behind the scenes of Birmingham's contemporary

art world was a little earlier in October, when I crashed Eastside Projects' fifth birthday party just before joining their volunteer programme. It was at Eastside Projects that I first saw the infamous duo Baz'Art as they presented various raffle prizes – I still have my raffle ticket by the way, which was made from a roughly cut piece of wood with a number scribbled onto it with permanent black marker.

Since then I have invigilated and assisted with several shows at Eastside Projects, including Trade Show (2013) – becoming familiar with the work of: An Endless Supply, atelier d'architecture autogéré, Sam Curtis, Valie Export, Field Cycles, Martino Gamper, Ella Gibbs, Katherine Gibson, Jens Haaning, Christine Hill, My-Villages, Kate Rich, Bob & Roberta Smith, Barbara Steiner, Apolonija Sustersic – as well as the first stage of Bill Drummond's tour with The 25 Paintings (2014) at Eastside Projects. I also become involved with Flatpack Film Festival's legacy, volunteering to help hand out free copies of their 2014 programme to the public and also help with different venues. It was actually during this experience that I started to learn how important Birmingham's independent coffee shops, pubs and public venues were vital for so many different events and groups that are in have made their home here in the city. 2014's OxjamBrum is another great example of this, as well as Church Street's Urban Coffee Company monthly Thursday hosting for Beatfreaks' poetry open mic nights.

Back to the Digbeth side, I have also learnt a lot from invigilating with Grand Union, who exhibited the works of locally based artists; Leah Carless, Sarah Sehra, Anna Smith, Glen Stoker and Hannah Sutherland (February, 2014) during the New Art West Midlands exhibition last year. It would also be fair to say that I have an

ongoing love affair with Digbeth's First Fridays, leading most of my conversations with the people around me to start with, 'So do you want to go and see some Birmingham based artists with me on Friday?'

There is a rich history of artwork and creative industry that is unique to this city, but I feel that it is the welcome attitude of artists and galleries in Birmingham, as well as accessibility that sets us apart. This is due to the high amount of festivals, events, independent artist groups and free galleries – some of which I have tried to include in this text. In my personal opinion, it is this open space for dialogue as well as opportunity to show work that makes Birmingham's art scene so progressive and exciting to talk about.

# STEPHEN EARL ROGERS

## WHAT IS THE ART OF BIRMINGHAM?

I don't think there is a particular Art of Birmingham; I would imagine that most artists are involved with the general traditions that are found within the art world. There may be a national character to the art made, certain approaches and forms that are more prominent. This may come about due to particular art forms that are highlighted by the educational establishment and the artwork held and promoted by large national collections.

## IS THERE AN ACCENT TO BIRMINGHAM ART-MAKING?

If there is an accent to Birmingham art-making it would probably be due to the predilection of the art colleges in the city, the courses at Margaret Street for instance. The training received, the influence of the tutoring staff and general direction of the courses, as well as the concentration of graduates from these institutions that stay and continue to practice in the city, would all have an impact. I don't think there is a strong countervailing force within the city. Plus the university offers some employment opportunity which is a help for the continuation of practice over the years. However I am still not certain that this amounts to an accent. The only thing that I feel runs through the art-making in Birmingham is a high level of commitment in a difficult situation.

## HOW IS BIRMINGHAM USEFUL FOR THE PRODUCTION OF ART?

Birmingham offers some help for the production of art. The main thing is the low cost of living, which is an important consideration for many artists. Birmingham's location and the good transport links to other parts of the country and internationally are helpful. This allows artists in the city to go after opportunities across a relatively wide geographic area. There is an arts infrastructure, studio space, galleries, educational establishments and an artistic community, including artist led spaces.

However the lack of commercial galleries and agents promoting and selling work by artists from the region makes making a living a difficult proposition for artists that base themselves here. This has a significant effect on the ability of artists to develop their practice and grow the ambition for their work. Also the informal networks that are supported by commercial galleries agents and buyers that exist in London and to some extent in other cities like Glasgow mean that opportunities for artists come about in a less formal way than in this region. However Birmingham being a large city certainly has ambition and an expectation that there should be art and artists within the city.

Birmingham, December 2014

GENE GEORGE EARLE

# Tower of 'Bab'el

There I was, trembling amidst the revelation that I am a tender twenty-three years old and shitting into a plastic Sainsbury's bag in my studio. I rarely smile while defecating, but just as leaves fall in autumn, flowers bloom in spring, or pipes freeze for winter, so this was perhaps a good time as I was hunkered down here for the next few months working through my MSc at the University of Birmingham. All this whilst still attempting to keep the other foot firmly planted in 'making work' for things that were unfolding – indeterminately – somewhere on the Eastside of town.

To live as so lowly a creature in a place; knowing the intimate rotations of Sainsbury's meal-deals on Broad Street and what gets thrown out where on Thursdays when you dumpster dive for oatmeal cookies; to know there are forty two steps on the bridges leading to Symphony Hall; to have the ability to trace by heart the routes to the kitchen from the studio in the pitch black dark (no mean feat considering it's a good thirty metre hike loaded with obstacles and fire hazards).

To never know when someone will break in and when my body would finally be discovered; never ever quite adjusting to the cries of foxes outside at three in the morning when the weekly rubbish was out (it occurred to me more than once they would perhaps be the first responders). Moreover, to live so close to the Ikon and yet never quite manage to see its shows (whilst Vinyl shows on the other hand, I wouldn't have missed for the world). Making work slowed and though my intention was always to continue, I slipped

rather into some sort of subsidence. It was like I was sleeping inside of a machine; it deepened my sense of empathy with those survivalist veterans and the outside became a sort of abstraction.

I frankly have very little idea what Birmingham did to my sense of 'making work', or being an artist other than it raised me, tolerated me, gave me opportunities – some I am ashamed to say I never followed through on. Having trawled through as many Art Reviews and Art Forums as I had at art school I wanted to speak in that language, with the tongue of the 'Esperanto-like vacuousness of much modern art' as a mocking Rushdie describes somewhere in *The Satanic Verses*.

Wishing I came from somewhere sexy like China or Gaza – something I could pin to the bio that would make people sit up and feel that now they are partaking in culture or politics – I felt little need to affiliate myself with Brum. If an artist told me they lived and worked in Sheffield (no offence Sheffield) I probably thought lowly of them, considering it (unfairly), a lesser city than the one that spawned both Napalm Death and the Balti Triangle. You give as good as you get though, and I saw the very same thing occurring to people I met at private views when I made my once in a blue moon trips to London, where disappointment sometimes seemed palpable as I mentioned working in Birmingham. It felt as if I was a starving peasant telling the courtiers about my failure to feed my own kids: 'Look at these people' I would think back, 'they've probably never had to shit into a bag for an entire season'. What's more, I presumed a Brummie 'accent' to my work to be detrimental,

seeing as the only gallery I have ever been called 'bab' in – completely unselfconsciously – had been Friction Arts.

Nevertheless, today I am more 'Brummie' than I ever was when I was reading in the Spotted Dog, or plunging my fingers into the soil when no-one was looking at Edible Eastside (for some reason this activity always delighted me). Having served my time as a part of a great machine, I feel at least more emboldened to claim this. I only really became a 'Brummie', or, at any rate, a weak diplomat for it, the day I left. Until then, I basically had a mildly abusive father; now I have a story. Now, I sit on bar stools in Beijing and I play a role, I flash out my time at Eastside Projects and working as an artist like a business card. It has credentials too; I am the person from that part of the world (in a capital where thousands of expat tongues lash simultaneously). And you wouldn't believe it but Birmingham here is exotic, the university I studied at, to my surprise, is well known'. So is Ozzy. Maybe not so much galleries or artists, but it'll get there. From here, Birmingham looks like palm trees and sunrises, not bags of shit and sunsets behind Brutalist buildings. And it is at this receding and reappearing horizon that I look, and become a little milky-eyed.

Interestingly with another artist – Sarah Farmer – I attempted a 'research' project excavating a history of Birmingham and Birmingham artists a few years ago. The two of us really bit off more than we could chew, and didn't manage to get past more than a couple of interviews. Going by the name of Cultural Amnesia: Things We Lost in the Fire (the sheer verbosity of the title is of course my own doing) the idea was to try and discover what the 'fire' was as we realised once in conversation that we had absolutely no idea of the history of Birmingham in terms of contemporary art and artists. We discussed the idea of it being like having amnesia and wondered how not having that sense of history in place affects the staying power of artists in Birmingham. The few people we told about the project, ranged from either delighted to talk about good old days, promising to go through their attics to find old press releases, to something along the lines of 'no-one cares' (also known as the 'Sheffield response'). Nevertheless, to call the current show timely would be an overstatement, it's around three or four years late. It would have been a godsend back then.

JOAN GIBBONS

# Art in Birmingham: Unsung and Badly Narrated?

Birmingham, December 2014

Last year, two advocacy, if not defensive, articles on Birmingham were published in national broadsheets. Writing in May for the *Telegraph* ('Birmingham: bad joke or cultural capital?'), Rupert Christiansen started on the positive, duly noting a matchless set of venues and facilities, prestigious public sculpture and the emergence of 'low budget, rough-edged stuff' in Digbeth'. More negatively, Christiansen concluded that these assets are inhibited by an overall image problem that affects the city's visitor economy. Starting with the downside in his July article for the *Guardian* ('An ode to Birmingham: how can the UK's second city fix its image problems?'), Stuart Jeffries began with what he too regards as a long long-standing image problem in Birmingham, now added to by developments such as the Trojan Horse scandal, failing children's services and the 'poverty porn' of Channel 4's *Benefits Street*. On the upside, Jeffries praised the city's history of civic pride originating from Joseph Chamberlain's *Civic Gospel*. Jeffries solution to the problem was to develop more positive counter-narratives while Christiansen called for Brummies to be less 'self-deprecating' and to 'shout a bit louder about the cultural riches of a fascinatingly complex and exciting city'. Personally, I agree with both journalists. Despite prestigious galleries and collections such as the Ikon, the Barber Institute and the Pre-

Raphaelite collection at Birmingham Museum and Art Galleries (BMAG) and, despite a relatively large, active and diverse contemporary art scene, Birmingham is, to my mind, a culturally underestimated and unsung city, especially with regard to the visual arts.

For me, the counter-narratives that Jeffries called for might be formed on several fronts, firstly in a redress of the art-history of art in Birmingham. For example, the story of art in Birmingham as related in Wikipedia's entry 'Art of Birmingham' does a conventional job of listing the number of art-historically validated artists that have either been born or trained in Birmingham but the narration of this history does nothing to convey the dynamism or energy behind each and every one of these artist's production of art and the society and cultural values that they negotiated in order to make their art. So less of the inadequate survey, more of a social history of art that ties into the history of the city might help. Also of help in creating alternative art-historical narratives are the historically overlooked such as Elijah Walton, whose work, in my opinion is well overdue an outing and deserves far more than being lost in the skied display of BMAG's Round Room – indicating that there are also radical revisions that might be made in the long-standing and to



some degree outmoded curatorial approaches to the display of their permanent collection. In short, our 'fascinatingly complex and exciting city' warrants an art-history that is both written and curated with more dynamism.

More out of the box and sometimes left-field practices and approaches are to be found in the making and representation of contemporary art in the city, so that it might be said that a counter-narrative to Birmingham's negative image already exists to some degree on this front. Much credit can be given to the Ikon here, a gallery which has a consistent history of bold curatorial decisions and gestures, some but by no means all of which have been featured in the two retrospective shows that have traced the history of the gallery's exhibits and exhibitions. In addition, as part of or alongside its portfolio of international artists, Ikon has also consistently showcased established contemporary artists connected to the city, the next being the photographer, Vanley Burke, who is an example of a generation of Birmingham artists and producers who have remained in the city for most of their working lives and are now sitting on a substantial body of work. The list includes Steve Payne, Graham Chorlton, Ruth Spencer and Jim Byrne, not to mention the highly reclusive Ted Allen. Vanley aside, these artists represent the self-deprecating wing of contemporary art in Birmingham, all producing thoughtful and highly skilled works, forming a solid core that, with more exposure, might constitute a counter-narrative of dedication and quality. Were Ikon Director, Jonathan Watkins' idea for a Museum of Contemporary Art in Birmingham to be realised, we might be even looking at a dedicated space for these and other long-serving artists.

But valid and important as the above counter-narratives might be, they do not form an ethos or create an overall climate that necessarily reflects the diversity and social dynamism of the city. It is project spaces or artists-run spaces that collectively have the greatest potential for this, some of which are listed as examples of a vibrant multi-layered art scene by Axisweb. Some

are well-established, such as Vivid Projects and, more latterly, Eastside Projects, others represent welcome new blood, but the upshot is that there is a largely unsung constituency of both artists and independent curators who are, as I write, creating the material substance for a dynamic narrative of creativity and diversity. What is produced by these groups and individuals is of course conditioned by time, place and circumstance, so the sense of political mission that informed the Women's Art Movement and the BLK Art Movement is not as pressing. In place, most artists and curators address political issues on personal or conceptual rather than crusading levels. Barbara Walker, for instance, is a shining example of an artist who blends the personal with the political. But, when push comes to shove, what can be said of artists and independent curators in Birmingham is that their work is often theme or issue-based, something that is perhaps a result of the emphasis on contextualisation in the way that art has been taught post-Coldstream in higher education, but perhaps in some way also a reprise of the values of the Civic Gospel.

But while contemporary art and curating in Birmingham is alive, well and vibrant and has been since the 1980s and the first wave of studio groups and the formation of the Birmingham Arts Trust, it has not really acquired the overall reputation it deserves. Counter-narratives, or even a meta-narrative would go a long way to help, but there are other factors at play. Last October, Council Leader Albert Bore pledged to protect museums, galleries and ballet from cuts. I wouldn't argue with this, but would add a plea for more vision and encouragement for the ways in which Birmingham's artists and independent curators can enhance the City's image, as well as a plea for serious consideration of the idea of a Museum of Contemporary Art with project spaces that showcase Birmingham artists and curators. For, if, as projected, artists defeated by the cost of living will soon start moving out of London, there may soon be many more to swell the ranks. The change of culture that they would bring, however, remains another matter.

# What is the art of Birmingham?

TOM GIDLEY

There are many possible answers to this (and equally none at all, of course). I'll make a case for one that I can think of. Clues are in Birmingham's coat of arms: above the motto 'Forward', a bulky arm wields a sinister hammer. If there is an art of destruction (there is) and an art of reinvention (ditto), then the city could be described as a great exponent of both.

In the mid-nineties, I made a series of photographs of central Birmingham. Each of the twelve large scale images is a different view of the city; somewhere in each frame I can just be made out, motionless on the ground. At the time, *Collapsed: A Calendar for the City of Birmingham* summed up my relationship with where I was born. The meaning of the work has already shifted; the photographs are virtually historical documents, the places in most of them have changed so much.

Birmingham eats itself endlessly. Historically blind to its architectural achievements, it has always been ready and willing to mess with its civic identity. The list of important buildings removed and replaced with reductive doggerel is long, and continues to grow; next month the iconic Central Library will be razed and a £500m re-development project built in its place. The extravagant plan can easily be summed up as another shopping centre. With a dash of classic Brum bravado (and zero sense of irony) the site is to be renamed 'Paradise'. The now defunct library is a significant sixties building unfortunately only suited to the loaning and reading of books, the purpose for which it was built – fatal in a city where there can never be too many shops. Meanwhile the authorities are almost bankrupt, and the new Library of Birmingham has been revealed as a bottomless pit of debt. Suddenly its odd, cavernous spaces and resemblance to a mega branch of Waterstones make some sense; rumour has it retail outlets will open as soon as the scale of the problem has been accepted, and the idea of a main library that's actually a mall made palatable.

After I left school, I went to Bournville College of Art. At the time it was considered to be the best around, a highly successful art school on a charming campus. Nowhere had as great an impact on my ideas and development as Bournville: it got me where I wanted to go next. The college doesn't exist now. It died this year without a whimper. Nothing has replaced it, so that particular cycle of destruction and renewal seems to have petered out, for the time being.

# Is there an accent to Birmingham's art-making?

Yesterday I noticed a recent national poll had declared the Birmingham accent the 'ugliest' in the country. This isn't news; such proclamations are made on a fairly regular basis and as a Brummie, you get used to the gentle mockery. The question here implies a double meaning and it's tempting to seek correlation between the two; could that familiar, much-derided twang connect to the art produced by those who speak with it? I don't know. My family are 'Brummie' whereas apparently, I'm not. At a very young age it seems I simply decided not to speak like the people around me. An early case of snobbery or sharp aesthetic censorship, take your pick. It did me no favours at school, where my lack of discernible local accent marked me out as posh. Later at Bournville College of Art I had a friend who was posh – properly so, by local standards. He was teased a fair amount by the other students for his lisping, Brideshead Revisited voice (yes, it was that long ago). I ran into him soon after I started at St Martins in London and he greeted me in a cartoonish Black Country dialect.

The 'Birmingham' in people from the city (and those who pass through it) comes and goes, it seems. Maybe the same can be said for the city's influence on the art made by them. I remember being amazed to discover years ago that the photorealist painter John Salt is from Birmingham; the link between his work and the city's car-making history seemed tenuous at best. Equally, I was surprised a couple of years ago when I found myself making interpretations of Pre-Raphaelite paintings I had grown up looking at regularly in the city art gallery. So perhaps a Birmingham art making accent can after all be said to resemble the way its people speak – lilting, fluid, transient. Rising and falling in its influence over them.

How is  
Birmingham  
useful  
for the  
production  
of art?

The logical answers are probably the most prosaic. Artists need affordable places to live, accessible and equally affordable studio facilities, and ideally, local competitively priced firms to supply materials and fabricate their work. Birmingham goes a long way to offering all three and it's great that a local arts community has grown up again in recent years. May the blunt forces of regeneration turn a blind eye to those putting old buildings in Digbeth to good use for a long time to come. Also, artists might not need to be in the capital, but it's no bad thing that it's a relatively short train journey away – for travel in either direction.

ANDREW GILLESPIE

A single white headphone droops down from his head as he stares across the road. Half listening, he sees a poster has been dragged against its will from its illuminated home at the bus stop. Two dimensions become three, as its scrunched, glossy form sits dazed on the pavement. Like a tangled key ring, the vowels and consonants awkwardly fuse to make an unfamiliar lexicon.

Five hundred meters away, they congregate on the steps like druids. A facade of the city surrounds them in the form of a large, printed, perforated banner. There are creases at the corners as it struggles to fit the architecture of its location. Now only half looking, he sees the past, present and future simultaneously.

# ALY GRIMES

The art of Birmingham is forward thinking and engaging. It is playful, inclusive, interactive and cosmopolitan. It is both historically- and self-aware and often questions its own identity.

The Birmingham arts scene forms a melting pot of coexisting arts organisations and collectives scattered throughout the city's industrial landscape. Birmingham is a fertile ground for the free movement of discussion, ideas, and fundamentally enables a progressive generation of 'pacemakers', and creative professionals to drive the production of art in the city and to establish a clear arts scene.

The art of Birmingham pushes boundaries and Birmingham champions variety. Birmingham further fosters a young and vibrant arts ecology, with many new collectives formed of recent graduates from Birmingham Institute of Art and Design.

The accent of Birmingham's art-making is ultimately collaborative. A combined hunger to raise the artistic profile of the city instills an innovative and entrepreneurial spirit into its art production through the forming of initiatives such as the seasonal Art Bus, Art Map publication and monthly Digbeth First Friday where art meets food, music and performance. It is this cross-pollination of ideas that facilitates a cohesive identity and burgeoning reputation one of the UK's major creative centres.

Birmingham is useful in providing opportunities for emerging and established artists to set up their own studios and project spaces, which in turn invigorates urban regeneration, unlocks previously neglected areas of the city and fundamentally, enables its inhabitants to reconnect with its heritage and culture.

## STRYX

Two years prior to Stryx's establishment in the Minerva Works estate, the site ... was a loose assortment of industrial buildings, some listed, with less than 20 occupancy ... Four years on, the site has supported the gradual re-occupation of its 43,000 square feet of lettable space to include a varied mix of heavy industry with the arts and architecture alongside. Formed by Fine Art graduates in 2012, today, the directors of Stryx work together to foster a diverse range of events, exhibitions and projects both in and outside their studio space. Furthermore, they seek to initiate and develop regional and national artistic collaborations in order to promote and strengthen an accessible and vibrant network of ideas and practices.

Sue Ball, A Slow but Sure Strategy  
[www.artsprofessional.co.uk](http://www.artsprofessional.co.uk)

AMANDA J GRIST

# Meet in the Middle

I am here, on the mid-line of making, the mid-way between the known and unknown, the mid-land, where a river flows, canals grow and the fire forges futures forwards, or backwards, or sideways, depending on the will of it.

This mid-way moves in the still point of listening to silence, it grows in the dark light and draws out the distance between thoughts. This mid-way is my way, but it could be yours and ours and theirs.

In the mid-point between the seen and unseen, this screen of a city projects back possibilities, which glance off glass and concrete. I land on my own two feet after turning through lives of living and giving. Walking in this way, in the ever shrinking and expanding sky, in the why and the where of each day, in the constant push and pull and play.

In the midst of me is a you who sees, who thrums like worker bees on a

summer's day. Somewhere in the heart of light and dark, in the shadow play where hands make other things alive, not a hive of activity but a constant, restless striving for something new, in the middle of me and of you.

I mine industrially the mid-land of me to see what it is that I see. My gut knows what the edges of me can only suppose, both everything and nothing, which grows and flows through the core of the earth and the caws of crows.

It's the heart's heart, in the centre's centre, of the middle's middle, it's the bubble of joy inside a giggle.

Mid-way, on the mid-line, in this mid-land of possibility is where all things meet. Albeit fleetingly.

For a moment they are undivided in the middle of your attention.

Birmingham, December 2014

JAMES HARRIS

# Sounds Like

It's hard not to be sensitive to regional peculiarities if you grew up in the Black Country. This being the place where accent and dialect is still discernibly different from town to town. The place where any attempt by local or central government to alter our geographical boundaries, or to tinker with place names for the sake of administrative efficiency, is fiercely rejected by residents who pride themselves on being able to tell whether somebody is from Dudley or Wolverhampton just by listening to them breathe. So when it comes to thinking about the art of Birmingham (or Brummagem as my Nan would have scathingly referred to it), and if it has an accent of its own, my naturally provincial mind goes into overdrive.

Fortunately however, I feel the subject is better addressed by one of my favourite techno records: Surgeon's remix of Birmingham by Rue East – one of the few instances in musical history where Birmingham isn't used in a negative context, i.e. The Fall's The Birmingham School of Business School ('The jumped up prats Laughing-stock of European Olympic bidding again and again' etc.) or the slightly depressing Birmingham Blues by Electric Light Orchestra. The fact that it's called Birmingham could be read as a nod to the pivotal role the city played in the development of techno in the late 80s and early 90s, through legendary club nights such as House of God. But I digress. For me this shimmering piece of pounding electronic goodness is a fitting analogy to all the art of Birmingham is or could hope to be, in that the work currently being produced here has a dogged sense of direction, built on top of a growing layer of something reasonably solid, and interspersed with subtle moments of real brilliance. It isn't quite the banging Birmingham of Surgeon's remix of Rue East – it hasn't got enough components to make such a racket. Not yet anyway.

Birmingham, January 2015

ELIZABETH HAWLEY

# When We Were Very Young

I am in my mid-life. I think similarly about the contemporary art scene in Birmingham, and it is also true of many of its successfully practicing artists. That's probably where the similarity ends; but not the connection. I did a lot of my growing up in Birmingham, personally and professionally, in the decade between 2000 and 2010.

One third of the art works on my walls are by Birmingham-based artists. They say something of me and something of the time in which they were bought.

It was a time when things felt dark, obscure, edgy and uncertain. Actually, it wasn't just a feeling. Everything interesting was happening somewhere out of the way, somewhere unassuming, somewhere makeshift, somewhere for which it wasn't intended and, often, somewhere hard to find. In a time before Digbeth was the alternative 'cultural destination', things were happening all over the city, and out of it. I can remember often having to search for things, seek them out, for the first time, after which they became as familiar as Ikon or MAC. I still feel a little disappointed not to have found one promising sounding event in a repurposed space, for which I spent a good part of an evening looking in the streets off Broad Street.

The city's industrial heritage provided the settings for many of the activities and projects, and they often weren't in the most salubrious or

obvious of locations. Springhill Institute made its home – literally – in a disused Victorian factory in Ladywood, as did Spectacle Gallery, with Corridor nestling alongside in a corridor, and the X-Ray Factory in a former ... you guessed it ... x-ray factory. Hockley lent itself to Colony, VIVID and Trove and a number of now very established artists cut their exhibiting teeth in Midwest's exhibition *The Best Years of Our Lives* held in a former jewellery factory. There was talk of repurposing a former coffin factory in Hockley as gallery, studio space. Intervention took place in a row of condemned Victorian terraces in Handsworth, and *The 18th Storey* in a condemned 1960s tower block. Martin Creed's balloons were displayed for the British Art Show 5 in the repurposed and off-the-beaten track B16.

To the unwitting, the Great Tindal Street building, which housed and continues to house some of the city's most critically acclaimed artists, looks like part of a slum. These were (and, in the case of Great Tindal Street, still are) cold and dilapidated, but full of potential.

A former shop unit in Bearwood was home to Crowd 6, Cityspace programmed a unit above Jessops camera shop in the city centre, and Self Service frequented the City's various hostleries for its Pub Conversations.

Elsewhere there were spaces like Periscope at Birmingham Artists' Lee Bank premises, the



Custard Factory Gallery, The Works Gallery, Mona Casey Projects, and Space Banana, later becoming [insertspace], tucked in neatly at Birmingham Voluntary Service Council and perhaps the real forerunner for what is now Eastside's artistic quarter, as well as temporary events like Birmingham Contemporary Art Forum's The Event and Modulate's curated programmes, and projects in less conventional settings such as Project Pigeon, The Rea Garden, and anything instigated by a.a.s. And then came Eastside Projects, Grand Union, The Lombard Method, Article, Stryx and Ort Gallery.

That feels a long time ago now, and many of these aforementioned initiatives are no longer in existence. It's not really though, and many of the people around then are still around now – a testament to the number of opportunities that have been created, many by them themselves, which have encouraged them to stay around – it's just that a lot has happened, to me, to the artists, to the city. Things are definitely lighter, brighter, more visible, more permanent. Birmingham may not have had the best provision for its many artists (studios, galleries etc.) but it provided the conditions for a mass of DIY activity that might not have happened if it had, and a test-bed for a whole host of artists – and curators – who now have successful, national (and international) careers. Eastside Projects, Grand Union, Vivid Projects, they're part of the fabric of the City, the establishment, along with Ikon, Birmingham Museums Trust, RBSA, MAC. Everything's grown up. People's expectations are more easily met, ambitions fulfilled. The city's alive with a critical mass of spaces and projects. And now there's a map ... Things get missed because there's choice, not because they can't be found.

Something else is certain too: there are plenty of artists based in Birmingham whose work I wish I'd bought to display along with the rest in my house. The trouble is, now I can't afford them

Nottingham, January 2015

## JANET HODGSON

In general I am nervous about attributing geographical, regional or national identities, or creating hypothetical boundaries and edges within which to corral something so it can be compared with an 'other'. It always begs the question – what or who is 'other' and why. In this case is it London? Glasgow? Bangladesh? Nairobi? It becomes as important to examine the motives of the questioner and respondent.

I write from a strange inside-outside position. I teach at the art school, putting me firmly on the inside, not only at the heart of the city centre geographically but also at the centre of new art in the city. However, in common with many art schools the connection between the city's art world and the art school is dislocated and tenuous. We observe one another from a distance but rarely interact, putting me firmly on the outside.

I've been teaching at Margaret Street for over a decade and know this city as one of the most ethnically diverse. However, it's always puzzled

me that this diversity is neither reflected in the staff and student body at the art school, nor in the people who run the visible art seen in the city.

Compared with other universities in which I work, Birmingham School of Art has one of the higher proportions of working class students, even now that the fees are so massive, and that's impressive. It's also impressive that a lot of these students go on to further study and practice all over the country and in Birmingham.

Increasingly, ex-students are choosing to stay and other artists are moving to live and work in the city, resulting in a growing infrastructure of studio groups and artist-run spaces and galleries. But thankfully, Birmingham artists look outwards to international and national agendas and so far I can't detect a characteristic regional Birmingham accent in the art.

Although the city, along with other regional cities, has no art market, it does have a lot of empty cheap property for studios and an ex-industrial

base, which helps in the realisation of work and, as London, becomes ever more expensive, Birmingham's attractiveness increases.

It's important to guard against reinforcing the regional identity or geographical boundary, as it can become a way of exaggerating the feeling of being peripheral to the centre. It can also lead to an inverted disregard for the artist living and working in the city, in favour of those from the centre, wherever that centre may be. It's never been good to be a local artist.

JOE HOLLYOAK

# The Art of Birmingham

I am always a bit suspicious about attempts to find a generally applicable answer to complex issues such as the art of Birmingham. A big simple answer is always a good headline, but lots of smaller, contradictory answers is more likely to represent untidy and complicated reality.

So I have no big simple answer. But I can identify one strand which I don't claim is universally representative, but which is certainly a part of the complicated whole, and one which I find quite interesting. That is the theme of art and utility.

I have a knowledge of the Civic Gospel, which grew in Birmingham in the 1870s and 1880s, and of the architecture and the institutions which it generated. One of the most outstanding examples of both the institutions and their architecture is the 1885 Birmingham School of Art, the first municipal school of art in the country.

The teaching at the School, under its first Headmaster Edward Taylor, sought deliberately to make connections between the disciplines of art and the manufacturing trades which dominated the economy of the city, and from which many of the pupils were drawn. It was in the Arts and Crafts tradition, and it emphasised the usefulness and the practicality of art. It produced much excellent work in many media and forms.

This was very much in the spirit of William Morris and it is very much to be admired. But usefulness has its limitations and I suspect that, just as the virtues of this approach have persisted through the culture of Birmingham ever since the early days of the School of Art, so have its more shortsighted restrictions. These often take the form of a philistine refusal to acknowledge that art can be judged on its own terms, or even a refusal to acknowledge a place for art at all.

As an architectural conservationist, I can identify this strand of thought in attitudes often taken towards historic buildings. It can be traced back at least to the Herbert Manzoni years of town planning, from the 1930s to the 1970s.

Having just submitted an entry into the competition to redesign Centenary Square, my mind also turns to the memory of Raymond Mason's *Forward* sculpture. Never popular, it was destroyed by arson, in an act which, though cruel, seems somehow appropriate. In its unimpressive monochrome glass-fibre, it was always a poor work of art when compared to his work, similar in many ways, *A Tragedy in the North: Winter, Rain and Tears*. Unfortunately, being poor, it probably did much to reinforce philistine objections to art.

Birmingham, December 2014

## DEREK HORTON

I can speak of what ‘the art of Birmingham’ was for me, though little of what it is now. I can hear ‘an accent’ in Birmingham’s art-making’, though probably only one my own accent has attuned me to, one that is heard differently, if at all, by others. And as for its ‘usefulness for the production of art’, it remains, I guess, as useful as anywhere, and almost certainly has particularities of usefulness that, estranged from it, I no longer know.

Apart from intermittent short visits since, I left Birmingham for the last time in 1986. I had been born there 30 years earlier. With the time and distance of the last nearly 30 years, I can see how those first 30 years gave me both my own accent, literally, and metaphorically my ‘voice’ as an artist and a teacher and writer about art. I like to maintain a privately Birmingham ‘accent’ visually when I write too – Baskerville is always my default font

I grew up, from my infancy to my late teens, within sight and sound of the largest car factory outside the United States. Almost all the dads and some of the moms of all the kids I knew worked there. ‘Art’ didn’t really exist for me then but, without really knowing what it meant, ‘design’ did, and (although I didn’t know what one sounded like) it had an Italian accent. Because I

loved the shape and form and colours (multi-colours for the first time since this was the 50s and 60s) of the cars that were made there, most notably Alec Issigonis’s Mini. And Giovanni Michelotti’s Triumphs, Herald, Vitesse and Spitfire from nearby Coventry too. For reasons I’m unsure of, history was the only subject that really interested me at school, which took me also to art history, taught by Mick Durman at Bournville Art School – to whom I owe my first encounters with Cézanne (in books) and John Walker (in the painterly flesh). My childhood car fascination probably explains though, when I discovered them a little later (in the Ikon in 1975 I think) my greater passion for the photorealist paintings of John Salt, who had recently returned to Birmingham from the USA. Like many kids growing up in the 50s and 60s I had a fascination with the USA too, and I loved the idea (fatally flawed as I look back on it now) that Birmingham then was modeling itself on American cities.

My older brother worked as a jeweler in a tiny factory in Caroline Street that had changed little since Victorian times, so I encountered first-hand both ends of the scale of Birmingham’s manufacturing industry. But I escaped the industrial aspects of manufacture: my own making

was more personal – first as an obsessive childhood model maker and then, later, more collaboratively and communally when I went to work in the large scale adventure playgrounds that were a radical force in the early-70s. Working at Hockley Port (and later in Balsall Heath) with the raw material of telegraph poles, railway sleepers, cargo nets and parachutes on derelict and abandoned sites was in some sense I suppose still ‘design’ (though the word in that context would have been alien). But, more importantly, it was the first time I had any close encounters with people who called themselves ‘artists’. Mark Renn and Francis Gomila of The Mural Company were among the first, Dave Patten a little later. I had a vague idea what sculpture might be – my mom was a childhood neighbor of Gordon Herricx the Birmingham sculptor and stonemason who had worked on the Hall of Memory and made relief panels at the Barber Institute (to which I’d never been, that came later). But atop a tower of telegraph poles or excavating the soil of bomb sites with nine and ten year olds and a few grown-ups who’d been to art school, I learned that it could be something else, and heard for the first time magical names like Gordon Matta Clark, Robert Smithson, Nancy Holt, Nikki de Saint Phalle and Claes Oldenburg. Unlikely it may be,

but for me Birmingham was the wellspring of those discoveries.

And many more besides, a lot of them thanks to the Birmingham Arts Lab, first in Tower Street, and then Holt Street, by which time I was living just down the road in Newtown. 'Design' as much as art was the thing again, now I come to think of it, with the great posters of Ernie Hudson, Bob Linney and Ken Meharg, all made at the Arts Lab Press. That art could be performance or vice-versa was something I learned there too – The People Show, Welfare State International, John Bull Puncture Repair Kit, Matchbox Purveyors (many of whom had connections with my now-home city of Leeds and had

some influence on my reasons for moving there much later) were all part of an ad-hoc Brummie education for me at that time. Not to mention film – the Arts Lab Cinema was my introduction to Pasolini and many more, not least Warhol's Trash and Empire. The Ikon Gallery really entered my consciousness at that time too, first in its New Street Station incarnation, and then John Bright Street, although there it was music more than art that stays in my memory. Most of all Howard Riley, Tony Oxley, Anthony Braxton, Steve Lacy, Leo Smith and Han Bennink in Derek Bailey's Company week at the Ikon in 1979. That early encounter with improvisation, and the fact that it took place in an art gallery, cemented a

set of aesthetic and conceptual relationships for me that are still solidly in place.

Not too many Brummies amongst that lot, but Birmingham was the place where they came together, and where they came to me, so that I knew they existed and through that knowledge could move on, both geographically and mentally. Having moved on, and eventually looked back, I can see how, much more than I'd been aware of, my particular experience of the art (in an expanded sense) of and in Birmingham is what shaped and made me and my view of art and how to make it and think about it.

# SARAH ISAACS

The dispersion of art and culture to less prominent settings in Birmingham has proven advantageous for artists, organisations and the public alike. It has become particularly useful for the production of art, because artists are able to assert and map a history on a specific territory, as such encouraging more ambitious occupations of space. There are many heritages to Birmingham, the content and meaning of which is up for grabs for artists to explore through time and across space.

The continual stream of artists converging on the city has meant the demand for designated arenas for artists to cultivate and question the context of art-making has increased. Birmingham is able to provide for these platforms within its disparate industrial landscape, for instance Digbeth is perpetually propelling itself to the forefront of the public's attention through its artist-led spaces and initiatives like Digbeth First Friday. The latter is a perfect example of how consolidating energy and influences between the city's organisations can introduce a new blend of audiences to the art of Birmingham. Positioning and communicating disused areas as places to learn something new allows the accent associated with art and culture to shift.

Traditionally we associate accents according to region, the variation of accent changing relative to the area of the city; accents are also valuable indicators and instigators of conversation. The

accent distinctive to Birmingham's art-making is its ability to act as a catalyst and support for the cultural development and regeneration of the city. Of my own current experience, the art of Birmingham I have encountered is intuitive, collaborative, responsive and generous. It is also exciting and significant to witness the public suggesting the future, envisaging potential and acting on it in order to guarantee the visual longevity of art in Birmingham.

I anticipate Birmingham Show to be a social and physical arrangement of Birmingham now, as arguably a sense of place must be related to a sense of time, if only because places are in a continuous state of becoming, and yet, Birmingham Show will perform a composite of narratives; perhaps conflicting narratives about the art of Birmingham, but equally important layers built within the fabric of the city's history.

The idea of a cross-pollinated image of Birmingham is synonymous with the remnants and traces visible from previous exhibitions at Eastside Projects, which form a visual compendium for future visitors to experience. It will be important for each individual viewer to consume, decipher and question the art of Birmingham presented to them in the exhibition. It is equally important to recognise that the exhibition will reveal the strengths and weaknesses of a society, and it is up to us as the public making art to respond.

## DR MYFANWY JOHNS

I am one of those artists Wikipedia currently mentions as living in Balsall Heath. Great area close to city centre characterised with green spaces, Canon Hill Park and generous back gardens to Edwardian houses.

My current work is a personal response to the events, conversations, exchanges of objects and ideas that occur in my life. What you know subconsciously becomes a backdrop to ideas. The city, the stuff that surrounds me, infiltrates my visual senses.

My own garden has begun to feature in a series of short films. All things are temporary and shadows are a condensed reminder and metaphor for our own short existence. They can be calm or disrupted by the effects of weather and background sound as in the captured cheer of a half marathon combined with wind-blown foliage being choreographed on the walls of my house.

The combination of imagery in my recent painting is there to unify, a lot is left unsaid – these paintings are the outcome of assimilating and reconfiguring information.

The imagery in some of the paintings makes a subtle reference to Birmingham – for example, the enveloping pattern on the outside of the new library circulates the surface. I have previously explored surface decoration in my work and feel that pattern has a huge part to play with connecting people to other and past generations. Patterns are like stories they get handed down from generation to generation.

Paintings and objects also get handed down, I often wonder what they could say if they could

talk. An ongoing project is archiving the objects that I come into contact with. Starting with the contents of my home, room by room. The process of collecting or amassing clutter – depending on the intrinsic value placed on the belongings – is similar to the process of curating, where the reorganisation and interpretation of items becomes formalised. I like to imagine that these objects have recorded in their DNA a permanent impression of the words and actions they have observed.

This consideration has also been voiced by philosopher Gaston Bachelard:

‘Of course, thanks to the house, a great many of our memories are housed, and if the house is a bit elaborate, if it has a cellar and a garret, nooks and corridors, our memories have refuges that are all the more clearly delineated. All our lives we come back to them in our daydreams. A psychoanalyst should, therefore, turn his attention to this simple localisation of our memories. I should like to give the name of topoanalysis to this auxiliary of psychoanalysis. Topoanalysis, then would be the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives.’

Charles Babbage, best known for originating the concept of a programmable computer whom I came across when researching digital technology was also to my pleasant surprise a philosopher.

‘Whilst the atmosphere we breathe is the ever-living witness of the sentiments we have uttered, the waters, and the more solid materials of the globe, bear equally enduring testimony of the acts we have committed.’

Charles Babbage 1791–1871

ANDREW LACON

Don't worry about  
cool, make your own  
uncool. Make your  
own, your own world.

Birmingham is suitably uncool.

Quote from a letter written in 1965 by Sol Lewitt (b.1928) in response to Eva Hesse (b.1936) during a period of doubt and difficulty.



Def it.

Nobody knew what this meant outside Birmingham so I stopped saying it.

# AMY MARTIN

## HOW IS BIRMINGHAM USEFUL FOR THE PRODUCTION OF ART?

I'm not from here. Like many I studied here then stayed. I've been away and came back. I've done London and dabbled living in Swansea.

But the potential of this place is intoxicating.

A whole district of unused Victorian warehouses, viaducts, foundries and factories make your brain swim with ideas of artsy spaces with mezzanine floors, summer time film screenings projected onto sides of buildings, co-op run spaces, Brooklyn. Edible gardens, cash points.

Somehow much of what drives me to create stuff here is to make the place better. I've heard other people say similar things. Birmingham is like a diamond in the rough, a well-kept secret. It's like we're trying to avoid eye contact with London in case they spot us and all move here because of gentrification.

I try to future proof Birmingham by investing in young people – young artists. I am certain that my investment will pay dividend when they are eventually running the show. When they have ousted the non-movers in charge of the cultural institutions and can lead us into a new dawn of creative expression articulated for everyone.

## WHAT IS THE ART OF BIRMINGHAM?

The people. The 'Pick your O-wun' flower lady in the market.

The Graffiti, poetry, pictures,  
The Jazz.

Dance, the reggae, the records, the music.

The spaces, the spaces in-between the spaces.

The markets, the ideas, the humor, the festivals.

The venues, the food. The parks.

The industry, the makers, the doers, the rag market,

The heritage, the cooperatives and the independents.

## IS THERE AN ACCENT TO BIRMINGHAM'S ART-MAKING?

Collaboration, resilience and determination, with a slice of 'he who dares'

## JOANNE MASDING

In my head, the art of Birmingham looks a bit like Jeremy Deller's *The History of the World* (the flow diagram that joins acid house to brass bands). It's not as straightforward as joining one thing to another, but more that it's a map of links between things that form through geographical routes in the city, relationships between artists, curators and others, and shared places and ways of working.

Some paths along my map of art in Birmingham might go from concrete, to Andrew Gillespie casting something that looks like a tabletop, and printing on lino, to Birmingham printmakers and them working with Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. Or Laurence Price's space, Sentinel, that led to Tracy Hickinbottom making a CGI palm tree and me thinking about post-internet, and using shiny surfaces, that Ruth Claxton's working with too, which could join back up with concrete via studio neighbours Simon and Tom Bloor's cast seating on the canal side by Grand Union. (You can get to almost anywhere via concrete.) And I think it's this weaving that contributes to Birmingham's usefulness as a place for me to make art in; that I think of it as an even plane of a thing with lots of room in, that it makes its links visible and accessible (or at least allows the humans within the map do so), and that it feels welcoming and wants to expand and add new labels to itself.

LAURA MCDERMOTT

There is space here:

space for oddity,

space for the kind of expanded eccentricity

from which true visionaries grow.

# JENINE MCGAUGHRAN

Once dubbed the most boring city in Europe, Birmingham is currently enjoying some long awaited appreciation. Recommended as the new go-to place to visit, following an article in the *New York Times* which heralded the city amongst its top twenty must visit locations, boasting that our cultural exploits keep pace with those of our nation's capital. The local and national press are joining in this new wave of praise; journalists are increasingly championing Birmingham as one of the most cultured cities in Britain. This follows a disappointing decade which saw us lose out on our bid to be officially recognised as a leading cultural landmark, both in the European Capital of Culture and the UK Capital of Culture respectively. Instead the the real work of putting the city on the artistic map has been accomplished by its arts organisations, not its multi-million pound, tourist focused marketing campaigns.

People are surprised to hear that Birmingham no longer lives up to the desolate, concrete wasteland described by many who have barely skimmed its ring roads while heading further North. In fact many of its inhabitants, either past or present, share a great fondness for the concrete that bleakly characterised the city for so many years. Echoes of John Madin's modernism can be found in the work of many artists who have studied, lived and worked here over the years. Yet to suggest that this is a defining quality of the art of Birmingham would be as inaccurate as stating that there is a discernable type of work, visible to the untrained eye, which could be instantly recognisable as coming from a particular place. If there is an accent to Birmingham art-making it isn't one that we should be ashamed of in the manner of so many whom like to sneer at the intonation of our unmistakable lilt. It is an accent of creativity, productivity and collaboration.

I see Birmingham as unique in its approach to providing services where they are lacking – by no means is this a recent trend. In the 1960s a group of contemporary artists dissatisfied with how their work was under represented in the city's galleries opened their own. This year it celebrates its fiftieth anniversary. Since then many individuals have followed in the footsteps of the founders of Ikon, making things happen for themselves. In 2003 the Springhill Institute was founded to bring artists together for the constructive discourse and production of new work. This was followed by Eastside Projects in 2008, Lombard Method in 2009, Grand Union in 2010 and Stryx and A3 Projects in 2012 to name a few. Complimented by a swath of festivals, collectives and projects, the art of Birmingham can be characterised by its industriousness and its solution led attitude. A lack of studio provision spurred the founders of Grand Union to form their own, securing long-term leases, support from the council and private landlords, fundraising to cover building costs and creating a sustainable base for some the city's most well respected artists.

When returning to the region from London in 2009 Birmingham was a pretty difficult place to navigate, culturally speaking. Having not studied in Birmingham for some years I no longer had a peer network which made engaging in what the city had to offer a challenge. Initiatives such as Extra Special People have made it easier for graduates returning to Birmingham, it offers an environment of like-minded people and possibilities. It also provides a much-needed context and continuation for artists graduating from the city's universities. It has helped make Birmingham a feasible option for arts practitioners wishing the live, work and forge careers in the city.

There are many hurdles to overcome in the production of art, but there seems no greater barrier than a lack of confidence. Birmingham's fostering of collaboration sets it apart from other cities in the UK. There is an understanding here that in order to get things done it is often advantageous to join forces. The ease at which practitioners can work across organisations, sharing skills and expertise serves for the greater good of our creative ecology. There may be gaps in the facilities available for the successful production of art in the city, but Birmingham's solution is to embrace the skill set of its individuals and initiate an exchange of knowledge. Equipping practitioners with these skills is central to the success of Birmingham moving forward and building on its already impressive network of artists, curators, galleries and studio spaces.

## ELINOR MORGAN

When I was young Piglet of Winnie the Pooh was from the Black Country. He spoke in the high-pitched voice, fast but lilting, of my great aunt Winnie who lived in a 1930s council house just outside Walsall. My dad and I used to drive from Leicester to visit Winnie sometimes on a Saturday. I liked the bit of road where there were gasometers and tall blocks of flats and grids of electrical pylons and the bright lights of Star City. We drove high above the activity.

In 2000 The New Art Gallery Walsall opened. On the way to Winnie's we would stop off there, getting lost trying to park in Walsall's strange centre. Walsall felt like a sad place but I could not have said why. People hung about and queued at burger vans. The air was damp. Women's saris were wet at the hems. The new galleries were made from warm wood. They showed small objects from around the world – an Ancient Greek bird, a golden Buddha, sculpted heads – and Modern European painting. From the stairs you could see out into the canal basin where there were drunks and shopping trollies.

I liked it there. There was a sense that we were discovering something; that this was a special place that my dad had found for me. On one visit he spotted a black bin bag by the door of the gallery. Trying to pick it up he discovered that the bag was in fact cast in metal. Making some perplexed joke he kicked the metal bag. I had somehow known that it was supposed to be there, that it was part of the place. I later realised this was a work by Gavin Turk. We assumed that at some point it would stop being called The 'New' Art Gallery, but it wasn't.

Sometimes, if there was time, we would go to IKEA for meatballs and milk. On the way home we'd listen to Herdle White's radio show and my dad would sing along and we'd laugh with elation at the beauty of his West Indian voice. My aunt Winnie died in a nursing home

in Wolverhampton in 2006. The last time I had seen her she was 87 and less than five foot. She was still doing the shopping for her neighbour and playing piano for the 'old folks'. We used to laugh: lord knows what that sounded like, she could hardly see.

Walsall is not Birmingham. I know this now but I did not really know it then. Then it was all part of a different, industrial place full of mimic-able accents. Those journeys on the M6 gave me the first glimpses of Birmingham's scale, its manufacturing nature and its staggering concrete.

Much later it was Birmingham's artists who brought me here. In 2011 and 2012 I worked with a number of people who lived or had formerly lived in the city: Karin Kihlberg and Reuben Henry, James Langdon, Stuart Whipps, Robin Kirkham and Harry Blackett, Simon and Tom Bloor. They spoke highly of Birmingham and I began to visit. I liked the feel of it. Big and roomy, busy and a bit grotty, ambitious but friendly. I saw shows at Ikon, Grand Union and Lombard Method. I went to Fierce, Supersonic and Flatpack Festivals and was impressed by the mix of art forms and what seemed like effortless collaboration.

I have followed Eastside Projects since it opened; I remember being perplexed and intrigued by the external and internal billboards in the first exhibition and discussing Simon and Tom's show with other members of the OUTPOST committee. The first thing I saw at Eastside Projects was Painting Show in 2011. I spent a long time, both in the space and at home in the Cambridgeshire village where I lived in at that time, understanding the layers within the exhibition.

In June 2012 a job came up at Eastside Projects. After the interview (to which Gavin Wade arrived late, to Ruth Claxton's hardly-veiled

exasperation) I went round to Grand Union. Everyone was going for lunch. Some of the people who I had worked with previously were there, as well as people I didn't know. At that moment I wanted to work at Eastside Projects so much and to be part of this group that seemed to fluently mix production and thought, art and design.

A few days later I was offered the job. Much later Cheryl Jones told me that the lunch was the first and last of its type. Moving to Birmingham was hard in one sense; it was grey, less well cared for and much bigger than Cambridge. There was rubbish everywhere in Digbeth and it rained a lot. In another sense the move felt logical. It was right. Birmingham is warm but hard. Its small art scene is esoteric but never remote.

Birmingham is a city with a lot of heart. There are things missing in its infrastructure: there is not enough studio provision or art and too much focus on the immediacy of commerce. This means that it is a place of great openness and potential. Empty space is frustratingly inaccessible but conversation is everywhere. The scene in Birmingham is small but pluralistic. The group I have become part of is critical, supportive and fun. Its people are fiercely interested in the future of the city. Working at Eastside Projects is like being in the car with my dad.

Since that auspicious lunch I have worked closely with many people in Birmingham and in the West Midlands. I have heard many accents and seen many ways of making. I want to hear and see more. And I want to help people outside of Birmingham to hear and see the city's spaces and artists.



LYNDA MORRIS

# The West Midlands has a larger population than Scotland

The West Midlands population of 5,602,000 is larger than Scotland's 5,327,000. Birmingham's population 1,085,400 is the size of both Glasgow and Edinburgh put together 1,055,916. David Cameron's Government has ignored the importance of the West Midlands and Birmingham by manipulating the figures released by the Office of National Statistics, to support 'Greater' Manchester as the counter balance (ahead of Birmingham) to Britain's London centric culture.

The reason could be the more Northerly location of Manchester, but I think a look at the colours on the 2010 General Election Results Map depicts the real reason the Conservatives have prioritised Manchester over Birmingham. It is because at the up and coming 2015 election they have targeted Manchester as the city and region where they hope to gain more seats from Labour than they can hope to gain from Birmingham. To flatter Manchester into believing they are more important than Birmingham is therefore an intelligent strategy for Cameron, who has spent the last four and half years planning his election strategy as Britain lurches to the extreme right. The truth is that the actual city of Manchester's population is only just over 500,000. Half the size of Birmingham.

Having put the figures right – without the Office of National Statistics manipulation of the figures to suit Conservative election hopes – I do not want to set up a competition between

Birmingham and Manchester artists. I want them working together and this is the important job for Eastside Projects and galleries throughout the West Midlands and 'Greater' Manchester to lead in the coming years through their programmes. Most important is the creation of an international collaboration between Birmingham and Manchester to set their artists in the world picture. No more 'British this and that' please.

A region only gets the international recognition for its artists that is equal to the effort they put into bringing international artists into their region. Konrad Fischer, the Düsseldorf dealer who first showed Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt, Bruce Nauman, Lawrence Weiner et al in Europe from 1967, replied to the question 'What is your job?'

To get artists over here, and to bring them into contact with those who live here. When I was an artist everything was so far away; Warhol, Lichtenstein and all those were unattainable great men. But when you know them, you can have a beer with them and get rid of your inferiority complex ... Palermo and Richter have now been to New York and they felt at home there because they had already met artists like Andre and Lewitt over here ... It is not the artists who are chauvinists, but the institutions.

Fischer was speaking as a German. He was born in 1939 and was six years old at the end of WW2. So let me ask the artists and curators

reading this to think about the inferiority complex you and your contemporaries need to overcome? You share with Manchester the legacy of The Condition of the Industrial Working Class in England. You have an important Non-Conformist, Quaker, Pacifist history. Birmingham has the largest Irish population in Britain. Digbeth is the traditional Irish area. Pugin's St Chad's Cathedral was the first Catholic Church built in Britain after the Reformation. The Non-Conformist, Quaker, Pacifist acceptance of immigration probably influenced the City Council to encourage Jamaican workers to come to Birmingham in the aftermath of WW2. Enoch Powell made his Rivers of Blood speech to the General Meeting of the West Midlands Area Conservative Political Association at the Midland Hotel, New Street, Birmingham April 20th 1968.

21 November 1974 saw the bombing of two pubs, The Mulberry Bush and the Tavern in the Town also in New Street in the city centre. In September 1944 Picasso declared Racism is Fascism. The population of Birmingham is now estimated to include 11% immigrants, including alongside the Irish and the Jamaicans, many Asians: Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims as well as East Europeans. Birmingham artists and curators have such an important job to do to lead the rest of Birmingham to understand that it is ahead of Britain and Europe in coming to terms with the mobility inherent in the reality of the future of modern culture.

Lynda Morris is Professor of Curation and Art History at Norwich University of the Arts. She curated Dear Lynda, Eastside Projects 2013, Vanley Burke's exhibition By the Rivers of Birminam at the MAC 2012 and the University of Johannesburg 2014. She curated Picasso Peace and Freedom at Tate Liverpool 2011.

HARUN MORRISON

Perhaps Birmingham's 'genius loci' can currently be glimpsed from the vantage of boats passing through canals, the basements of warehouses, tops of multi-storey car-parks, windows of buildings due for demolition and the cranes hoisting materials to replace them; in the ready turning and transforming of one space to another, in porous and unsuspecting networks, in the possibility of workshops originally built for industrial labour now housing self-governed immaterial labour coupled with a human touch, all the while resisting the alienation that goes hand-in-hand with denser cities.

## HEATHER PEAK

The art of Birmingham rides a bicycle around the ring roads and through the underpasses, passes a pub and gets a can thrown at it. 'Get a fucking bike', its owner calls. The art of Birmingham walks its dog in the cemetery in the Jewellery Quarter, eats a bacon gap in the watery morning light and sees a dead cat next to a grave, takes a photo. Photo is shown later that year at Witte de With. The art of Birmingham catches the Megabus to London at 5am, and Chiltern at 11:45pm back. It buys a box of mushrooms at the Bullring market and makes risotto for 40 people while they watch Chris Marker films, in the dark, in the cold, in an old factory, with hot water bottles. It visits mum on a Sunday in Stechford, reads Olaf Stapledon that evening and writes a talk on science fiction and contemporary art.

The art of Birmingham has many accents. A voice for mum and dad, for the MA student they are teaching, for the Swiss gallery that sells their work, the Canadian commissioner arranging the transportation of a dead cat photograph, the local framers, the rivet manufacturer, the local Councillor, the landlord, the bouncer on the door of the club, the fryer in Mr Egg, and to call the whippet. It looks for what for what is needed or what is missing, an unknown and previously unidentified crack, void or blind-spot in the people or place. It says we acknowledge it all, we know, we can see it too, it's ok.

Birmingham makes things, well, and cheaply. Behind those roll top doors in Digbeth, if you dare go in, is a man or woman making exactly the thing you want producing.

## ROXANE PERMAR

‘What is the Art of Birmingham?’ Surely, the art of Birmingham, like any other place, is primarily defined by its local context, embracing its historical perspective and contemporary aspirations, its economics, politics and culture – underpinned by the priorities and prejudices of its people and communities.

I was surprised to receive this invitation to write something about the art scene in Birmingham, for I’ve not worked in the area since I resigned my lectureship at the School of Art (Margaret Street) in December 1998. Since that time I have only returned four times, twice to realise commissions that I had started while I was working there, once to attend a conference on public art and lastly to take part in an Arts Lab based at VIVID. I therefore write from a historical perspective, from my memories while working in the art college over a period of six intensive years of my career in the 1990s.

When I joined the teaching staff in January 1992 as a 0.5 Senior Lecturer in Fine Art, my positive impressions of the art scene in Birmingham were based on the work of the Ikon Gallery, public art organisations, the community arts sector and work by photographers such as Rhonda Wilson. Unfortunately I must confess I was surprised by some of the conservative, entrenched and narrow attitudes I found on my arrival in the art school. In many ways it was a myopic, unimaginative, small-minded and parochial place, latterly contaminated by bullying. I left Birmingham to work at Gray’s School of Art in Aberdeen, and within a short time I realised Birmingham School of Art was positively enlightened by comparison, but that is another story.

I am not sure whether the insularity in the art school was characteristic of the city at that time or only the community of people in the college. Nonetheless I’m happy to say that I witnessed change over my six years there, and I was very

sorry to leave. From what I read in the press now, I sense that change in the city has taken place, and I hope these wider changes are reflected in the production of art. I wonder if the region’s manufacturing roots are still visible in the production of art and to what extent means of production in art are using new technologies.

Despite finding such insularity in the college in the early 1990s, I worked with some wonderful artists and teachers who strived to nurture students and overcome unadventurous attitudes by embracing contemporary trends. Very sadly Peter Lloyd Lewis, Judy Inglis and Mike Holland died after I left. Roger Westwood, David Mabb, Nick Wells, Jean Vaudeau, Tom Gillespie and Jess Hands, who deftly managed change in the BA Fine Art course before Mike Holland took over after his retirement, have all left the college, so the teaching staff today is very different.

With hindsight I can see how much change we brought to the art courses, both BA and MA. Various factors precipitated this change. Margaret Street was refurbished over a two year period, so for two years we worked in completely different premises where all teaching staff shared one office rather than being in separate offices spread across three floors, thus enabling better communication and interaction. The temporary building had previously housed council offices and a parking garage, so the atmosphere couldn’t have been more different from the Victorian Gothic of Margaret Street. In our temporary premises everything was on one floor.

Not long after we moved out of Margaret Street, I was asked to take on responsibility for the sculpture area. Over time I managed to forge productive links with arts organisations in the community, beginning with the Ikon Gallery. I recall that I couldn’t believe the college didn’t have active links with the gallery. In the face

of diminishing funds to bring in guest artists, I began to look to beyond the college to bring in opportunities for students as well as resident artists.

Sheila Houlston spent a year with us when we returned to Margaret Street as part of our Live Art project funded by West Midlands Arts, which also included a Live Art Forum with weekly guests (Monica Ross, Tim Etchells among others) and a conference on sound. Eliza Jane Gros took up residence in the sculpture area to create a public art work which was funded through Arts and Business. Architects Shillam + Smith worked with us while they were organising commissions for temporary public art in Saltley and Small Heath, one of which was for a student.

When I began working at the School of Art, there were only two female students in the final year in the sculpture area, so I felt it was important to make this area more attractive to women students. I remember suggesting we purchase a sewing machine and iron, which nowadays seems ridiculous. We brought in a diverse range of artists, including Michelle Lewis King, Derek Tyman, Naomi Dines, Tracy Emin and many others. In order to facilitate ways for students to keep pace with new developments in art practice, we re-structured the way we used space and created bookable installation spaces.

I hope that the change we brought into our course has positively impacted on the production of art in the city. The production of socially engaged art would influence and indeed change perceptions of art production in the city, and so I hope the college supports training in this area. It is important for art in Birmingham that graduates from the School of Art remain in the city, for in the late eighties and early nineties students felt they needed to go to London to have a career as an artist. I hope students have more confidence in their experience of art college than they did at that time when I also simultaneously taught in London at Central St Martins. Unlike the West Midlands graduates, those students perceived a future in the art

world for themselves whether they got a first class degree or not. I hope that in Birmingham artists make art for social change.

Thinking about art in Birmingham largely fills me with sadness as some of my colleagues from that period have died, most recently, Pete Lloyd Lewis in 2013. We started working at the college on the same day in January 1992. Pete was perhaps my favourite colleague, and he became a firm friend until his untimely death. He was a quiet radical and in this way he exerted significant influence on the making of art, particularly painting, in the School of Art. I hope most of all that his kind of radical continues to this day in the art of Birmingham.

ROMA PIOTROWSKA

# Former East meets Former West

## A Subjective History of Central and Eastern European art in Birmingham Since 2004

Birmingham's art scene has changed a lot since I arrived to the city in 2009. New spaces have cropped up rapidly and the arts activities have become more diverse. Diversity is also present in the programme of large institutions and galleries showing international contemporary art. It has not always been like this. In fact until the late 1970s the art scene of Birmingham was quite British-centered. This text aims to highlight some of the most exciting Central and Eastern European artists currently living and working in Birmingham as well as curatorial activities featuring art from that part of Europe.

It is quite problematic for me to categorize these artists under the same Eastern European umbrella, as possibly many of them are beyond their national identities and they feel they are so much more than just for instance Polish, Lithuanian or British. Their practices are far removed from regional or national pride, they do not produce Eastern European art, nor any national art, often they are not interested in exploring their cultural identities. The reason I bring these artists together is that the series of specific socio-political situations brought us from the former East to the same place and therefore we share the same common ground.

I have been working with and showing so-called Central and Eastern European art first in Poland and then in the UK since 2005. The contribution of artists from that part of Europe to the Birmingham art scene has become increasingly visible since 2004. Artists and curators contribute to setting up new art spaces; they also organize exhibitions and show their art regionally, nationally and internationally. Some promising emerging artists live and work in the city (Malgorzata Adamowska, Jakub Ceglaz, Anna Katarzyna Domejko, Barbara Gibson, Marta Kochanek and Tadas Stalyga to name a few). Rafal Zar has recently had his first UK solo show at Eastside Projects. The city has also attracted art producers (Jaanika Okk) and more established artists like Tereza Buskova.

There are several independent art initiatives working in Birmingham – artist collectives (Pail West Midlands) and non-profit organizations (PEA, Centrala and newly established Hey East). Artist Karolina Korupczynska is a co-founder of Stryx, where she has curated several exhibitions alongside realizing her own artistic practice. Between 2010 and 2014 I developed PEA's art programme where I was showing work from Central and Eastern Europe as well as artists interested in the region, its context, culture,

history and socio-political situation. During that time we organized residency exchanges and showed art by some of the most striking contemporary artists like Joanna Rajkowska, Artur Zmijewski, Anna Molska, Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska among others.

These independent initiatives go alongside the programmes of main galleries and art institutions, where one can sporadically spot an internationally acclaimed Eastern European artist showing their work. Arguably, the first exhibition featuring art from that region in Birmingham was Ikon's *Art at the Edge: Contemporary Art from Poland* (1988) with artworks of Magdalena Abakanowicz, Edward Dwurnik, Izabela Gustowska, Jerzy Beres, Jan Nowosielski, and Leon Tarasewicz. Since then there have been many more, including large Ikon's solo shows of works by Yuri Leiderman (2007), Victor Man (2008), Jozef Robakowski (2009), Nedko Solakov (2011) and Timur Novikov (2013) among others. Eastside Projects have organized exhibitions of Slavs and Tatars (2011) as well as Yelena Popova's solo show (2012). In 2013 Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery and the New Art Gallery, Walsall worked in partnership with Ikon to jointly acquire Jozef Robakowski's *From My Window* and Aleksandra Mir's *World Map of Social Network* to their collection under the Art Fund International scheme.

In the above paragraphs I have made a short review, which is by no means exhaustive, of Central and Eastern European art activity of the last few years which definitely engenders a certain sense of optimism and also evokes generalizations. I hope that my voice, imperfect, subjective and one of many, will stay in the diverse new art history of Birmingham and the effort of the artists and art initiatives mentioned above will not be forgotten.

Birmingham, January 2015



NIGEL PRINCE

# Birmingham

From a contemporary standpoint we can look back into history and see many examples of artists either originally from Birmingham who then moved elsewhere, ones who stayed and those who chose to live and work there. And many notable figures there are too, but beyond sharing specific time, place and on occasions a common interest, is there anything intrinsically of this city that can be identified as a shared language, inspiration, influence or flavour that cannot be found elsewhere? Certainly there are moments of convergence in one place or another, but whether this is happy accident, by design or fundamentally rooted in some local condition or an inimitable quality then that becomes difficult to ascertain, since for every rule there is an exception.

Contemporary life and, in particular visual art, is a much more complex or pluralistic means of expression than ever before. In a similar way, ideas of some form of national characteristics which define a particular country seem somewhat redundant or at least outdated in our

ever increasing globalised, yet fragmentary situation. Nonetheless, its industrial past, then for Birmingham its basis as a manufacturing centre and as a thriving economic society, clearly permeated ways of thinking and making in days past whereby the historical infrastructure and resultant distinctive culture can be claimed to have shaped thought and reached far beyond the city walls.

Given Birmingham now stands as an international business centre, a hub within the post-industrial landscape of the UK, what might remain or still seem tangible that infiltrates artistic expression: the idea of a working city, a class-based society, a place where things are still made? Do the remnants of its oft repeated reputation as a concrete jungle, an alienating Ballardian future-scape still resonate? Or perhaps this was seen by some artists as a brave attempt at forward-thinking urban planning. Is there a visual equivalent to the idea that Birmingham spawned heavy rock and metal, quite literally the pounding of iron and steel presses, the repetitive rhythms

and syncopation, the sheer noise, giving unique form to the music of bands from Black Sabbath to Napalm Death, despite the indebtedness to musical customs and traditions from other shores?

And just as immediate is the city's diverse population, in particular generations from the 1970-80s who determined issues surrounding Black English identity, a legacy present in a number of artists working in the city today. As a city of many cultures and backgrounds, most visible as you walk through the streets, the sounds, signs, and people integrating into a broad melee provides perhaps the most telling of attributes as they go about their daily routine, and one that is imbued with a natural reticence, a self-deprecating humour that ensures scrutiny or the contemplation of such questions is often deflected.

Vancouver, December 2014

JOSIE REICHART

Sometimes I feel like creating art or organising art events in Birmingham is like walking on an icy lake. Everyone around me is going ‘yeah keep going, you can do this, it’s amazing what you are doing’ and yet with every step I come closer to crashing through the thinner layers and drowning in ice cold water. I always feel one step away from the end. The audience I have sought out will pull me in one direction, the audience I have not sought out in another, the City Council is pulling me back, the Arts Council will lend a tentative helping hand. Amongst all this I am trying to cling on to what I set out to do. I am trying to make it to safe land, but I have no idea what it’s going to be like when I get there. I might make it across to find yet another icy lake. Or another abandoned factory, so beautiful and yet so expensive to run.

## DEBORAH ROBINSON

What is the art of Birmingham? It is so diverse. It is every student ever to have graduated from Margaret St, it's the incredible programme offered by Ikon Gallery going back over the years bringing exciting international artists to Birmingham (I dressed up as a bride and participated in Miralda's bonkers city-wide performance), it's the rich collections of BMAG ranging from the Pre-Raphaelites to the extraordinary contemporary collection of works acquired with The New Art Gallery Walsall and Ikon with support from Art Fund International, it's the old HADAF course at Gosta Green and iconic characters like George Noszlopy, it's the energy and creativity of artists that make amazing things happen; the incredible Fine Rats International that created something wonderful and memorable under the M6, even managing to bring Roman Signer and some explosions into the mix, the Springhill Institute with its programme generated by Reuben Henry and Karin Kihlberg – they hosted an international residency programme but I remember fondly sitting in borrowed hats and gloves, sipping Karin's home-made soup and despite the cold, enjoying the company and an artist's selection of horror films, it is the motivation and force of those who have created Eastside Projects, Grand Union, The Lombard Method and BOM amongst others. I'm not sure about an accent but there is certainly an energy and a drive to make things happen rather than waiting for opportunities to arise.

HENRY ROGERS

# Lest We Forget

I listened to a local news report recently, no not of the ilk of ‘man finds an old piece of rope and sells it on eBay’ so common in this region in the month of August but one that suggested that the population of Birmingham and the wider region, some 5.6 million people, is comparable to the population of Scotland. Given the recent Scottish referendum and the growing concern that, as a Scot living in Birmingham and working at Birmingham School of Art, I may well have to reconsider my status or as one of my colleagues repeatedly queried (apparently in friendly ‘banter’, I like to think of it as ‘friendly fire’) what was I to become: an ex-pat or a migrant worker? Would I describe myself as British, would I have to sit the citizenship test and swear allegiance to the Queen? And of course anyone who knows me at all knows fine well that would never happen. In which case would I be designated as ‘Stateless’ or indeed as a member of my own family titled me, and others who didn’t buy into the whole Braveheart moment, a Diet-Scot? While the invention of this neologism makes me smile, being Stateless is by far the preferred option. But then, I also recalled another news report, from goodness knows when, that said that when asked, young people of from a range of minority backgrounds born in England chose to describe themselves as British and not English as the latter seemed to have been co-opted by groups such as the English Defence League and UKIP – so immediately politically this highlights the problem of presenting a single perspective, a single position, an accent perhaps. There is so much to consider for while the exploration of identity is rich (it is also fraught) with intersubjective relations. But fraught-ness is something close to friction and friction can be productive. Then again from

another perspective one might reflect upon Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings and its apparent rootedness in the region – after all who says it’s a fiction? – or, indeed the atmospheric stylishness of *Pzaky Blinders*: a veritable feast of transgressive materiality: in its use of image, colour, sound, desire, fucking and smoking. Oh yes, lots and lots of fucking and smoking and a thick complexity of dialect and dialogue: the Irish, the Gypsies, the children of the Black Country and the words of Benjamin Zephaniah.

But where are all these words taking us? I decided, my dear reader, to regale you with this commentary because the question posed about identity and regional distinctiveness in the arts is a complex issue: one at the intersections of our being in the world, one embedded in daily life. Of course we can simply say our distinctiveness is predicated on diversity but where in the uber-interconnected world of 21st century art is it not? What is it that we are trying to name and more importantly, in naming it, what is excluded in such an attempt at designation? Are we trying to tease out something about positions, what we are philosophically committed to and taking a stance on, giving voice to or enabling, or is this simply a marketing exercise? And, of course, should we not be mindful here, for if we have learned anything at all from the 1990s and the creative impulse that gave us YBA as a new vision in British culture, is it not inevitable that the ‘young’ and the ‘new’ always become the old and the ‘old’: the flesh on a carcass that inevitably bloats and sags and fades in the light of the sun regardless of its apparent ‘value’. Let’s face it many of them have become the bitches of corporate capitalism.

In the early 2000s we invited the then Director of Education at the Tate to visit us at Birmingham School of Art to speak to our students working in arts education. A reasonable request we thought and she did agree to come. Upon her arrival she declared that she knew nothing about the school and marvelled at the building. Clearly we hadn't been Googled. We marvelled in equal measure at her 'attitude' and apparent ignorance which aptly reminded me that for many, even at the very end of the various London tube lines, the world remains flat and the technology to see beyond this limit into an expanded liminal or conceptual space of other places is often flawed and marked by distortion. Perhaps in the spirit of generosity we might say the lenses and mirrors of their apparatus have been ill-configured. A less generous point need not be made but I do now wonder if she had forgotten her Tolkien. I personally feel privileged to work at Birmingham School of Art, in the midst of the daily institutional drama it can be a joy, not simply because of the school's heritage and centrality in the region, after all who can compete with such an environment in the heart of the city, but because it brings together people from all over the world for which we should be deeply grateful: real human encounters with other people that generate new alignments and conversations despite the general constant peddling in some quarters of right wing anti-migration propaganda and xenophobic narratives.

In my role I have never postulated one point of view, or put forward a single agenda. I have always felt quite deeply that it is important to be responsive: to offer opportunity where we can and to invite curious people, who are themselves curious, and who have an appetite for creative thought. But in saying that, I am aware that I have to some extent circumvented the questions posed. This is, of course, a deliberate act of refusal, or a strategy of sorts, for distinctiveness can have nothing to do with the stasis of a single overarching definition, perspective or doctrine, for any location (city or region) is a porous geographical and nuanced landscape, a

nuanced physical and intersubjective space: one that has highs and lows, mountains and valleys, actual and speculative lines of flight that must facilitate the emergence of much more subtle sets of real and imagined relations, kinships and ties. For me, and perhaps mischievously so, a question usually begets another question, so dear friends I will leave you with this should we fail to remember the migratory conditions of art: Is it not less a matter of the topography of place and location, than a matter of a topographical dynamism, something that facilitates new ways of attending to that which we have yet to imagine?

SARAH TAYLOR SILVERWOOD

# Paleotechnic Paradise

In the index of Lewis Mumford's *The City in History* (1961), four of the five page references to Birmingham are found within the chapter 'Paleotechnic Paradise: Coketown'. The chapter describes industrial, smoke stained, redbrick, Dickensian cities and a period of industrial development marked by the predominance of hand tools and factories.

A quad bike has appeared overnight on the ground floor of the factory where I have a studio. I lean my bike next to it and go up four flights of stairs. I put the kettle on and look out to see rows of windows lit up, veining outwards into wings I have never entered. My studio was built by another tenant who supplements his rent with renovation work. Three months ago I moved in. With a scotch in hand, the landlord handed over the keys to what must be his 100th tenant since an artist asked him if he could use the building a few years ago.

In [Birmingham] thousands of the new workers dwellings were built back to back. (p.526)

Using a Swiss Army penknife, I unscrew the door frame. I forgot the code for the combination lock two months ago so take the whole door off the hinges each morning.

It's Saturday and busy: people are building on the floor below, I can hear someone taping something on the other side of the wall, a woman is loading a van below the window, someone is dragging pallets up the staircase.

The people [of Birmingham] live in an atmosphere vibrating with clamour; and it would seem as if their amusement had caught

the general tone, and become noisy, like their inventions. (p.538)

I can hear the landlord's phone ringing and across the street a woman is shouting at her children while they climb on a car.

In cities [like Birmingham] noise can produce profound physiological changes: music can help keep down bacteria count in milk. (p.538)

Moving quickly I spend three hours dragging stuff around: tables, boxes, chairs, ladders, rolls of wire, a huge mirror, sheets of MDF, and three different incarnations of Lexmark printers. I clear a five metre stretch of wall to photograph some new work, and set up a camera ready for the hour window when the light is right. Now the furniture has been pushed back, unpainted expanses of floorboards are revealed in orderly rectangles.

While I wait, I finish making a pulley system for new drawings on large rolls. Projecting from the beams are metal pipes ending with sinister circular clamps. I make a lanyard and, using a lasso technique I saw on a documentary called *How the Wild West Was Won*, I hang the drawings. By 3pm I have the photographs and go home.

Cycling down the canal with a tripod tied to the front of the bike and a box of old work on the back, the wheels begin to veer dangerously left and right. It reminds me again of the *Wild West* programme. There's a ghost town in California called Bodie; a gold rush town which went from nothing to 10,000 people in just a few years and was then abandoned. When miners moved

on they were charged a toll on the road by the weight of their possessions, so they simply left them behind. I stop, untie the box of drawings and bin them.

Ordinary weeks at the factory pass by, a week back home in the Forest of Dean, another week commuting to London. A month or so later I pass the bin again, and realise that in all the time that has passed I had never thought about the box of drawings.

The factory became the nucleus of the new urban organism. Every other detail of life was subordinate to it. (p.522)

I get to the studio and get the penknife out. A piano has appeared next to the quad bike. I lean my bike next to the piano and head upstairs.

## IVAN SMITH

Let me start by giving you a brief history of my involvement in and with Birmingham, which should then set the scene for my response to your questions.

I studied Fine Art at Margaret Street between 1985 and 1988 and during my second year I managed to acquire a space in the Fleet Street studios (now demolished) to work during the summer holidays. I kept the studio during my third year and when I graduated I began my life as a practicing artist there.

Having previously lived near London I had made a conscious decision to stay, work and live in Birmingham after my degree as I knew I could do both more easily than in London. It also appealed to me and offered a more friendly and proactive working environment.

My involvement in the studio group expanded into being involved in BAT, an artist led movement working to enable artists to have more profile, politically and practically in the city. This opened up the artist community to me very quickly.

In 1990 I began to work with a group of artists in Birmingham to develop exhibitions in non-gallery environments. Fine Rats International quickly began to gain a national reputation for dynamic one night only visual art exhibitions in post

industrial spaces around the West Midlands including Under Spaghetti Junction in 1993.

Alongside the early days of Fine Rats I worked as a technician at Ikon Gallery, maintained my studio practice and developed an exhibition profile, showing in galleries around the UK including Ikon Gallery in a show called *The Secret Life of Objects* in 1990.

I stayed in Birmingham until 2001 when I was awarded the Henry Moore Fellowship in Sculpture at the University of Derby. I moved to Derbyshire where I now live and work on an international platform developing exhibitions and residencies.

My recollections of Birmingham are exactly that, recollections. It's been 14 years since I lived in the city, although it remains an important part of my identity as an artist and a person. My responses are maybe clouded by nostalgia but regardless are relevant to those times.

I don't believe that Birmingham has a specific arts identity; it is a transitory city that artists pass through and this is both a strength and a weakness. The city is a kind of studio in itself, enabling artists to easily get a foothold and establish a profile and practice without judgment.

The city's only requirements is that artists are open and work hard. The transitory nature of the art scene doesn't allow it to establish a reputation on a national level for the calibre and profile of its artists; consequently the city isn't brave enough to trumpet its artists or arts activities in any meaningful way.

A bit like the city's recent well-publicized 'multicultural' status the arts, and artists, are cross-disciplinary with community, street, public, multi-media and studio practice. The accent is its diversity.

The production of art is the city's biggest strength, its function as an open willing partner to new developments and ideas. It encourages a dialogue between its practitioners and arts professionals regionally. The relationship with audiences in the city, are in my opinion, very positive and audience numbers at events and exhibitions I've been involved with have always been very good in Birmingham, in stark contrast to my experiences in the East Midlands.

I worked in the city during the Thatcher years when there was a plethora of redundant, neglected and obsolete industrial environments, which we were actively encouraged



to play with. Fine Rats was born out of the need for alternative exhibition spaces but we also sought to utilise the political climate and resultant post-industrial neglect as a platform for an experimental approach to visual arts which empowered the artist and their practice. Looking back now, this could only have happened in Birmingham.

ADAM SMYTHE

# Why the Art of Birmingham Does Not Have an Accent

Thank Christ the art of Birmingham doesn't have an accent! Accents in art don't share the colloquial charms of accents in speech. Birmingham's artists do not join in collective outpourings of cardboard assemblages, flashy low-resolution animations, acerbic neon backdrops for houseplants, or art as some form of uber-critical luncheon – although these things do, occasionally, crop up in the city. I can write with confidence that at no exhibition, art fair or biennial have the words 'oh, that's so Birmingham' ever been spoken; and, locally, that the phrase 'it all looks very Acocks Green' has never been used. Spoken accents enliven language; accents in art do little more than stymie its potential. Artistic accents usually take the guise of stylised tropes or buzzwords and tend to form a barrier that prevents critical engagement. Art made with an accent is so often dismissed as 'too trendy' or 'too hip'.

Birmingham isn't trendy and nor is it hip, it's much too earnest to chase the zeitgeist. But its artists do follow the city motto: 'Forward' Perhaps the reason for Birmingham's lack of accent is that the city's artists never quite agree on which direction is forward and at what pace to move there. This is what makes Birmingham such an exciting place to make art; it has no fixed direction, there are multiple voices, contesting ideas and debate. And yet, this all plays out under the terms of support and friendship. Artists in Birmingham will assist one another, even when their goals aren't shared.

Whilst Birmingham's art is not made with an accent, it is made with a shared sense of history. An artist arriving in Birmingham soon becomes aware of a recent history of art, from Ikon Eastside to the residencies of the Springhill Institute, Self-Service's Pub Conversations and Colony's gallery. This residual past does not form an accent to be acquired by newcomers to Birmingham. Rather, it forms a sequence of possibilities that give the artists of Birmingham confidence that art can be made here, that there is an audience, that ambitious artists work here and that the city values its art.

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CATHY WADE

# The Extant Condition of Unpresent Space

In the city of Birmingham artists live with unnoticed ghosts. Spaces in which others have manifested furiously glorious outbursts of work that now, near forgotten, still prompt reminders of acts when passed by. These are presences that indicate other creative lives, buildings in which ideas were conceived for audiences that have now departed. Spaces in which works were debated over, performed, engaged and opened out to audiences. The projects completed, these now empty husks that housed them are present in the city; we pass them on a commute elsewhere. Structures in which lives are layered and recorded in fractured reminiscence.

In Digbeth there is a building where an exhibition was staged, where in the stairwell of a modernist lobby performed a roving security guard. On the 50 route (stuck in traffic) looking out to the exterior shell behind which an exhibition was made (there was no electricity), the work brought in for a day as 'goods-in' then swiftly shipped out; the couple of days in which pamphlets containing wonderfully dense texts were distributed across the city; walking to an upstairs space just next to The Jewellers Arms, a wall constructed from cardboard stretched from the entrance into two rooms as a display system for exhibited works; the Institute where a free breakfast was served to test the habits of both artists and art viewers; the echo of a show about sculptural practice by the fire station; the series of exhibitions by emerging artists in a front room in Moseley; some painted works on

paper hung from a wooden structure in a space destined to be a restaurant. All of this work now fading from mind, as artists, curators and producers moved outwards taking their rationale to projects elsewhere. The energy once housed, now dispersed. Their programme of events, exhibitions and publications closed; the structure stripped out within the buildings they left.

The presence of the space stilled within the city and the moment passed on.

Yet does all of this energy dissipate? Or is it manifested in the spaces that are left?

Waiting to be focussed by artists that we have not yet met?

When Birmingham has new spaces for art, let them be fully utilised until they cease their function; and when they do, (as they will through the passing of time), let's imagine for a moment that each time an artist run space closes, six open. That this process is continuous throughout the decades, and spreads with a great rapidity. We can envisage a future where practitioners have to move their projects outward into the suburbs as the city becomes saturated with vibrantly engaged spaces. Exhibitions would then move outward into untested territories, remodelling the environments they inhabit.

'Perhaps artists clad in hundred coloured rainbows will transform the grey dust of cities,

perhaps the thunderous music of volcanoes turned into flutes will sound ceaselessly from the mountaintops, perhaps we will make the ocean waves pluck at strings stretched from Europe to America.'

Vladimir Mayakovsky 'Open letter to the workers' 1918.

Art is useful in Birmingham as it manifests energy that when used with focussed intent gets things done, brokers new paradigms and makes space for future actions. Places in which we can think and have our response to the world tested. Let us not forget that space, be it project, studio, table, or mantelpiece is needed to make the impossible happen. In other words, make ideas manifest as total works, exhibitions and events in the world. This is not something for which we need permission. For Cabaret Voltaire in seventies Sheffield, the city was there as a witness to public performances; the factories an audience for the music played from the open backdoors of an amplified van. The energy that their work manifested lasted for decades. The projects, works we make are bigger than us. They have an independent life outside us and will need to be evidenced and sustained when we are no longer with them. The works we make within the city of Birmingham are one of the multiple stories of the city. There are rich legacies of practice in the coeval publications, websites and dispersed ephemera of Colony Gallery, Springhill Institute and Spectacle Gallery that are invaluable for Birmingham, they have enabled the creation of spaces within which art can live. Let's make more of them.

# JOHN WIGLEY

## WHAT IS THE ART OF BIRMINGHAM?

As course director for the BA (Hons) Fine Art in the Birmingham School of Art, I have been in a unique position over the years to witness, and be part of, developing student careers as artists, curators, designers and film makers etc. Given the social, political, economic and institutional changes over this time, it is interesting to see that their imaginative engagement with ideas and willingness to take risks remains unchanged year-to-year. They are forever optimistic, energetic and enthusiastic, knowing that they need to make things happen for themselves and that they have the confidence and tools to do this, helped by a strong course team, a great course and an ever increasing network of professional support, including Turning Point West Midlands, located in the school, Extra Special People (ESP) at Eastside Projects and graduate residency opportunities at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

## IS THERE AN ACCENT TO BIRMINGHAM ART-MAKING?

The student work is not driven by trends or fashions, and in that sense feels authentic and honest. It is often modest – is this a Birmingham trait? – although also ambitious and confident in its position in the world. There is an increasing interest in performance and live art – the annual Fierce Festival to an extent promotes and underpins this – and in work that has the possibility of being ephemeral – here and there, as seen in Trove and Edible Eastside. There is a quality in the making, a knowingness and understanding of context and content and a generosity in their attitude to others.

Issues of identity, history and place are ever present, linked to gender and sexual politics, ethnicity, and geography. But so, too, a handling of material itself to create lyrical and poetic

works that do not make statements so much as establish resonance. There is a sense that our art students have a voice and have found something that say that is theirs. But don't be fooled: in amongst the flat vowels and dry self-deprecating humour, there is often a razor blade in a peaked cap

## HOW IS BIRMINGHAM USEFUL FOR THE PRODUCTION OF ART?

It is affordable, viable and has a significant history of the creative arts, of collaboration and intentional networks.

The city has the oldest and one of the best Schools of Art in the country, housing the BA(Hons) Fine Art course (240 students), the uniquely interdisciplinary BA (Hons) Art and Design course (100 students) and the Arts-Based Masters Programme (80 students), which delivers courses and shared modules in, for example, Contemporary Curatorial Practice, Queer Studies in Art and Culture, Media Art Philosophy Practice, Art and Education and Art and Project Management. It is notable that the number of our own undergraduate students progressing to the programme doubled this year. It is a place to remain part of. It is at the centre of things.