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Curating the artist-run space: exploring strategies for a critical curatorial practice

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Curating the Artist-run Space:
Exploring strategies for a
critical curatorial practice

By

*A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the University's
requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy*

2013



Abstract

The once distinct roles of artist and curator have blurred dramatically in recent decades owing to a blending process in both directions, which has led to a turn towards the concept of the curator as producer and author, and the development of the hybridised figure of the 'artist-curator'. Within my practice-based curatorial research at *Meter Room* and *Grey Area*, the 'artist-run space', as both form and content of space, is used as a critical framework for artist-curatorship.

Artist-run spaces play a significant role in the cultural ecology of the UK, and this project explores the power relations involved in the production, distribution, and consumption of work within the field, in terms of both a cause and effect of a contested relationship with institutions and commercial galleries. Artist-run spaces are initiated for a number of reasons, but this project specifically focuses upon those spaces that identify with terms such as 'independent', 'alternative', 'not-for-profit', 'DIY', 'self-organised', and 'critically engaged'.

Using strategies for the development of a critical practice, such as Chantal Mouffe's theories on 'counter-hegemony' and 'agonistic space' (2007), and Gerald Raunig's concept of 'instituent practice' (2009), this project explores how curatorial practices within artist-curator-run spaces might offer different ways of working, and be used to contest hegemonic structures within the field. I explore the role of critique within curatorial practice, specifically in relation to the struggle for autonomy, the production of subjectivity, and strategies for negating or resisting cooption by the New Institutions of post-Fordist neoliberalism.

Three curatorial strategies were developed from experimental projects at both spaces, and then explored at *Meter Room* over a 2-year period. These strategies sought to occupy institutional structures in new ways: through the re-functioning of 'void' space, blending studio and gallery functions within a *Curatorial Studio*, developing a paracuratorial practice referred to as *Caretaking*, and re-approaching the concept of a collection-based institution through processes of layering works and their vestiges within an *Artist-run Collection*. The practice-based research culminated in a 5-month durational project in collaboration with five other artist-run spaces based in the West Midlands region, which explored a strategy for the creation of a new speculative artist-run institution as a dialogical process of instituting values through a critical curatorial practice.

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Introduction

Curating the Artist-run Space: Exploring strategies for a critical curatorial practice

Shaped by the artists at their helm, there is no ready-made template or consensus for an 'artist-run space'. Artist-run spaces play a significant role in the cultural ecology of the UK, and this project explores the power relations involved in the production, distribution, and consumption of work within the field, in terms of both a cause and effect of a contested relationship with institutions and commercial galleries. As I will go on to evidence, artists initiate and run their own spaces for a variety of reasons, and this project specifically focuses upon those that identify with terms such as: 'independent', 'alternative', 'not-for-profit', 'DIY', 'self-organised', and 'critically engaged'. This thesis reflects upon the similarities and differences in how these spaces are formed, organised, and function in relation to one another. Much more than simply the first rung on the ladder for artists and graduates, artist-run spaces can often develop highly resourceful models of self-organisation, which enable artists to take control of the means of producing and distributing their own work.

Through an analysis of existing definitions and selected case studies of artist-run spaces, I will address how these spaces can be seen to have been shaped by their respective conditions and power relations. I will then go on to discuss the ways in which artist-run spaces can be seen to impact upon other agents in shared or overlapping fields, and how they have contributed to curatorial discourse, specifically in relation to the development of the concept of the 'artist-curator'. The key research questions that will be addressed in this thesis are as follows:

- What are the forms and practices of 'artist-run spaces' in the UK and the West Midlands region in particular?
- What are the power relations involved in shaping the practices of these spaces, and their respective struggles for agency and autonomy within the field?
- Within the context of artist-run spaces, what are the factors that have contributed to the development of the hybridised figure of the 'artist-curator'?
- How might forms of critique be used within a curatorial practice to explore strategies for contesting and inverting the hegemony of institutional structures within the field?

Chapter 1.1-1.3

Chapter 1 accounts for the literature review section, in which a range of sources (journals, reviews, statements, conferences, exhibitions, interviews, etc.) and positions are analysed as a means of

outlining the scope of artist-run spaces, including their methods of organisation, ideological and political dynamics, and their influence upon wider fields of contemporary art (e.g. public institutions, commercial galleries, biennales, etc.). Having identified the agent of the artist-curator within the field of artist-run spaces, I go on to discuss the power relations between agents that compete for forms of authority within that same field, and how they regulate their own strategic possibilities.

Any research into contemporary curatorial practice must acknowledge the significant impact of the blurred boundaries that have traditionally served to separate the practices of artists and curators, owing to the expansion and re-skilling of both activities. The role of the curator was emancipated from its custodial tradition in the latter half of the 20th Century, and canonical exhibitions such as Harold Szeemann's *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes become Form* (1969) and Walter Hopps' *Thirty-Six Hours* (1978), were especially influential in the paradigm shift of the curator, from 'behind-the-scenes aesthetic arbiter' (O'Neill 2007, p.12) as described by the curator and researcher Paul O'Neill (Bard College, New York), to what Professor Bruce Altshuler (New York University) has referred to as the 'rise of the curator as creator' (1998, p.236). A two-way movement has resulted in the hybridised figure of the 'artist-curator', which is analysed in this thesis in terms of the changes within practice that have had the effect of bringing the roles closer together, and the effect of this development. The territory of curation has extended to encompass terrain formerly considered the exclusive domain of artists, creating a shift whereby curators have become central, not just to shaping the content of exhibitions of contemporary art, but also to the production of works themselves through collaborative processes, idea exchange, and the construction of new situations and contexts. The concept of the artist-curator is still an embryonic one, offering a new lens through which to view both art and curatorial practices, and the ways in which exhibitions and their interpretations are produced. In Chapter 1.2, I argue that artist-run spaces, by virtue of expanding the activities of the artists organising them, and prompting them to become involved with generating exhibitions and supporting material, actually have the effect of producing artist-curators.

As the independent researcher Rebecca Gordon Nesbitt pointed out in *Harnessing the Means of Production* (2003), DIY production methods often associated with artist-run spaces, due to a combination of modest budgets and exploring alternatives to the White Cube, have themselves been harnessed as a visual currency by the 'New Institutions' to have emerged under the conditions of post-Fordist neoliberal capitalism. The term 'New Institutions', which originates from the social sciences, has come to be used widely in curatorial discourse to refer to progressive contemporary art institutions that centralise opportunities for audience participation, fluid movement between multiple spatial functions, and embedded forms of institutional self-critique.

Chapter 3.1 - 3.3

Central to my practice-based curatorial research has been the founding of *Meter Room*; a former Coventry City Council office building, which has been re-functioned as an artist-run project space and studios for contemporary practitioners. *Meter Room*, and specifically the project space, which will be referred to throughout this thesis as a *Curatorial Studio*, provides a critical framework for my practice as an artist-curator. *Meter Room* is a working model and a practice-based framework for what an artist-run space could be, within which a series of curatorial strategies have been developed and explored.

Drawing from the legacy of Institutional Critique, I explore how self-reflexive strategies can be used to critique institutions and power structures within the context of artist-run spaces, in ways that are both implicit and explicit. The project is self-reflexive in the sense that the research subject, namely the curatorial practice of an artist-run space, is also central to the methodology generating the outcomes. Rather than investigating an existing model, the subject of the artist-run space has been given form through practice in live and ongoing processes, which are also subject to change. Several of the artist-run spaces that have been used as case studies were also invited to collaborate in the *Floor Plan for an Institution* project as detailed in Chapter 3.3. The objective behind this strategy was to stimulate dialogue and exchange within a collaborative laboratory-type environment, whereby the relations pertaining to the wider contexts of curated works, or the 'paracuratorial' (2011, p.1) as the curator Jens Hoffmann (*CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts*, San Francisco) has referred to them, are given equivalent levels of attention to the realised works themselves.

For Professor Chantal Mouffe (University of Westminster), who co-authored the influential *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985) with Professor Ernesto Laclau (University of Essex), we live in a time of the total subsumption of capital, which penetrates every aspect of our lives. Mouffe has drawn attention to the importance of developing strategies for challenging and disrupting these flows of determination, through the creation of spaces in which alternatives can be imagined. In the context of curatorial practice, this process can be seen as a means of producing subjectivity and developing strategies that are resistant to the totalising effect of this subsumption. Laclau and Mouffe's theories on hegemony will be applied to artist-run spaces as a means of analysing the power relations that influence and determine their practices, and how these might inform new strategies for contesting neoliberalism and the hegemony of art institutions. More specifically, the concepts of 'antagonism' and 'agonistic space' (2007, p.1) are used to analyse forms of contestation between institutional structures and non-institutional platforms that may have the

potential to offer a relative alternative to them. The dialectical struggles between conditions of creative autonomy and instrumentalisation played out in artist-run spaces are analysed in terms of their materiality, (deferred) value, processes of professionalisation and institutionalisation, and through curatorial practice itself.

The intention here is not to compile a comprehensive account of the practices of UK-based artist-run spaces over a particular course of time, as the geographic scope would be too extensive to undertake. This thesis instead focuses upon how the forms and functions of artist-run spaces in the UK can be understood in relation to three specific lines of enquiry: the concept of the artist-curator, critical curatorial practice informed by Institutional Critique, and the power relations that shape these spaces. In my capacity as an artist-curator with experience of establishing several artist-run spaces including: *Wall Gallery* (2002-2003) and *Other Gallery* (2002-2003) in Portsmouth, *Grey Area* (est. 2006), Brighton, and *Meter Room* (est. 2011), Coventry, I have first-hand experience of the conception, development, and disbandment of these types of initiatives as they pass through their relative lifecycles. An outline of several artist-run spaces will be presented, including a selection of case studies that provide a cross-section from the specific geographical and socioeconomic context of the West Midlands region. Analysis of these spaces, and indeed the practice-based curatorial strategies explored within the project, will place particular focus upon three interconnected subjects: practice, power, and critique.

Chapter 1.1: The Artist-Curator

Contents

1. Artist-Curator
2. Curator-Artist
3. Curatorial Practice
4. Curator-Producer

In the latter half of the 20th Century the role of the curator was emancipated from tasks pertaining to its traditional custodial function, which in combination with the expanded fields of contemporary art practice, led to a blurring of the practices of artists and curators. In the first section of this chapter, I will outline the concept of the hybridised 'artist-curator', and more specifically the artist-curator as an agent within the field of artist-run spaces. I will examine the discourse surrounding merging and merged practices, and how new forms of artist-curatorship can be defined in relation to contemporary art practice.

Artist-Curator

The once distinct roles of artist and curator blurred dramatically towards the end of the last century owing to a process of blending in both directions. The increased level of creative authorship ascribed to curators, coupled with the expanding fields of both professions, means that these roles can now be understood in terms of their mutual overlapping and shared methods for producing new contexts and meanings.

In its traditional guise, curating has been composed of tasks pertaining to the acquisition, ordering and preservation of art and artefacts, which are valorised through the medium of the exhibition within public and private collections. The conservational model of curating, which still continues alongside, and is embedded within, its more subjectivised contemporary counterpart, involves the classification and safeguarding of objects in accordance with the concerns of their host institutions. Curating as practiced in art museums and collections, which I will refer to throughout this thesis as 'custodial', as a means of distinguishing it from the more subjectivised role of the contemporary curator, has traditionally been guided by taxonomical methods that can be traced back to the Enlightenment. Claims of objectivity within the workings of art galleries, collections, and museums were scrutinised throughout postmodernism, thus foregrounding the role of subjectivity within curating, and the ways in which it can be instrumentalised to maintain power structures through the ordering, mediation, and production of knowledge. The increased emphasis placed upon curator-centred authorship and discourse, has been reflected by the way in which the subjective essentialism of an individual curator's preferences and thematic treatments, have widely

supplanted classification systems derived from museum displays.

The evolution of curating, as an activity, process, and a set of relations between objects and subjects, can be mapped through a diverse collection of metaphors that have been drawn to express different conceptualisations within the field. The following terms have been used to describe the role of the curator: 'carer' (O'Neill 2012, p.9), 'editor' (Power 2008, p.101), 'knowledge-worker' (2008, p.101), 'bureaucrat' (Levi Strauss 2008, p.38), 'cultural impresarios' (2008, p.38), 'project manager' (Hoffmann *et al* 2005), 'multitasker' (2005), 'auteur' (Medina *et al* 2011, p.30), 'curateur' (2011, p.30), 'agitator' (Roberts *et al* 2010, p.57), 'non-artist artists' (2010, p.55), 'meta/artist' (Charlesworth *et al* 2007, p.21), 'DJ' (O'Neill *et al* 2007, p.13), 'solicitor' (Poole 2010, p.1), 'key performer' (Russell 2011a), and 'provider' (O'Neill 2012, p.126). Each one of these different terms serves to continually reposition the curator and the activities associated with curating, such as assembling, arranging and overseeing, each time shifting the defining boundaries that have traditionally served to separate curators from other (formerly) distinct roles and professions (artists, critics, project managers, etc). Stretching from conservational responsibilities to the (co-)authoring of works, the elasticity of the term and the mobility of curators within and between different fields, means that definitions of either the curator, the activity of curating, or the sets of relations constructed between objects and subjects through curation, are changeable and contingent. The increasing emphasis upon subjectivised forms of curating means that rather than asking what the role of the contemporary curator is, a more pertinent question to ask might be; who is the curator?

Curator-Artist

The use of either 'artist' or 'curator' as a prefix for the other, has the effect of drawing attention to discourse surrounding their interaction, but also serves to smooth traditional distinctions between the roles. I argue that my practice is located somewhere in-between that of an artist and curator, meaning that either 'artist-curator' or 'curator-artist' could be applicable, perhaps depending upon the nature of a given project and the skills or approaches required. The hyphenation of the two terms enables them to be reflected upon in relation to one another without collapsing or fully absorbing one into the other. It enables different aspects of both roles either to step forward or back, to proceed, or recede. Their combination is also suggestive of the possibility of a negotiable medium ground, but currently the artist subject position more often precedes the obverse. In *The Curatorial Turn: From Practice to Discourse* (O'Neill *et al* 2007), O'Neill argued that maintaining any distinction between the terms, even with hyphenation, is problematic because within contemporary art practice 'the separateness of the artistic and curatorial gesture (is) no longer apparent' (2007, p.14). The artist Liam Gillick, a frequent collaborator with O'Neill, expressed a

similar view in a text for Hoffmann's influential *e-Flux* project entitled *The Next Documenta should be Curated by an Artist* (2005). Gillick argued that the portioning of different levels of authorship to artists or curators is anachronistic, as their segregation 'does not exist in the most productive projects now and has not done for many years' (Hoffmann 2005).

Hoffmann's editorial overture for the curating focused e-journal *The Exhibitionist* (2011), described the medium of the exhibition as a 'nexus between individuals and objects' (2011, p.1) responsible for producing new relations and effects. Hoffmann, who was formerly a director at the ICA (2003-2007), suggested that one reason for the accelerated growth in curating since the 1990s is that it has parallels with a 'new culture of choosing' (2011) in society, underpinned by an emphasis placed upon interactivity, customisation, and choice within a neoliberal economy. As Hoffmann has previously stated, artists who curate exhibitions are 'not necessarily a new species' (2001), as there have been numerous examples of artists who have staged their own public exhibitions throughout art history, in order to circumvent or supplement the institutions of that period in history. Upon being refused admittance to participate in the *World Fair* (1855), Paris, Gustave Courbet organised an exhibition of forty of his paintings, including *The Artist's Studio* (1855), in a temporary structure provocatively located adjacent to the official salon, entitled *The Pavilion of Realism*. As early as the 1830s, private galleries had been mounting small-scale exhibitions of works that had been refused entry by the salon juries. The *Salons des Refusés* (1863) is the most renowned example of artist-initiated exhibition making during this period. The rejection of more than 3000 works led to a wave of dissatisfaction, which with Napoleon's approval, resulted in a public contestation of the power of taste-making institutions. A spirit of proactive resistance guided the self-organised exhibition making of numerous avant-garde movements in the early 20th Century, without the input of professional curators and deliberately staged outside of established institutions. The concept of the artist-run venue as a living artwork is perhaps best epitomised by the *Cabaret Voltaire* (est. 1916). Part bar, part theatre, part hang-out for like-minds, *Cabaret Voltaire* shared many similarities with the contemporary image of the artist-run space, such as the support and advocacy of experimental, open-ended, and interdisciplinary creative practices.

The practices of Harald Szeemann (1933-2005) and Walter Hopps (1932-2005) provide canonical examples of artist-curating, whereby the discursive processes of exhibition making were framed as formative agents within collaborative meta-artworks. In contrast to those professional curators who have moved into the production of works, are those artists who have curated exhibitions as a natural development of their body of work and oeuvre. Canonical examples of this include, in chronological order, Marcel Duchamp's curation of the *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* (1938), *Galérie Beaux-Arts*, Paris; Richard Hamilton's *An Exhibit* (1957), *Hatton Gallery*,

Newcastle; Yves Klein's *Le Vide* (1958), *Iris Clert Gallery*, Paris; Claes Oldenburg's *Store* (1961), New York; and Martha Rosler's *'If You Lived Here...'* (1989), *Dia Art Foundation*, New York. More recently, Mike Kelly's *The Uncanny* (1993, 2004), *Sonsbeek*, Arnhem and *Tate Liverpool*; Thomas Hirschorn's *24hr Foucault* (2004), *Palais de Tokyo*, Paris; Mark Wallinger's *The Russian Linesman* (2009), *Hayward Gallery*, London; and Grayson Perry's *Unpopular Culture* (2008), *De La Warr Pavilion*, Bexhill-on-sea; have all provided examples of established artists working with an institution in a curatorial role to realise large-scale exhibitions. The concept of the artist-curator has been further explored by Maurizio Cattelan, who's *Wrong Gallery* (est. 2005), which took up residence in *Tate Modern*, is contextualised as an extension of his practice; a gallerist-in-residence as artwork. Cattelan's curation of the non-existent *Caribbean Biennial* (1999), which materialised as an opportunity for a holiday with friends, is another example of how artists have made use of art's institutional apparatus as art. Cattelan's fictitious biennale was celebrated and vilified in equal measure, applauded for its satirical critique of global cultural tourism, and criticised for its self-indulgent abuse of institutional power.

The curation of artist-run spaces has contributed to the development of the hybridised figure of the artist-curator, which has subsequently become a privileged sign within contemporary art. It can be argued that artist-run spaces create conditions that actually serve to produce artist-curators, in the sense that artists are required to curate and program these spaces, alongside a myriad of other tasks in their organisation and upkeep, thereby extending the creative territory of artists. This has the effect of centralising the role of the artist and the importance of production processes within a given space. As the artist and theorist Dave Beech (Chelsea College of Art & Design) has pointed out, by 'displacing the artist from the studio' (2005, p.16) and prompting them to take on various curatorial and organisational roles, artist-run spaces have challenged the assumption that artists are solely makers, and by extension, that curators are not also artists.

Any artist who has been involved in the selection and display of their own work can be said to have 'auto-curated', and so if by virtue of this criteria, all of these artists automatically qualify as artist-curators, the term quickly becomes too diluted to be used meaningfully. The category is further blurred by those artists who appropriate methodologies and display devices from curating to produce new work, rather than simply as a means of presenting discrete predefined objects. Despite the apparent ease with which these two roles are navigated in many multidisciplinary practices, both are also encumbered by complex value systems and an historical weight, which can serve to obstruct their full integration. Several pertinent questions arise from the combination of the two roles, such as whether or not artists always remain artists when they are curating or performing manual tasks such as painting walls for an exhibition, or whether a curator temporarily

becomes an artist when they are involved in the production of a work, in collaboration with, or independently from, artists. Gillick addressed these questions directly when he described the dynamic relations that connect artists with curators, and vice versa, whereby these roles alongside others (that of the critic, project manager, technician, etc.), can all expand and contract at different phases of the production process. Rather than seeing this dynamic as a switch between on and off positions, Gillick's conceptualisation instead allows for degrees of nuance and simultaneity. Different projects obviously require different skills and at different times, but instead of perceiving of curating or art-making activities as discrete, they might be better perceived as being fluid and ambient. Not always engaged: but proximate, and with the potential to be engaged.

Processes of blending and merging have been further increased by the activities of independent curators moving and working between public and private institutions as part of a neoliberal knowledge-economy. Professor Julian Stallabras (Courtauld Institute of Art) described the independent curator in terms of being both a co-opting and co-opted agent, whose nomadism has enabled them to become the main source of expression of an individualised model of curating. In his article *Artist-Curators and the New British Art* (1997), Stallabras voiced concerns upon the shifts in authorship and power brought about by the activities of independent curators. Their independence from the mandates of institutions has created a new breed of cultural producer who is able to work flexibly between the activities of artists and institutions. The artist Alberto Duman (Middlesex University) compared the curator's newfound independence from institutions to the manufacturer's liberation from the production line (2008). However, it is the very lack of definition regarding the activity of curators, now that they have forayed beyond a prescribed list of professional duties within an institution, which has been a source of heated debate within the art world. There are some prominent critics, such as Anton Vidokle (*e-flux*) in his text entitled *Art without Artists* (2010), who have argued that curating is, and should remain, a profession rather than an art form, and that claims of creative freedom within this role are underestimating the control and scrutiny of host institutions, funders, and participating artists. In addition to the question of legitimacy hanging over claims of institutional independence, is the question concerning how practitioners, in recently developed roles such as that of an independent curator or artist-curator, exert their own forms of authority and authorial power. The degree to which this power is demonstrated can be seen to range from collaborative facilitation, to pronounced determination, whereby artworks are used as mere 'props for illustrating curatorial concepts' (2010, p.1).

Szeemann's canonical *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form* (1969) at the *Kunsthalle Bern* is one of the earliest examples of an exhibition that centralised the creative authorship of the curator, positioning him in the role of 'ausstellungsmacher' or 'curator-as-auteur'; a meta-artist who

uses artists and artworks as components within the larger artistic gestures of exhibitions. Referring to himself as a 'spiritual guest worker' (2005, p.80), Szeemann's practice responded to the changing methods and materiality of art practice during the 1960s by working closely with artists to extend their ways of working into the gallery-space, which was in turn re-conceptualised as a publicly accessible working studio. The materiality of art was challenged and re-approached throughout the 20th Century, meaning that curating had to become more adept at accommodating these changes, including devising ways to give temporary flesh to de-materialised works for the purposes of display. Szeemann's practice drew attention to the concept of a curatorial remit, which operates 'above and beyond the limits of the artist or the discrete artwork' (O'Neill 2012, p.4). Daniel Buren's influential critique of Szeemann's curatorship of *Documenta 5* (1972) entitled *Exhibitions of an Exhibition* (Buren 1972), voiced concerns over Szeemann's activity as a meta-artist who deploys other artists as his material, on the basis that Szeemann's interest in curating self-reflexive exhibitions about exhibitions had the effect of overshadowing the works displayed within them.

Szeemann, who worked independently at the same time as being the sole curator of *Kunsthaus Zürich*, is the practitioner most responsible for the contemporary image of the artist-curator, or the 'curator-as-artist'. Hans Ulrich Obrist (*Serpentine Gallery*, London), citing Szeemann, described the expanded role of the curator as consisting of the following: 'administrator, amateur, author of introductions, librarian, manager and accountant, animator, conservator, financier, and diplomat' (2008, p.27). As the critic Aaron Schuster (*Sandberg Institute*, Amsterdam) remarked in an obituary for *Frieze* magazine, Szeemann's practice as a 'roaming, freelance designer of exhibitions' (Obrist and Serra 2005, p.80) paved the way for the contemporary figure of the 'übercurator'. This new species of international independent curator freelances across a global platform, moving nomadically from airport lounge, to international biennial, to airport lounge, and on again.

In *The Artworld is not the World* (2008), Nina Power (Roehampton University) satirised the prominence of globe hopping übercurators, and the neoliberal conditions that have produced an abundance of freelance producers in a decentralised market, which has an appetite for cultural tourism and spectacle. Power argued that the übercurator's role as self-appointed tastemaker must be reviewed in light of contemporary debate on the nature of power relations within the art world. The significant increase in the number of freelance curators over the past decade, an occupation described by Power as the 'immaterial labourer par excellence' (2008, p.101), encapsulates the immateriality of neoliberalism and the seemingly limitless space made available for and by 'knowledge-workers' (2008, p.101). Power's criticisms are not aimed at curators per se, but against those ambitious participants who are seduced by the promise of status through curating, without an

awareness of the inner workings of their own industry, such as the substantial impact of spiralling privatisation, and the broader political and socioeconomic shifts from Fordism to post-Fordism.

Curatorial Practice

The concept of the artist-curator has been largely shaped by two different strands of curatorial practice. Firstly, the recent phenomenon of the independent curator as a species of meta-artist on a global stage, and secondly, the practices of artists who have moved into curating by self-organising exhibitions or becoming involved with artist-run spaces. The particularities of both of these conceptions of curating are located in practice, but they pose different questions about the nature of those practices in relation to production, authorship, and status.

In their article *Curing Curation* (2008), the artists J.C. Fregnan and Stefan Brüggenmann argued that the definition of curating has become so un-tethered from its original referent as to become a signifier that floats through the culture industry and further afield. Fregnan and Brüggenmann traced the term's etymological roots from the Latin verb 'curare', which has the dual meaning 'to cure' and 'to be in charge of' (2008, p.52). Originally denoting the curing of the body and meat, the term gradually expanded to include the meaning of other subject-object relationships and the ordering of things. Paradoxically, the initial unfixing of categorical meaning led to a specific association with the arrangement of art and artefacts, which must remain as a normative reference point from which more discursive connections can be made, which in turn divert and expand contextual possibilities within and outside of the field. Simply put, the practice of curating has evolved from the selection and organisation of objects that have been, or are by virtue of the selection process, ascribed value, to the positioning of objects, subjects, and contexts in relation to others within the framework of art.

Despite significant shifts in focus, the custodial responsibility of curatorship shows signs of having been reoriented rather than relinquished or replaced, as traditional concerns pertaining to the safeguarding of objects still exist in the processes of editing, arranging, and contextualising works. This reorientation includes a move towards more open-ended frameworks, which seek to destabilise or contest meaning rather than preserve a static object for posterity. The critic JJ Charlesworth (*Art Review*) identified a tension at the very heart of contemporary curating, which must simultaneously act with an awareness of the 'attenuated legacies of museology' (2007, p.92) and evidence an 'active and partisan nature of presentation' (2007, p.92). The diversity of the curator's remit outside of the activity of curating works, which can extend from budget-keeping to event management, are all indicative of its intermediary nature, which is located between the producers of art and the power structures that serve to define its institutions.

Recent developments in the academicisation of curating and its emergent status as an academic subject in its own right, have prompted debate on the scholarly virtues of contemporary subjectivised non-custodial practices. The proliferation of postgraduate courses in the subject since the formation of the MA Curating Contemporary Art course at the Royal College of Art (est. 1992), the first of its kind within a higher education institution, has done much to develop the concept of the exhibition as medium, and can be considered to be indicative of the growing relevance of the subject. Expansion in the provision of the subject within academia has been partnered by a growing demand for these courses, notably from Fine Art graduates seeking postgraduate pathways that they deem to be more likely to result in employment within the creative sector. The RCA course, which drew from preceding courses at the *École du Magasin*, Grenoble (est. 1987) and the Independent Study Program's Curatorial Program at the *Whitney*, New York (est. 1987), initially required students to dissect a limited number of theoretical sources due to the subject's embryonic nature. No existing pedagogical guidelines were available, and so these were cleaved from courses in museum studies, art history, cultural theory, and the wider visual arts. The success of forerunners such as the RCA, the MA Curating course at Bard College (est. 1994), and the later but no less influential MFA Curating course at Goldsmiths College (est. 1995), had a significant impact upon the expansion of similarly structured courses in postgraduate departments across Western Europe and the USA (including the MA Critical Writing & Curatorial Practice course I undertook at Chelsea College of Art & Design, 2008). Within the West Midlands region, the provision of postgraduate courses is still modest, with only Birmingham Institute of Art & Design (BIAD) offering an MA in Contemporary Curatorial Practice (est. 2006). Aside from instigating new critical material and stabilising terminology within a more academic context, it is difficult to predict what the longer-term effects of the subject's academicisation will be.

Existing academic research into similar or related subjects include Gordon Nesbitt's studies of artist-led culture, Jacqueline Cooke's PhD research into printed material produced by artist-run spaces during the 1990s (Goldsmiths, University of London), and Sarah Clarke's MA thesis upon artist-run galleries (1994). The scope of existing research into artist-run spaces ranges from the sociological impact of artist-run galleries (Sharon 1979), to studies upon how the development of spaces for artists can potentially contribute to gentrification and growth within the creative industries (Jackson 2007). Other PhD students focussing upon subjects related to self-organisation and the expanding field of curatorship at the time of conducting this research include: Ian Irving's study on independent curating (Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen); Andy Abbott's research into post-capitalist subjectivity through DIY cultural production (University of Leeds); Sophia Crilly's research into the archivation and editing of curatorial practice (University of Salford); Megan

Wakefield's study into informal peer learning between artists in selected UK cities (University of the West of England, Bristol); Nanne Buurman's study into performativity and authorship in contemporary curating (Free University of Berlin); and Corina Oprea's research into curating micro-political communities (Loughborough University). Contemporary art periodicals with a specific focus upon curatorial practice include *Afterall* (est. 1998), *Manifesta Journal* (est. 2003), *On-Curating* (est. 2008), *The Exhibitionist* (est. 2010), and the recently founded *Journal of Curatorial Studies* (est. 2012). More widely, other journals that regularly contribute to discourse within the field include *Variant* (est. 1984) and *Mute* (est. 1994).

Paul O'Neill, a prominent curator and researcher in the field, who's doctoral research focused on the history of curating visual culture (Middlesex University, 2007), coined the term 'curatorial turn' (2007, p.14) to identify the broad turn towards the concept of the curatorial in recent decades. The trans-disciplinary framework of the curatorial now reaches far beyond the curator-centred remit of exhibition making, into methods of generating, mediating and reflecting upon experience and knowledge. Vidokle has likened the curatorial to other expanded categories of culture, such as the 'filmic or the literary' (2010). In much the same way that the filmic operates as a set of relations that are considered analogous to, but are also able to function outside of film, the curatorial refers to a set of skills and relations that are transferable between different social and cultural fields. The curator function, which has traditionally bridged and mediated in-between such binaries as artist/institution, studio/gallery, and object/meaning, has expanded in meta-artistic scope, to such a degree that all stages of art production, presentation, and distribution, can now potentially also be considered to be aspects of the curatorial. During the course of my research O'Neill published *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)* (2012), which presents a comprehensive overview of developments within the field, particularly in relation to the increased agency of curators and the framing of exhibition making as an expanded art practice.

Curator-Producer

The mass proliferation of international art fairs and festivals (Biennials/Biennales, Triennials, *Manifesta's* trans-European model, etc.) in the latter half of the 20th Century and their ability to generate social, cultural, and economic capital, has accelerated the formation of a wide variety of physical and conceptual spaces for curatorial discourse on a global stage. Upon this expanded platform, the curator's remit as producer extends beyond exhibitions, and is made manifest in supplementary resources such as multilingual publications, forums, and fringe events. Discourse on curatorial practice is frequently practitioner-led, and as many curators are themselves also writers and critics, the ways in which this discourse is produced, distributed, and consumed, is often highly self-referential and self-legitimising. In this sense, the discourse production can be

seen to have the effect of producing its own demand and audience, promoting the high cultural status of curating in the process. The material produced by curators to accompany exhibitions in the form of catalogues and essays has grown in prominence and critical-engagement, to become comparable in status to journals of art criticism. Upon this subject the critic Barry Schwabsky (*The Nation*) quipped that the quintessential curator has now switched from being a 'frustrated artist' (2012) to a 'frustrated intellectual' (2012).

Unlike the figure of the art critic, whose status and influence in the art world has long been acknowledged, the significant role of the contemporary curator remains largely unaccounted for, and perhaps yet to be fully realised. As discourse that focuses upon curating has grown in accordance with the subject's expansion, art criticism displays the trend of an increased level of focus upon the ways in which curatorial authorship has a determining effect upon the formation and interpretation of exhibitions. There has been a distinct shift in focus in art criticism, from the critique of autonomous art objects, often synonymous with the art criticism of Modernism, to an increased level of emphasis upon the strategies that position works in relation to one another within particular curatorial frameworks. More specifically, the critique of singular, successive, or interrelated exhibitions (expressed in the form of an exhibition programme), as opposed to the individual pieces of which they are composed, displays an increased level of emphasis upon the degree to which a curator has been able to realise a cogent text within an exhibition-construct. The curatorial methods used to position and form connections between different works, are now as likely to receive critical attention as aesthetic readings of individual pieces.

Professor John Roberts (University of Wolverhampton) contributed an article entitled *The Curator as Producer: Aesthetic Reason, Nonaesthetic Reason, and Infinite Ideation* (2010, pp.51–58) to the Amsterdam-based *Manifesta* Journal; an extension of the peripatetic *Manifesta* biennial. Roberts revisited Walter Benjamin's concept of the *Author as Producer* (1982) to consider how the activities of artists and curators might be better understood in terms of a shared role; that of a cultural producer. Benjamin sought to locate aesthetics within the material conditions of their production, and so when re-visited in this way, similar questions arise in relation to contemporary art discourses, which tend to place emphasis upon subtlety, ambiguity, self-referentiality, and complexity. Roberts argued that historically artists became producers when their methods switched from the 'artisanal and pre-photographic' (2010, p.51) to that of an 'operative' (2010, p.51) of various technical and conceptual processes. Roberts claimed that the skills of artists have been invariably altered by the impact of new reproductive technologies upon labour processes. The shift of the artist's site of production from traditional studio environments to post-studio practices, and the use of 'advanced technical relations of production' (2010, p.54), have transformed the core

apparatuses of art into service-based technical processes available to anyone. The de-skilling of traditional artisanal skills and the re-skilling of art practice with multifarious project-to-project technical skills and methods of post-production have increasingly aligned the means of production of artists and curators. Just as Benjamin's author became a producer who produced other producers (2010, p.52), Roberts argued that the artist as producer produces other types of artists; namely, curators.

Roberts argued that there are no longer any fixed technical or intellectual boundaries separating the working methods of artists and curators, as both have come to be equally reliant upon the 'labour and intellectual, archival, and other symbolic skills of others' (2010, p.52) in the process of arranging 'materials and signs into new constellations and totalities of meaning' (2010, p.52). They are not always the same, but they are also not always distinct. As Roberts put it, the curator is no longer the 'discreet scholarly editor and mediator' (2010, p.52) of art works or historical periods, but an 'active collaborator' (2010, p.52) who has achieved equal recognition and status in collaborative processes. Roberts argued that post-Fordist production methods have created identification between artists and curators, as cultural producers who work both materially and immaterially within the knowledge economy. However, despite acknowledging the significance of this recent alignment, Roberts pinpointed what he sees as being the specific factor that continues to separate them; namely, the artist's consistent ability to create new ideas. Roberts argued that the escalation in the creative status of curators and any number of other 'non-artist artists' (2010, p.55), will ultimately not be able to eclipse that of the artist, who continues to maintain a 'post-artisanal sovereignty' (2010, pp.54–55) because of their ability to be open to art's 'infinite ideation' (2010, p.55). In Robert's view then, the artist continues to be privileged as the finite creator. Despite the impact of collaborative production methods and discourse passed down from Barthes' *Death of the Author* (1993), artists continue to perch at the summit of the creative hierarchy. Roberts outlined a distinction between aesthetic and 'non aesthetic reason' (2010, p.51), as a means of further differentiating the roles of artist and curator. Whereas the curator straddles both of these aesthetic modes in the curation of exhibitions, by virtue of working with both art and agendas external to it, Roberts claimed that the artist is able to maintain a greater distance from the non-aesthetic reasoning of 'institutional, bureaucratic, and academic frameworks' (2010, p.57).

In *The Curator as Iconoclast* (2006), Professor Boris Groys (New York University) offered a similar appraisal to Roberts, arguing that despite the impression of merged or even homogenised practices, crucial differences continue to remain between artists and curators. Much like Roberts, Groys identified specific phases of activity within the production process to try to demarcate points of difference. Groys returned to traditional distinctions, which posit the curator as a primarily post-

production agent concerned with the arrangement of pre-determined art objects, whereas crucially artists initiate transformative processes in pre-production. Following a post-Duchampian thesis, whereby appropriated objects achieve the status of art by virtue of being selected or arranged by an artist, Groys argued that curators remain unable to transform non-art objects into art. For Groys, curators are able to contextualise and activate works through the orchestration of exhibitions, but ultimately they will always be without the 'magical ability to transform non-art into art' (2006), as this is a power that belongs to the artist alone. Similar in form to Roberts' concept of 'infinite ideation', Groys argued that even though independent curators may appear to be doing all of the things that artists do, they should be seen as artists who have been 'radically secularised' (2006), having 'lost the artist's aura' (2006). In Groys' view then, curators may valorise an object as art, but crucially, they cannot transform it into art.

Groys added a further twist to his claims by arguing that the distinguishing factor and process separating artists from curators has itself reversed, as historically it was museum curators, not artists, who were able to bestow the status of art upon an object through the medium of display. Rationalist approaches to taxonomy practiced by museum curators meant that when entering a collection, religious icons were treated as secularised artefacts and appreciated for their artistry and cultural value rather than their religious power. This transformative process of secularisation meant that custodial curators have been able to ascribe the status of art upon an artefact by virtue of devaluing or negating the sacredness of religious icons. Groys argued that the forms of taxonomy practiced by museum curators have had the effect of creating artworks through the subtraction of sacredness, and that a form of iconoclasm continues to be evident in contemporary curatorial practice. The layering of subjects and contexts within contemporary curatorial schemas, Groys argued, stands in iconoclastic opposition to Modernist display conventions, which were devised to encourage the 'silent contemplation' (2006) of objects deemed autonomous and immutable.

Both Roberts and Groys have acknowledged the overlapping of art and curatorial practices in terms of their working methods and shared skills, but they also maintain a belief in a crucial distinction between them, as accounted for by Roberts' theory of 'infinite ideation' and Groys' argument upon transformative power. Both of these concepts appear seduced by the Modernist myth of the artist as the singular figurehead of art creation, which they attempt to conserve (or regain) through the compartmentalisation of transformative agency. The contingent and relational nature of post-artisanal contemporary art practices means that it is very difficult to isolate individual works from the curatorial and contextual networks in which they are entangled. Rather than trying to protect a creative hierarchy crowned by the artist-subject, a broader recognition and

understanding of the depth of contributing factors and agents that shape artworks is required. The development of a term such as 'artist-curator' is a progressive movement towards acknowledging the artistic aspects of curatorial practice, but an implicit separateness is also maintained by how this medium ground is expressed. These developments in art practice cannot be simply accounted for as the *Death of the Author* or the artist's diminished status, but rather the birth, or evolution, of multi-skilled cultural producers working collaboratively, directly or indirectly. The evolution of curating is better understood as a diversification or split, rather than an absolute shift, as alongside those practitioners who (co-)create new 'work-constructs' (Tatham *et al* 2009) through curatorial strategies, are those curators who continue to only take a supporting role in post-production methods of art's display, distribution, and preservation.

In order for the activities of artists and curators to merge more fully, perhaps even indistinguishably, it would be necessary for curating to become fully emancipated from the history of its custodial function. Only then will curators be able to produce work free of the explicit or implicit restrictions pertaining to the treatment of other people's work. The curatorial turn, as described by O'Neill, is the product of a series of stages in the transformation of curation as an activity and a profession. This turn encompasses the increased level of status and power given to individualised curators on a global platform, the activities of artists who naturally extend their practice within the context of overlapping fields, and the space made within neoliberalism for independent freelance curators. When asked about the increased overlapping of curatorial and art practices, the artist Jeremy Deller (b. 1966), who himself uses taxonomical methods of organising research material, pointed to the fact that there has long been a sizeable number of 'artists/writers/critics/broadcasters' (Govinda 2005, p.4) and that 'no-one seems to mind' (2005, p.4). There are very few artists who can be classed solely artists or artist-artists, as the majority have additional occupations, roles, and responsibilities running concurrently with their practices. Why then would a term such as 'artist-curator' be problematic? The merging of roles could be interpreted as a categorisation problem and an infringement on the artist's authorial control, or conversely it can be viewed as a natural development of expanded and entwined fields, highlighting the need for a greater degree of understanding of interdisciplinary practices, which have moved beyond the longstanding and now over-simplified artist/curator dichotomy.

The following section of Chapter 1 examines the field of artist-run spaces through a review of existing models and associated concepts such as independence, self-organised methodologies, and the possibility of developing alternatives.

Chapter 1.2: Artist-run Spaces

Contents

1. Artist-run Spaces
2. Artist-run Models
3. Independence
4. An Alternative
5. White Cube
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Artist-run Spaces

The term 'artist-run' is commonly used as a prefix to identify grassroots organisations established and run by practicing artists, on either an individual, collective, or group basis. The term not only denotes the fact that these spaces were founded and maintained by artists, but significantly also indicates where their emphasis is placed. This use of the term has the effect of centralising the role of the artist as producer, and by virtue of this, the importance placed upon production processes within a particular space. Chapter 1.2 focuses upon the catalysts for why artist-run spaces are initiated, and how they are subsequently shaped through methodologies such as self-organisation, DIY, voluntary labour, and resourceful forms of gift economy. Much more than simply the first rung on the ladder for emerging artists to display their work before moving on to more established venues, the spaces and support structures that artists put in place themselves are integral to the art world.

By prefixing the term 'space' with 'artist-run', the concept of space, as an unfixed parameter of possibility, is yet further unfixed through its connection with the yet to be constituted processes of art production. The verb 'run' is also a significant component, alluding to an activity and process rather than a static form or purpose. To emphasise that artists run a particular space, is to acknowledge a culture or condition made manifest through artistic processes. The identity of an artist-run space is not pre-given, but instead constructed through processes of identification within the field. It is important then, that any definition of these spaces also provides room for their contradictions and differences, not just with contrasting gallery models, but also within the shared categories of artist-run or artist-led. This research project focuses specifically upon artist-run spaces with a physical presence (galleries and project spaces), rather than the plethora of non-traditional gallery locations, such as online platforms or the public arena, except for where it is relevant to draw comparisons between them. What are the conditions that catalyse and shape these spaces?

In my capacity as an artist-curator with experience of establishing several artist-run spaces, including *Grey Area* (est. March 2006) and *Meter Room* (est. February 2011), as well as a range of collaborative projects affiliated with other similar initiatives, I have observed how artist-run spaces are frequently catalysed by a sense of dissatisfaction with how established institutions are neglecting to provide for artists on a range of ideological and practical levels. The two best known accounts of artist-run spaces, the eponymously titled *Transmission* (2002), and the more anecdotal *City Racing: The Life and Times of an Artist-Run Gallery* (Burgess *et al* 2002), both describe how these spaces were founded by a group of artists as a proactive response to a groundswell of despondency towards the 'lack of exhibition spaces and opportunities for young artists' (2002, p.5) in Glasgow and London at the time of their respective formations. In their self-published chronicle, the members of *City Racing* describe a moment of self-realisation upon gathering outside of an unidentified commercial gallery in the West End during a busy private view event. This manifested as a collective sense of 'exclusion' (Burrows *et al* 1998, p.21) and alienation from the gallery and its means of display; of artworks, people, and its self-affirming status. Ultimately, it was this mutual feeling of despondency towards the lack of opportunities available to artists within the prevailing culture that acted as a creative force in the founding of both galleries, by artists seeking to put these platforms in place themselves. Matt Hale (*Art Monthly*), a founding member of *City Racing*, described how the collective impulse to set-up the space grew from feeling 'fed up of waiting to be offered a show' (1998, p.20).

Stallabras has associated the growth in the number of artist-curators to the influence of several economically and critically successful artist-curated shows, the most renowned of which was *Freeze* (1988) in the Surrey Docks, London. Many of the artists, who featured in *Freeze* and later exhibitions at *Building One*, a 28,000 sq ft former biscuit factory in Bermondsey, reappeared in the infamous *Sensation* exhibition at the *Royal Academy* (1997). Guided by the entrepreneurial spirit of Damien Hirst and Carl Freedman amongst others, these spaces were renovated and run by artists, but supported by property developers and collectors. The spirit of self-organised exhibition making during this period reached a self-referential peak in the *Tracey Emin Museum*; an artist-run studio, gallery, and shop close to Waterloo station, which functioned as a platform for auto-ethnographic display. Experimental artist-run spaces, which had previously been overlooked as countercultural activities, had moved from the fringes to centre stage. Younger artists were being taken seriously more quickly than in the previous era, and more artists were experimenting outside of the White Cube environment. However, rather than offering alternative practices, many of these initiatives built upon a culture of entrepreneurship developed during the 1980s. Many of the

best-known YBA shows embraced media spectacle and celebrity, and for some *Building One* quickly began to symbolise a hegemonic structure for other artists to contest and counter. The distinctions between artist-run spaces and their commercial or institutional counterparts are not always clearly defined, particularly when different organisational models borrow elements from one another. The fact that *Building One* and my own activities at *Meter Room* can share the category of artist-run, is indicative of the wide spectrum of practice being encompassed, and the need for a greater level of differentiation within it.

Economic recession in the UK during the late 1980s and the 1990s, had a part to play in the growth in artist-led activity, as the abundance of vacant industrial units, made available by processes of mass de-industrialisation, provided spaces in which to make and show art. There is a direct correlation between industrial decline and the amount of spatial resources made available for artist-run activity, and in this sense, artist-run spaces can be seen to provide examples of post-industrial practice, through the repurposing of vacant spaces for art. However, these economic conditions cannot be considered favourable to self-organised activity in any other sense. The culture of appropriating empty commercial, administrative, and industrial premises is indicative of an interest in engaging in a dialogue with the distinctive character of these locations, re-imagining them as alternative sites for the (dis)placement of art. These socioeconomic conditions, partnered with growing mythology surrounding the entrepreneurial DIY spirit of many YBAs, led to what Stallabras once referred to as the 'rise in the artist-run space' (1999). However, despite the influence of artist-run spaces upon the boom of interest and investment in young British art during the 1990s, Stallabras argued that much of the artist-curatorship of artist-run spaces during this period has been overlooked in discussions on contemporary curating, and that the 'artist-run model of curator-artist practice' (1999) has largely disappeared.

The resurgence of interest in artist-run spaces during the 1990s shared many affinities with the self-organised counter-cultural movements of the 1960s. Half a century later, and many of these value systems and practices have become embedded within an institutionalised sphere, but the struggle for creative autonomy outside of the determining effect of institutional structures is still very much at stake. Methodologies that offer an alternative, such as self-organisation, ad hoc, and collective making, continue to present forms of resistance and negation. The benefits of self-organisation can be seen to lie within creative autonomy, in addition to the exposure gained by artists through the creation of their own platforms. Initially sparked by the demand for opportunities for artists, many of these spaces go on to formulate their own specific agendas. The varied output of these spaces can be considered demonstrative of the frequently contradictory nature of contemporary art practice.

Indeed, because emphasis is largely placed upon practice within these spaces, rather than the quantification of value and impact, these spaces can be considered reflective of the breadth of art practice.

As the curator Charles Esche (*Van Abbemuseum* and *Afterall* journal) has put it, a key reason as to why many young artists seek to initiate 'independent alternative spaces' (Gordon Nesbitt 2003) outside of the presumed centres of art, is so that they can continue to live in the places to which they are committed. Esche drew a metaphor with the power of negotiation between globalised economic power and the development of 'alternative solutions and local responses' (2003), which enable artists to maintain or regain control of their own work. Artist-run spaces can provide artists with a higher degree of validation and importance in their own communities and local contexts, helping to develop a scene and contribute to a culture of resistance to the power of central institutions. Many artists will develop their first exhibition outside of an art school context within an artist-run space, providing them with valuable experience at a crucial stage in the development of their practice. These spaces can function as either a safe harbour for experimentation, or a launch pad for early career artists, depending upon the methods and critical status of a particular organisation. In this sense, artist-run spaces are often located at a threshold between different career stages and institutional structures. The image of the artist-run space as a form of peer-run testing grounds for emerging or less established artists was epitomised by Professor Grant Kester (University of California), who once likened them to a 'farm system' (Cooke 2007, chap.2, p.2). It is views such as this, which characterise artist-run spaces as feeder mechanisms for the industry, which limit a deeper understanding of their role within the wider cultural ecology, and the complexity of their relationship with public institutions and the market.

Frequently used in Germany to describe artist-run spaces, the term 'off-space' (Beck 2002) originally derived from Broadway and the tradition of self-organised performances at smaller fringe venues. These off-Broadway events were peripatetic and could take up temporary residence anywhere; in bars, studios, or on the sidewalk. Although its use has been largely restricted to German-speaking countries, the term captures a sense of displacement and heterogeneity often associated with these spaces. It also bypasses a semantic problem with the use of 'artist-run' as a prefix, as these spaces may also be run by curators, writers, students, lecturers, etc. Another German term, 'Ausstellungsraum', which is used to identify non-gallery temporary exhibition spaces, provides an alternative term for temporary project spaces that may or may not be run by artists. When those involved in an artist-run space work off-site, outside of their habitual location but still under the banner of the organisation,

terms such as collective or group may be more apt forms of classification, on the basis that emphasis will have switched from the spatialisation of practice within a specific location, to ways of working outside of fixed geographical boundaries. The terms 'artist-run initiative' (ARI) and 'artist-led initiative' (ALI), are both frequently used interchangeably in reference to these spaces in the UK. 'Artist-led' is also sometimes used to describe organisations that have expanded and developed into other models, such as regularly funded institutions, which although no longer principally run by artists, maintain an influence by artists upon their direction and identity. The first use of the initialisation 'ARI' has been credited to the Australia Council for the Arts (1998), as a means of categorising these spaces within studies that seek to recognise and monitor their value. In a report that built upon her MA research into the systematisation of Australia-based ARIs, Amy Griffiths (University of New South Wales) accumulated a list of variations that communicate the scope and diversity of the field:

'Artist run. Artist led. Artists' spaces. Artist initiated. Artist centred. Apartment gallery. Antigallery. Not-for-profit gallery. DIY space. Guerrilla gallerizing. Studio gallery. Independent space. Artist co-operative. Alternative. Artist run adventure. Artists' Organizations. Marginal spaces. Oppositional artists' structures. Artist-oriented service organizations. Artists' playgrounds. Artist run enterprise. Parallel galleries.' (2012, p.1)

Artist-run Models

As stated in Chapter 1.1, curatorial practice is an embryonic subject, meaning that much of its history has not yet been accounted for outside of international exhibitions within larger institutions. This has the effect of making research into the curatorial practices of artist-run spaces, which are so often spatiotemporal and transient, a challenging task. The fate of this history, or histories, is yet unknown; it may perhaps be retrospectively pieced together with the aid of hindsight and critical distance, or else a great proportion may be lost to time.

Susan Jones, director of *Artist Newsletter* (a-n), conducted a sizeable study of artist-led groups in 1995, and revisited the material some years later to review how many of those spaces remained, and of those spaces, how many could still be considered artist-run. Jones estimated that there were over 300 artist-led galleries in the UK when she revisited the material, compared to just a handful only a decade previously (2012). From over 300, 15 of these organisations had subsequently become professional bodies, some of which had amassed memberships numbering in their hundreds. The study, entitled *Measuring the experience: the scope and value of artist-led organisations* (1995-2013), raised pertinent questions about the impact and relative successes of these organisations over time. For example, whether or not the subsequent closure of many of these spaces could be

considered to evidence a form of failure, either in terms of their aims or support networks. Similarly, the question of whether or not sustainability or growth should be looked upon positively by default. Jones identified long hours of unpaid work and the exercising of democratic processes, as key reasons as to why the decision making processes of artist-run organisational structures can become laborious and frequently lead to internal discord and disbandment.

Tether (est. 2007), an artist collective based in Nottingham, developed a touring project entitled *Hither and Thither* (tethervision 2010) as a means of recording the activities of a range of artist-run spaces across the UK. I participated in a video interview for the project in the capacity of director of *Grey Area*, and thus contributed to a discursive snapshot of artist-run culture in the UK at that time. Several of the other spaces interviewed by *Tether* also feature in collaborative curatorial projects developed during my research, including *Grand Union* and *The Lombard Method*. The interviews were screened at the *London Art Fair* (2013) by *Artist-led Initiatives Support Network (A.L.I.S.N)*, who invited a selection of small independent galleries to occupy their stall during the fair, as a means of drawing attention to how these spaces are usually excluded from such events. The *Gazetteer* (2008), featured a survey of artist-run spaces compiled by the *ICA*, London, in the form of a web-based resource with introductory information upon each of the spaces. This project, the name of which referred to a form of geographical directory, was part of the larger *Nought to Sixty* (2008) programme of events, which attempted to sketch a portrait of the UK's contemporary art scene. Of the organisations listed in the non-London section, only two of these were located in the Midlands: *Springhill Institute* (Birmingham) and *Moot* (Nottingham), both of which have since disbanded. Regional research into artist activity include Coventry University's article for the *Regional Studies Association* entitled *Creative Spaces* (Grainger and Hamilton 2010), and the activities of *Midwest*, an Arts Council funded network aiming to develop regional, national and international dialogue and support the ambitions and capacity of artists and artist-curators within the West Midlands (See Chapter 3.3).

Studies conducted by Emma Bijloos (Istanbul Bilgi University) and Pelin Tan (Kadir Has University, Turkey) upon independent artist-run spaces in Istanbul have provided evidence that many of the issues identified by practitioners and researchers upon the conditions and contributing factors in the UK are shared in other European countries, and indeed globally. *Artist-Run Spaces* (Detterer and Nannucci 2011) is a long overdue anthology of non-profit arts collectives active during the 1960s and 1970s in Western Europe and North America. Written in collaboration with the initiators, founders, and members of 'communally organized

artist-run spaces' (2011, pg.5), Gabriele Detterer and Maurizio Nannucci combine archival material and personal narratives, with research into how forms of meta-level categorisation have been developed within the field. Drawing from canonical case studies such as *Printed Matter* (1976), New York, and *Western Front* (1973), Vancouver, the authors analyse the progressive art and anti-art movements of the period through the recollection of 'personal ties with fellow combatants' (2011, p.7), and the convergence of emotional responses and rational strategies. Detterer and Nannucci identified how a democratic ethics of participation within these spaces has served to emancipate many artists from forms of creative isolation, which has contributed to the overall 'social artwork' (2011 p.21) of these spaces. The authors identified several ways in which measures of success and common cultures are developed and shared within these communities, through processes of 'communitarization' (2011, p.21) and sociation. The identity construction of each space reaches far beyond the media they produce, and is reflected in fundamental processes such as 'fitting out its premises, establishing rules to enable decision making, and demonstrations of solidarity ensuring its continued existence' (2011, p.22). At the same time as addressing the importance of such shared values as 'creative spontaneity, openness, anti-art, and aesthetic positions directed against pictorial traditions' (2011, p.26), Detterer and Nannucci also stressed the importance of resisting the urge to 'glorify and idealize models of collective self-organization from bygone decades in a nostalgic light' (2011, p.7).

As a means of reviewing and analysing the field of artist-run spaces in the UK, I have identified four examples, each of which offers a different form of organisational model. I will present a brief overview of each of these organisations, which provide a backdrop for my own empirical and practice-based research in the field. Two of these spaces have ceased operating, one of which was an informal self-organised gallery run by a group of friends in a former squat (*City Racing*), and the other was an influential art collective that experimented with artist-curatorship and forms of Institutional Critique (*BANK*). Of the two currently active spaces, one is a gallery that grew from artist-studios (*Transmission*), and the other is an unconventional example of an artist-run space, in the sense that it was more strategically planned to function as a public and academic art institution (*Eastside Projects*).

Founded in Glasgow in 1983, *Transmission* is the most renowned model for an artist-run space, widely recognised in the field for implementing a non-hierarchical organisational structure in the form of a committee, which is refreshed bi-annually. This model, which prioritises collective curatorial practices and democratic decision-making over the individualism of its members, has become an industry standard, having been subsequently adopted by several other artist-run spaces including *Outpost* (Norwich), *Catalyst* (Belfast),

and *Generator* (Dundee). *Transmission* was conceived by members of *WASPS* studios as a gallery 'for the benefit of, and run by, artists' (2002, p.10), and was planned by studio members and supported by the city council from the outset. However, *Transmission* addressed the very same issue of a lack of opportunities for young and emerging artists, by providing them with a platform upon which to show and produce new work. This objective is still evident today in the demographic of the committee, which at twenty-five, currently has an average age that is younger than the gallery itself. *Transmission* has developed to become an artist-run institution, which is now likely to both precede and succeed the artists who run it.

Unlike *City Racing* and *BANK*, which were run by the same core of artists at the helm, *Transmission* operates as a standalone model. The terms of the biannual tenureship means that board members act as temporary custodians of the space; curators of its material history and traditions, as well as the producers of new events within its established framework. This membership model increases the volume of artists who are able to participate and engage with *Transmission*, but the responsibilities of this form of custodianship can also mean that artists are restricted in their ability to impact upon the organisation as individual artists. This creates a tension between two distinct but entangled identities; *Transmission* as both an experimental kunsthalle, and a longstanding professionalised institution. *Transmission* has developed to become 'a backdrop, a context, a mailing list' (2002, p.10) for a much celebrated contemporary art scene, which was once referred to by Obrist as 'the Glasgow Miracle' (Hartvig 2012).

Housed within a former betting shop in Oval, London, with squatted upper floors, *City Racing* was founded by five young male artists: Paul Noble, Keith Coventry, John Burgess, Peter Owen, and Matt Hale. The board, which consisted of only the founding members, decided against the idea of writing a manifesto or constitution during their decade of activity (1988-1998), and instead, without any particular objective, adopted a strategy of having no strategy in particular and an ad hoc approach to curation, which echoed an overall sense of instability and spontaneity. Hale has stated that there was 'no high principle' (Burrows *et al* 1998, p.20) behind the curation of the gallery: it was simply a place for a like-minded community of practitioners, whose DIY methods were directly representative of their means and voluntary labour. However, despite the lack of an overarching ideology or set of objectives, its members did share the general goal of trying to offer an alternative to the monopoly of the West End art world and to exhibit the work of artists who were unable to secure opportunities to show at that time. Individually, the members of *City Racing* had no intention to run a gallery, but as a collective they 'found the strength to do it' (1998, p.1), and to attempt to

traverse the 'massive gulf' between those galleries that promote art and 'those which encourage you to make it' (1998, p.1). In an interview with Hale, David Burrows (Slade School of Art & Design) a former member of *BANK*, succinctly summarised the dichotomy of operating a space that is both an edgy alternative to the mainstream, and a platform for more conventional career aspirations, by stating that *City Racing* 'refused to be marginalised from the mainstream' (1998, p.20).

BANK (1991-2003), an art collective that took its name from the disused bank in Lewisham in which they first exhibited, gained notoriety for their chaotic group exhibitions. Former members include John Russell, Milly Thompson, Simon Bedwell, Bill Williamson, Dino Demosthenous, and in a less fixed role, David Burrows. Russell has likened the sprawling exhibitions to '(film) sets' (Burrows *et al* 1998, p.22), which were made all the more theatrical by their provocative titles, including: *Winkle the Potbellied Pig* (1997), *Fuck Off* (1996), *Zombie Golf* (1995), and *Cocaine Orgasm* (1995). The latter featured a diverse collection of works blanketed in a layer of artificial snow, a curatorial strategy that had the effect of unifying the installation's component parts, and extending works beyond their relative frames into a staged environment. Perhaps their best-known exhibition, *Zombie Golf*, featured twelve life-sized wax zombie figures with pained expressions causing havoc upon the gallery's makeshift course. A review in *Frieze* at the time proposed that their loose curatorial style advocated a form of 'democracy in which the viewer judges each work without a pre-set reading' (Barrett 1995). Many of *BANK*'s curatorial strategies, from the wandering un-dead to drug-fuelled winterscapes, created fractured absurdist contexts, whereby individual works could be lost or found in the mêlée. Individual pieces would either find niches within the overall construction, or else be reduced to arbitrary backdrops by overpowering curatorial gestures.

Russell described *BANK*'s driving force as a 'just do it' (1998, p.22) attitude, which grew from a shared sense that they had 'nothing to lose' (1998, p.22), perhaps closer to a form of fatalism than self-belief. Much like *City Racing*, members of *BANK* were uncomfortable with the notion that they each abided by a collective party line, as there simply was not one. They were a community of practitioners with individual as well as collective practices. Although a shared agenda was never inscribed, collective strategies were negotiated through practice, such as switching between studio and gallery contexts, the dynamic possibilities of acceleration and overproduction, and an acerbic critique of the spoken and unspoken rules that entangle the art world.

BANK described their interest in opposing the 'ostentatious power mongering' (2001, p.10) of

curators and dealers in London during the 1990s, and developed a series of strategies for operating with a greater degree of autonomy outside of this. Self-organising projects that they could themselves control, rather than making art that was ultimately 'CONTROLLED by OTHER PEOPLE' (2001, p.10). One such strategy was to invite participants to contribute to discursive exchanges within sprawling group exhibitions. However, only partially concealed within this openness lay a distinct autocratic control over how the overall project was positioned and communicated. *BANK* claimed to make visible what curators do in a 'more vulgarly visible way than was usual' (2001, p.24), thus striking an uneasy balance 'between the work of (overbearing) curators and (side-lined) curated' (2001, p.24). In addition to revealing the power relations between the curator and the artist, *BANK* have described how they felt the effect of those same relations flowing through a food chain of London-based galleries. Within this hierarchical order, each of the emerging galleries, artist-run and commercial alike, jostled for position with varying degrees of rivalry, all with the aim of staking claim to a greater degree of 'non-establishment earnestness' (2001, p.24). *BANK* claimed to have occupied a unique position within the field, as unlike the majority of other artist-run spaces, whom they considered to maintain a 'strict distinction between curating and their own separate practices' (2001, p.24), the members of *BANK* made work and curated shows collectively. *BANK*'s description of a culture of separateness during the 1990s, between the practices of the individual and the collective, and of the artist and the curator, is a reminder of how the change in attitudes towards their mergence is still a relatively recent development.

Self-proclaimed to be a 'new model for a gallery' (2011) where space and programme are entwined, *Eastside Projects* is an 'artist-run space as public gallery' (Langdon 2012, p.26) and a partnership project between Birmingham City University and the Arts Council. Founded by artists Simon & Tom Bloor, Celine Condorelli, Ruth Claxton, James Langdon, and director and curator Gavin Wade, *Eastside Projects* is located in a former cabinet-makers in a re-branded area of industrial Birmingham, previously known as Digbeth. A comparison is drawn between the re-purposed factory, and Wade's interest in framing the gallery as a production site for culture. *Eastside Projects* is described as an 'incubator' (Khan 2008) of new ideas, as well as a platform upon which to revisit the 'radical historical models and precedents' (2012, p.6) of experimental exhibition making developed during Modernism. Rather than constituting a new model for a gallery, *Eastside Projects* instead combines a selection of facets from existing models in an investigative manner. The gallery has become prominent in the West Midlands for having foregrounded curatorial discourse, which is perhaps best embodied by the self-published *Eastside Projects Manual* (2012), which offers a glossary of key terms and guidance upon the strategies at work within the space. Tellingly,

the glossary provides a definition of 'artist-curating' that is identical to the one provided for 'curating' (2012, p.3).

The fact that *Eastside Projects* describes itself as an artist-run space poses the recurring question: how can an artist-run space be defined? As one of only three *National Portfolio* visual arts organisations in Birmingham, *Eastside Projects* is currently in receipt of an annual budget from Arts Council England of approximately £126,000, and a total budget of £330,720 for 2010-11 (2012, p.4). The organisation's strong finances and well-resourced premises, complete with slick surfaces and staff uniforms, position the gallery at the opposite end of the scale to the majority of artist-run spaces. Fully planned and securely funded prior to its establishment, *Eastside Projects* stands in stark contrast to the image of those artist-run spaces that grew from ad hoc gatherings of artists or from the squat culture of the 1980s, such as *City Racing*. By describing itself as artist-run, *Eastside Projects* appears to be proposing the thesis that regardless of budget, resources, or notions of professionalism, if a gallery has at its helm people who refer to themselves as artists, by definition; it must be artist-run. This position shares an affinity with a post-Duchampian tradition, whereby an artist's declaration is enough for an object to transform into an artwork. If the individuals involved in running the space declare themselves artists, simply by definition, the space must become artist-run. Despite the hierarchical appearance of their directorship model, *Eastside Projects* cite how their organisational structure has drawn from non-profit arts collectives and exercises 'social power gained from consensus' (2012, p.13). Founding member Ruth Claxton has argued that artist-run spaces need not only be associated with the formative stages of artist careers, but can also develop much more complex and ambitious models, which remain artist-led if they maintain the 'idea of practice at their core' (Hamilton 2012).

I participated in a discussion event with Wade at *Lanchester Gallery Projects (LGP)*, alongside the artist Craig Mulholland (Glasgow school of Art), Kendall Koppe (*Kendall Koppe* gallery, Glasgow), and two representatives of *Transmission* gallery (Appendix 1). During this discussion, Wade made the statement that *Tate Modern* would automatically become an artist-run space if Nicholas Serota were to start to describe himself as an artist. Of course, such a transformation is not merely semantic, and far from being instantaneous, it would require a substantial re-orientation of the institution's ideological position and activities. However, Wade's proposition remains simple: any art institution, regardless of size or budget, can become artist-run 'if the leaders of the organisation made that their agenda' (2012), and switched their subject position to that of an artist. Wade clarified that this intention would not necessarily affect the institutional structures in place immediately, but

that it would fundamentally change the way that the institution positions itself, and how it is perceived.

Independence

Terms such as 'independent', 'not-for-profit', and 'alternative', can all be encountered frequently within the press releases and constitutional documents of artist-run spaces, and form part of a wider vocabulary for these practices. Although these self-penned descriptions have a very particular cultural currency in terms of the identity of these spaces, they are also difficult to define comprehensively. For example, the use of the term 'independent' could refer to their artistic, strategic, or economic autonomy. However, the growth of cross-organisational collaborations within and beyond the field of artist-run spaces has made it increasingly difficult to determine independent positions. The clarity of the water separating artist-run spaces and either public or commercial galleries, has become significantly muddled by cross-organisational exchange and the growing number of independent curators who float back and forth between them. With no specific allegiances, the figure of the independent curator has come to represent a particular conception of independence within contemporary art and a neoliberal economy. In this context, independence, as a relation and a condition, is representative of the ability to move freely within the marketplace. The ability of independent curators to pursue a range of freelance opportunities can also necessitate the temporary adoption of the methods and agendas of a wide-range of organisations, from small artist-run spaces to those on the international biennial circuit.

Artist-run spaces cannot be considered independent by default, nor can those involved be assumed to be well versed in, or even necessarily privy to, discourse surrounding the relationship between artist-led activity and public institutions, nor the politics of striving to achieve an independent position. Some artist-run spaces are unconcerned with whether they are acknowledged as being independent or alternative, and are instead developed strategically by artists to function as a springboard for future careers within institutions and commercial interests. A substantial number of artist-run spaces lay claim to a form of independence, but as there are many institutions and market-oriented galleries that can also claim to be independent of external bodies, operating freely within the market, it is important then to define the specific characteristics of the form of independence at stake within this context. Both an artist-run space and an art museum may be not-for-profit and independent of commercial objectives, but there are significant differences between their methods and ideological focus. These differences can be extended to the schism between the spatiotemporal nature of much of contemporary art practice, and the museum's evocation of permanence, order, and public service. No art space can claim to be neutral and

independent of all external forces, and so rather than being said to possess a greater degree of independence than other types of organisation, it may instead be more accurate to claim that artist-run spaces are less dependent upon either the art market or public funding. This type of independence, or lesser degree of dependence, permits these self-organised spaces to operate in less fixed ways and experiment with alternative models for curatorial practice and sustaining themselves.

Beech, who makes up one third of the politicised art collective *Freee*, raised several pertinent questions about the nature of independence within the context of artist-run spaces in an issue of *Variant*, the art paper that grew from *Transmission* and later became independent of the gallery. Beech argued that independence is not achieved by simply rejecting the established order of the present or past eras, but instead through the occupation of the contested spaces of those eras in different ways. For Beech, an independent art practice is unlikely to result from the negation of art's institutions as this can only result in leaving circumstances unchanged. Instead, Beech advocates the development of strategies that occupy cultural fields in ways that contest 'business-as-usual' (2005, p.16). Beech asks whether independent positions are even possible within the context of artist-run spaces, and if so, how can this form of independence be best practiced?

'It is clear that a number of artist-run spaces are set up for no other reason than to catch the attention of the market and art's large public institutions in the spirit of entrepreneurial enterprise. Such spaces may be funded and run as independent concerns, but they are in no way ideologically or culturally independent.' (2005, p.16)

In Beech's terms then, an artist-run space can only lay claim to an independent position if it does not aspire to replicate existing models and instead sets out to challenge the status quo by setting 'its own agenda' (2005, p.16), independent of dominant cultural ideologies. Those spaces, which simply adapt their practices to the prevailing culture and the institutions that define it, cannot be deemed independent. Beech goes on to claim that spaces that do not 'promote this stronger brand of independence' are not actually artist-run spaces at all, and actually end up becoming 'agents for those that they address' (2005, p.16). Beech's criteria for independence has an affinity with Bourdieu's concept of an inverted economy, whereby cultural agents increase in status and peer esteem within the field for the distance they take from established measures of economic capital, popularity, and power. In an inverted economy, practices accrue capital based upon a 'loser wins' (1993, p.39) principle, which systematically inverts the 'fundamental principles of all ordinary economies' (1993, p.39). An inverted economy accumulates cultural capital by reducing or circumnavigating the pursuit of

profit, and neglects to guarantee a 'correspondence between investments and monetary gains' (1993, p.39). Autonomy from the logic of economic capital is joined by a distrust of power, through the condemnation of institutions assigning honours and acclaim, or that are deemed complicit in the institutionalisation of cultural authority. By virtue of distancing itself from art market capital and the social capital of power in and through established institutions, a cultural agent can be rewarded significant capital for their uncompromising pursuit of creative autonomy. When these acts of resistance are themselves normalised, for example, through the institutionalisation of the avant-garde, the act of recuperation displaces meaning and creates a form of cultural vacuum. As Beech argued, the resultant effect is paradoxical, as at this point, 'dissent occupies the place of power' (2006, p.10).

How useful can terms such as 'independent' or 'alternative' be deemed to be, when their distinction can be so variable and relative? Any claim to an independent or alternative position invariably provokes questions around what these practices are claiming to be independent of, or an alternative to. By definition, independence must refer to the state of being independent from another particular body or force, whether that is commercial activity, public funding, or operating as an entrepreneurial sole trader. No artist-run space exists within a vacuum, and so the question of independence may be better analysed through the degree to which a given space is dependent upon, or complicit with, factors that restrict creative autonomy and self-determinism. The boom of interest in independent cultural activity during the 1990s, epitomised by the popularisation of 'indie' music, which grew from underground independent labels into a music genre with mainstream exposure, also stretched to artist-run activity. As *BANK* stated in their retrospective publication, to be alternative was to be in vogue in the mid-90s. The growth of artist-run spaces in London has meant that by virtue of their ubiquity they cannot be considered an alternative, or a response to a lack of exhibition spaces. Within this multitude, the struggle for individuality manifests in the reinvention of staple activities such as residency programmes and increasingly niche forms of specialisation.

The concept of artistic autonomy is heavily mythologised, particularly in relation to artist-led activity, but in this context, it can simply mean a diversification of practice as a means of resisting and foregrounding the constraints of the market, historical paradigms, and institutional frameworks. The question of independence and instrumentality, which can be seen to exist at the intersection of an autonomous art practice and the political struggles inherent within any institution, cannot be formulated as a simple opposition between autonomy and subordination. The publication accompanying the *Life/Live* survey of contemporary British art at the *Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris* (1996) curated by

Obrist, featured an anthology of independent artist-run spaces active at the time. In this publication, the artist David Batchelor (Royal College of Art) asked the question 'what is an 'independent' art independent from these days?' (Page 1996, p.18). The fact that Batchelor finishes his question with the words 'these days', points to how the question of independence is contingent and variable at different periods, becoming increasingly difficult to answer when the activities of multiple organisations are so entwined and co-dependent. His question is also suggestive of nostalgia for a bygone era, when independent positions were perceived as being absolute and ideological differences were set up to directly counter one another.

Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt, who presented comparative research of the methodologies used by *Transmission* and *City Racing* at the *Just Do(ing) It* (2011) conference held at S1, Sheffield, argued that artist-run spaces operate outside of, but not counter to, dominant institutions because they continue to rely on similar systems of public funding, albeit on a more modest level. *Transmission's* current funding structure is dependent upon a combination of public funding and members' contributions. Although sales may not be foregrounded within *Transmission* or other comparable spaces, they do still occur and contribute to revenue, even if this contribution is infrequent or meagre. Gordon Nesbitt's concept of being 'outside but not counter to' (1996) captures the contradictory nature of many artist-run spaces, which are too complicit and involved to be considered counter-cultural, but which may still evoke a sense of marginality and separateness. *Transmission's* organisational model is illustrative of Gordon Nesbitt's comments on the contradictory nature of more established artist-run spaces; in equal parts cornerstone institution, and experimental artist-led initiative, both local hangout for like-minds, and prestigious international exhibition venue.

It has been important to the project, and my practice as an artist-curator, that *Meter Room* maintained a level of independence conducive to being able to operate in a way that has been free from the enforced mandates of external institutions. The activities of *Meter Room* constitute my practice-based PhD research at Coventry University, but it is also an independent entity, and by extension, the practices of the studio holders are also independent of my curatorial practice. An affiliation with Coventry University remains from *Meter Room's* conception, as one of the reasons as to why my proposed course of research was selected for a competitive studentship bursary was due to the perceived benefits of enriching the local arts scene, and stimulating exchanges with the research faculty's visual arts community. In Chapter 4, I will go on to reflect upon whether the practice-based projects outlined in Chapters 2-3 can be seen to have resulted in outcomes that realised this objective.

An Alternative

Although frequently cited as a catalyst within the field, I am keen to avoid a simplified dialectical relationship between artist-run spaces and either institutions or commercial galleries, whereby artist-run spaces are represented as authentic alternatives beyond the reaches of capitalism's tentacles, and both institutions and commercial galleries are framed as being monolithic or exclusive. Gordon Nesbitt articulated a dialectic that is often referenced in discourse surrounding artist-led activity, whereby on the one hand there are spaces that strive towards 'total autonomy from institutional hegemony' (2003, p.78), whilst on the other there are spaces that are willingly complicit in collaborating with other organisations 'in return for commercial gain' (2003, p.78). A binary opposition is drawn then, between artist-run spaces that are complicit with neoliberal values, and those that resist those same values on ethical or ideological grounds. To be unquestioningly accepting of a polemic between that which is artist-run and the institutional or commercial, would be to oversimplify their relationship in terms of both their shared ground and their mutual distinctiveness, as well as the differences between the private and public sector as materialised in gallery models. Conversely, the understatement of difference is equally as problematic as the overstatement of diametric oppositionality, and it is imperative that neither one is collapsed into the other.

A cultural producer may offer an alternative to other sources of production, but their status as an alternative is of course relative to those other, perhaps more mainstream, producers. In this sense, no artist-run space can be in and of itself alternative, but the term has expanded to encompass practices that have traditionally occupied marginalised positions, even when these same practices have grown in popularity and migrated to the mainstream. For example, the use of derelict factories for the exhibition of contemporary art was considered an alternative practice in the 1960s, but this has since become a recognisable convention within the field. As Professor Charlotte Klonk (Humboldt University, Berlin) once stated, as soon as any 'dysfunctional industrial building' (2011) is painted white, it is widely recognised as being a signal for an art venue and a forerunner to 'gentrification and urban development' (2011). In some instances, artist-run spaces are categorised as alternative exhibition venues, on the basis that they offer an alternative to commercial galleries and established institutions, even if they are well established themselves.

As a descriptive term, 'alternative' is problematic because of its inter-dependent relationship with its antonym. Paradoxically, artist-run spaces can be considered to be simultaneously central and marginal: central in terms of providing a focal point for a community of practice, at the same time as being peripheral to, and outside of, certain institutional machinations or

profit-making agendas. Despite this lack of clarity, the term has remained operative and artist-run spaces are still frequently referred to as alternative platforms. This condition, of being an alternative without actually being an alternative in real terms, is both a misnomer and a functioning sign. The alternative relation may operate on a local level, perhaps as a counterpoint to a specific organisation, or instead because they advocate a different set of values, such as an emphasis upon supporting new experimental work. Burrows has pointed to how *Time Out* made the decision to stop using the term 'alternative' as a heading for event listings for artist-run spaces. *Time Out's* decision to replace it with the word 'up-coming' (Burrows *et al* 1998, p.20), appeared to indicate how these spaces were no longer seen to be operating as alternatives, but had instead become indoctrinated into the mainstream. Although this act of re-branding was widely criticised at the time for making the blanket assumption that all of these spaces held the desire to develop in the same way that established institutions had done previously, Burrows suggested that this might actually be closer to the ambitions of many of the artists involved in organising shows of their own work. It isn't possible to remove the more entrepreneurially minded, who have an interest in monetising the model, from the category of artist-run, nor those who strategise them as platforms for self-promotion. However, the inability to filter these differences does pose the question of how the more challenging spaces can be identified within this category.

'Not-for-profit' is another term commonly used by artist-run spaces when describing their activities within promotional material. However, much like the concept of independence, the status of being not-for-profit cannot be considered unique to artist-run spaces, as the majority of publicly funded galleries and museums have a non-profit or charitable status. As the descriptor does little to distinguish these spaces from those non-profit public institutions, the declaration can instead be seen as largely symbolic. It is the indication of a focus and a set of values that are separate to commercial objectives and the pursuit of capital. Sales may be deprioritised, but this is not necessarily indicative of an anti-market position, as they may still be made and commission from this used to offset overheads rather than generate net profit. An ideological difference is being signified, and can be identified in such methodologies as a refusal to make available information upon sales, or experimenting with non-saleable or difficult to commodify works such as temporary site-specific installations. In London, the sheer quantity of spaces and crossover between sectors means that distinctions between artist-run spaces and smaller public or commercial galleries can often be very difficult to identify, at least not without prior knowledge of the organisational model at work behind the scenes. Conversely, the lack of contemporary commercial galleries in the West Midlands and low visibility of market activity generally, means that on a regional level, artist-run spaces are easier to distinguish and segregation appears more distinct.

White Cube

Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space (2000) threw a spotlight over the ideological constructs behind the divisive strategies and internal mechanisms at work within galleries. Brian O'Doherty drew attention to how the materiality of the White Cube, such as expanses of bleached surfaces and serene spotlights positioned to bless each object with a glowing halo, give flesh to an ideological construct. The conceit of the White Cube is that it functions as a sealed chamber that is undisturbed by the relations of time and space, the particularities of which are instead cast outside, where they must remain along with any other socio-political concerns that could disrupt this illusion. The White Cube as a particular model of space is presented as a democratic and ahistorical absolute. It is a form of anti-realist materialism constructed to preserve and protect artefacts from the real beyond its walls. O'Doherty, who himself curated influential projects such as *Aspen 5+6* (1967), which consisted of a box of multiples conceptualised as a gallery, argued that White Cubes are aesthetic objects in and of themselves, thereby making them antithetical to any claims of neutrality on the basis that they are propped up by highly controlled power structures. Many of O'Doherty's contemporaries shared a feeling of exasperation with the White Cube model, and the text remains a canon of Postmodernity, rejecting the prevailing culture of blinkered idealism that had become synonymous with Modernist exhibition practices. Several of O'Doherty's observations about the mechanisms behind display methods, have themselves been used as reference points by artists working with Institutional Critique. This has resulted in a cycle, which moves from exhibit, to critique, to exhibit once more.

Critical responses to the White Cube, and more specifically the ideologies signified through its materialism, has led to the development of alternative platforms, untreated exhibition environments, and idiosyncratic project spaces. However, despite the fact that the text was published almost 40-years ago, the history of the White Cube is still being pieced together, and as a model, it continues to be deployed as the primary medium of choice across a diverse cross-section of art spaces. For example, neither *City Racing* nor *BANK* shied away from using the White Cube model. Instead, both spaces have been retrospectively self-critical of the way in which they allowed themselves to inherit the formula and its associated aesthetic and power structures. John Russell has stated how he felt *BANK* 'fell into various traps' (Burrows *et al* 1998, p.22), such as the habit of overly decorating venues so as to become more White Cube-like, and by being distracted by discourses pertaining to site-specificity. *BANK* later launched a polemic against the White Cube, referring to how it now functions in relation to the 'productive ruins' (2001, p.88) of its own obsolete ideology. The ruins being referred to here concern its loss of aura and Modernist narrative, the absence of

which conjures a nostalgic spectre and a 'memorabilia of resistance' (2001, p.88), which has long been disarmed by the effects of its commodification. However, even when the walls remained white and the exhibition spaces remained cube-like, many other conventions associated with the model were directly challenged by *BANK*, through strategies such as the non-isolation of works, emphasis upon the social function of the exhibition as event, and a truth to DIY methods, which were reportedly often evident even when the intention was otherwise.

Alex Farquharson (*Nottingham Contemporary*), identified how many public institutions have adopted strategies for sidestepping 'the problem of the white cube' (2006, p.158) by moving fluidly between gallery, studio, and workshop spaces. Farquharson argued that there has been a paradigm shift in the ways in which galleries are perceived and approached, as it is no longer the gallery that defines its contents as art, but the contents that serve to 'determine the identity of the container' (2006, p.158). Within the context of departmentalised contemporary art institutions, the White Cube has become simply one of several interconnected spaces. A gesture that appears to invest in a longstanding cultural model, at the same time as indicating an awareness of the respective traps surrounding such specialised aesthetic spaces. So influential was O'Doherty's critique that these spaces are no longer able to disguise the mechanisms of their own construction or the structures that combine to perform a White Cube. Although many of the Modernist ideologies behind the model have been discarded by Postmodern practices, the ideologies still persist within its materiality, but with a heightened sense of self-awareness and an ability to flex the model's parameters. Within an exhibition programme, the White Cube may be used to perform its doctrines, provide a normative conceptual framework, or act as a symbol of the establishment for artists to respond to. It is this level of duplicitous flexibility, and the ability to be employed either in earnest accordance with its Modernist conception, or with a degree of knowingness, which has given the model such longevity. Once an apparatus for a utopian vision of art, it now acts as a lens through which to reconsider what once was, what might have been, and what will follow.

As Klonk explained in *Spaces of Experience: Art Gallery Interiors from 1800 –2000* (2009), the White Cube evolved from several different spatial practices, including domestic interior design and the sanitised environments of Modernist architecture. Charles Eastlake, the first director of the National Gallery, London, introduced hanging paintings against a background of red material in the middle of the 19th century, after research into sensory physiology that examined the subjective contributions made by the eye itself in the process of seeing. According to Klonk, Eastlake's radical experimentation resulted in the gallery wall suddenly

being emptier, with paintings moved to eye level, and the colour scheme playing a more important role. The White Cube as we now know it was crystallised at the opening of the *Museum of Modern Art* (1929), New York, but as Klonk identified, white only became the dominant wall colour in galleries in France and England after World War II, whereas in Germany there had been multiple examples of white-walled museum exhibitions during the 1930s. For example, white walls had previously been used for an exhibition of German Expressionist paintings at Essen's *Museum Folkwang*, on which occasion the hang was dramatised with expressive black outlines painted directly onto the walls around the works. In addition to Modernist design sensibilities, this phenomenon may have also been influenced by the Nazi's advocacy of white as being synonymous with purity and classical values.

Curators, who identify with the problem of the White Cube and the stultifying effects of its hegemony, have a clear motive to seek out spaces that offer an alternative to it. Event-based project spaces and other curatorial platforms can offer ways of working outside of this doctrine, by shifting focus away from the display of isolated works, to the ways in which art and curation can be combined throughout the processes of their production, consumption, and preservation. The curatorial strategies explored within this project, which I go on to describe in Chapters 2 and 3, were not intended to be a counterpoint to the White Cube. They were instead intended to be an exploration of a studio-gallery space that is equally informed by the tradition of the White Cube, that which preceded it, and contemporary curatorial experiments within laboratory-type environments.

Deferred Value

Professor Neil Mulholland (Edinburgh College of Art) has long been a commentator on artist-led culture and how it can run counter to what he once referred to as the 'Darwinian career model' (2005) of individualism within the art world's 'top down pyramidal structure' (2005). Mulholland is a vocal supporter of autonomous artist-led culture, arguing for its right to engage in forms of 'purposeless production and esoteric consumption' (2005), which is continually threatened by 'hegemonic entrepreneurial culture' (2005). Despite the disproportionate distribution of public funds, whereby artist-run spaces lie at the 'bottom or off the funding rung' (2005) and are increasingly shackled by an 'educational burden' (2005), Mulholland claimed that artist-run spaces in Scotland continue to command a level of critical acknowledgment and international exposure that the 'old guard, artcos and municipal galleries can only dream of' (2005). Mulholland referred to the lottery funded attempts at 'Third Way thinking' (2005) spearheaded by New Labour, which resulted in the blending of DIY methods, market engagement, and existing institutional frameworks. DIY, as a method

of both organisation and production, has become a signifier for self-sufficient collective practices, the ethics of which become compromised when determined by external agendas. Mulholland claimed that the refurbishment of established 'artcos' (2005) and the creation of New Institutions, have adopted forms that are largely 'continuous with the aesthetic predilections of artist collectives' (2005). However, despite these hybridisations, a culture of protectionism continues to prevail, ensuring that meaningful collaboration between the different sectors remains limited.

The concept of 'deferred value' (2005) is frequently used to identify the longer term benefits of artist-run spaces as launch pads for future success and impact. Although this qualitative measure is fitter for purpose than reliance upon quantitative data capture, such as visitor figures or generated revenue, it has also garnered criticism for primarily measuring the success of artist projects in terms of their instrumental powers, and for devaluing the significance of these spaces as and when they happen. After all, to look upon the activities of artist-run spaces in terms of deferral, is to miss their value in the moment. Mulholland made the point that what is seen to constitute contemporary art at any given time is formed from 'nebulous pockets of interest and influence and loose groupings' (2005) rather than any strategic joined-up thinking. Indeed, such strategising could have the effect of subduing more spontaneous and experimental possibilities. The fluctuating and contingent nature of contemporary art should serve to discourage overly simplistic readings of the cultural ecology of a given city and how art, particularly socially-engaged practices, can be wrongly identified as a form of treatment to be applied to wider socioeconomic problems. An invisible economy composed of 'sweat equity', support in kind, and gift economy, all play a fundamental role in these spaces, and as they are frequently non-formalised, are underpinned by a significant degree of trust. By virtue of their support of experimental practice and esoteric production and consumption, Mulholland proposed that artist-run spaces are able to cultivate a highly specific form of inverted economy, and a sense of 'awkward authenticity' (Mulholland 2005) that can be rewarded and protected within the field. This quality of awkward authenticity runs counter to the agendas of neoliberal entrepreneurial culture and its attempts at quantifying the value of artist-run spaces in terms of their capacity to produce deferred, and primarily economic, capital. Mulholland identified equivalences within the struggle for autonomy, between the power of the market to recuperate 'unruly, diverse, segmented (and, after years of unpaid labour, thoroughly exhausted)' artist-led activity, and the power held by those artists in the act of denouncing the market.

I conducted an interview with Neil Mulholland (Appendix 2) concerning his theories on the methods and practices of artist-run spaces, and the political dimension of these practices within the context of increasingly instrumentalised art ecologies. Mulholland highlighted the importance of communities of practice, and how research into artist-run culture should not only focus upon institutional discourse, but also upon the role of practice in the formation of communities. Mulholland argued that the very idea of a museum of contemporary art is contradictory, on the basis that as soon as a work enters into a museum, it becomes fixed as an outcome rather than a process, and other possibilities for it cease to be. By contrast, the institutions artists have set up have tended to be closer to the coalface of production and practice, resulting in methods and activities that are less fixed and more open. In this sense, Mulholland argued that the conventional characterisation of artist-run spaces as being alternatives to mainstream contemporary art institutions is flawed, as artist-run spaces can make a legitimate claim to being more involved with the practice of contemporary art. However, whether or not a space is artist-run, should not be the predominant factor upon which value judgements are based, and there are multiple examples of practice-led commercial galleries giving a more rounded perspective upon contemporary practice, with a demonstrable awareness of means of production (e.g. *Cabinet Gallery* and *MOT*, London).

Mulholland identified how those spaces that are set up to provide alternatives to existing institutions, can be looked upon as an act of refusal to recognise their legitimacy. As this relationship is relative, it is not possible to maintain an alternative position indefinitely, and it would be logical for agents to seek to eradicate other agents that they provide an alternative to. Upon the role taken by artist-run spaces, Mulholland argued that they should adopt more antagonistic positions by declaring the significance of the part they play in the cultural ecology, rather than capitulating by thinking of themselves only in terms of being a mere 'step on a career ladder' (2012). These spaces need room to manoeuvre without the 'constant pressure to expand' (2005), which can often be a symptom of forms of instrumentalisation, which vary depending upon the particular political climate. Mulholland also voiced criticism of self-reflexive curatorial strategies that foreground the institutional structures upon which they are based, as these forms of perpetual auto-critique can be seen to be limited by the framework of a personal ontology. Instead of only communicating with themselves, or limit themselves to exchanging smoke signals with other like-minded spaces, they should instead adopt more open and less exclusive approaches. This way of communicating may expand a community of practice and lead to the development of a form of peer group 'folksonomy', but to remain vital they must also operate beyond insular cliques.

Mulholland has recently developed an archiving project for two Edinburgh-based artist-run

spaces, *Collective* (est. 1983) and *Embassy* (est. 2002), which aims to create a both a physical and online resource documenting their activities, which he claims are often overlooked in favour of Glasgow's more celebrated artist-led scene. The *Artist-Run Archive* (Mulholland and Jackson 2012) is being compiled by students of the MA Contemporary Art Theory course at Edinburgh College of Art (ECA), with the intention of building upon the close connections between the university and these spaces, and investigating the 'transnational cultural impact' (2012) of forms of inter-organisational knowledge exchange. The resource will also feature in an exhibition entitled *Artists Running* at the university's *Talbot Rice* gallery, scheduled to coincide with the Commonwealth Games (2014), before moving on to the *Scottish National Modern Art Gallery*, to be 'safeguarded for future artists, researchers and educators' (2012). Although the acknowledgment of artist-led culture within an academic context is a positive development, this project also embodies a tension between scholarly research within the field, and the seemingly unavoidable encroachment of external funding agendas, in this case linked to national achievement and sporting events.

In order to 'engender confidence' (2002, p.34) from funding bodies and implement a 'consistent point of contact' (2002, p.34), *Transmission* were encouraged by the Scottish Arts Council to create a paid position for an administrator. Self-organised and informal methods gave way to the professionalisation of an administrative workforce and the promise of longer term financial sustainability. The appointment of an administrator can have the effect of re-orientating methodologies and attitudes, both internally and externally. The multiple funding and revenue streams of the present day *Transmission*, which is now very much a fully developed public institution, contrasts with the constitutional ethos of being organised and renovated by the 'voluntary labour of the membership' (2002, p.9). In the early 1990s *Transmission* became, not mainstream, but certainly 'more aligned to the international art scene' (2002, p.30), and upon entering the white space, 'one could have been in any city in Europe' (2002, p.30).

Having become aware of the significance of its own history, *Transmission* has been active in self-archiving, including the survey publication mentioned earlier and a recently developed archive room accessible to the public. Although the survey publication acknowledges the value of making available documentation pertaining to their history of innovative exhibition making and notable alumni, it is also underwhelming to see so many challenging and experimental exhibitions condensed into a dry chronological survey. Introduced as being a part of the 'continuing work of *Transmission*' (2002, p7), the publication expands very little on the methodologies of its cooperative structure, the politics of consensus decision making, the role of voluntary labour, or the associations forged with other politicised social and cultural

organisations.

City Racing encountered similar pressures to professionalise their operation and make the transition from loose non-constituted organisation to a registered not-for-profit company in order to become eligible for grants from the *London Arts Board*. On the basis that the first five exhibitions at *City Racing* were unashamedly nepotistic, consisting of solo exhibitions by each of the committee members, the *LAB* only agreed to fund their future activities with the proviso that they also agreed to show the work of artists outside of the group. The acceptance of public funds should come with an appropriate level of accountability and an assurance that these activities will look beyond habitual nepotism, but a question hangs over what may be lost in the process. *BANK* once described the process of purposefully developing projects in order to meet public funding criteria, as being a very real threat to their 'carefully nurtured independence' (2001, p.98). *BANK* instead declared their interest in developing forms of culture that were deliberately 'NOT professional' (2001, p.1) and 'NOT a career' (2001, p.1), but which were instead as complex and chaotic as life. Is it possible for these spaces to maintain the more beneficial aspects of their independence, at the same time as doing all they can to ensure survival by negotiating procedures and outcomes that are correlative with public funding agendas? The struggle for autonomy is not limited to the practices of artist-run spaces, as it is also shared across many institutions undergoing reform in accordance with neoliberal agendas, including the research faculties of academic institutions.

The DIY impetus that led to the founding of *City Racing* was tapered with equally prominent moments of self-doubt and scrutiny over their own validity as curators or gallerists. This sense of uncertainty may have been the product of finding themselves operating in-between so many binaries: the squat and the gallery, their studio practices and the gallery job, the roles of both artist and curator. Having been established as an alternative to the exclusiveness of existing institutional hierarchies and the sleek presentation of the marketplace, *City Racing* encountered an unexpected dilemma when they started to receive exhibition proposals, which grew in direct correlation to their reputation and connection with a number of high profile YBAs. The artists who had felt excluded from the art world were now in the unenviable position of having to exclude other artists in their programming. In their own words: who were they to start rejecting other artists? *City Racing's* self-confessed 'naivety and conservatism' (Burgess *et al* 2002, p.1) in their early years, clashed with a substantial degree of self-assurance that they, as the producers of contemporary art, were producing edgy unmediated exhibitions. This resulted in a precarious balance, which the artist David Musgrave once referred to as the 'special preserve of spaces without a profit

making drive' (2002). *City Racing's* spontaneity and lack of strategising can be seen as significant factors in both their respective success and their eventual demise. Indeed, so unprepared were they for the arrival of profits, that when Charles Saatchi bought works by Sarah Lucas, Hale recalled that they actually had no idea how to negotiate this transaction, or whether they were supposed to hand over the work there and then.

As a means of attempting to ensure survival, it is often necessary for artist-run spaces to adopt strategies, sometimes painfully, which are comparable to those employed by their institutional or commercial counterparts. The dialectical struggles between conditions of independence and instrumentalisation can be gauged in terms of processes of professionalisation (e.g. implementing procedures, measurable outcomes, diversifying audiences, etc.). Properties such as instability and spontaneity are looked upon as undesirable traits, and through public funding routes, artist-run spaces are pressured to become increasingly formalised and implement bureaucracy designed to evidence more quantifiable indicators of competence and success. There are multiple examples of artist-run spaces becoming increasingly professionalised over years of continuous operation, to become comparable eventually to the establishment figures that they were originally set up to offer alternatives to. Questions surrounding the sustainability of artist-run spaces are raised regularly in subject discourse and funding strategies, and it is generally assumed that any plans for securing longer term sustainability necessitates a movement towards a more mainstream acceptance on the part of the organisation or a loss of autonomy. This trajectory of development is to be resisted or embraced, depending upon the intentions and ideological positions of those involved, and relates to the instinct to ensure the space's survival. In order for these spaces to maintain a state of independence of the kind described by Beech and Mulholland, and not be coerced into becoming antithetical to their original agendas, it is imperative that the role of the artist is not supplanted by that of the managing director, and that practice not be replaced by a form of managerialism. Organisational changes such as these are frequently implemented out of financial necessity and the struggle to secure the future existence of a space, rather than a drive for institutional growth, making this a question of negotiating degrees of compromise. Public funding rightly comes with a level of responsibility and accountability, but should this necessitate a change in organisational structure and practice, whereby artist-run spaces are pressured to adopt legal structures that are not necessarily fit for purpose? If not, this question leads to what kind of relationship there should be between artist-run spaces and public funding bodies.

Four artist-run spaces responded to a policy document published by the Arts Council England, by issuing their own report: *Visual Arts, A policy for the Arts Funding System in*

England (Hale *et al* 2012). Within this response, Hale called for a 'more precise recognition' (2012, p.20) of artist-run spaces that consistently develop high quality innovative exhibitions, but which have never been provided with an assured commitment to project funding. Hale goes on to argue that the Arts Council's policy in regards to artist-run spaces seems misdirected, as although many of them often set themselves ambitious goals, they do not necessarily wish to expand in size, nor be burdened with the provision of educational workshops to justify public funding expenditure. They evidence resistance to forms of financial arrangement that might be perceived to legitimate their work, and against the need to measure their sustainability against normalisation and institutionalisation. Artist-run spaces do not require large injections of capital funding, and a substantial number of them have a strong track record of achieving high quality multidisciplinary events. However, as Emma Kay (*Cubitt*, London) put it, in order to flourish they need to be valued for what it is they have initiated themselves, and not be shackled by 'unrealistic levels of public accountability and educational provision' (2012, p.20). As part of a more complex culture, artist-run spaces need to be permitted to be able to constantly change in correspondence with their own changing environments, as this is one of their key strengths, and indeed could even be considered to be one of the primary reasons why these platforms were initiated. Rather than encouraging the retrospective adoption of more conventional organisational models, the less linear and more unstructured models often favoured by these spaces could be learnt from by other cultural bodies.

Artist-run spaces are by their very nature contradictory; a product of such an open criteria for categorisation (simply to be a space run by an artist), which also mirrors the discursive and adaptive nature of art practice itself. Having used examples in this section to identify the breadth of the term and some of the models of self-organisation at work within these spaces, I have formed the initial conclusion that the term 'artist-run space' is inconsistent, and is, or has at least become, non-specific. The lowest common denominator between these spaces is that they are all run by artists, which signifies their intention to highlight the importance of artist activity within and through the organisation and its space, materially and conceptually. This proclamation identifies an ideological position, but there is no way of identifying whether this is indicative of critically engaged art practice, or a cursory gesture that signifies a claim to a valuable form of cultural capital. The inconsistencies of the term could elicit the belief that artist-run spaces do not actually exist, or more specifically, that they are so uniquely individual that any umbrella term lacks veracity and meaningfulness when applied more broadly. Artist-run spaces exist as a multiplicity, but a more specific term is required to identify those spaces that are more specifically driven by practice, DIY methods, and forms of critical contestation.

In Chapter 1.3, I will analyse the politics and power struggles that combine to shape these spaces, specifically in relation to the role of critique, institutions, and neoliberalism.

Chapter 1.3: Critique and the Institution

Contents

1. Institutional Critique
2. Self-Reflexivity
3. New Institutions
4. Hegemony
5. Antagonism
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7. Dissensus

In this, the final section of Chapter 1, I aim to situate the agent of the artist-curator within the field of artist-run spaces in relation to discourse upon the internal and external power relations that shape them. I will explore how the forms and methods of artist-run spaces can offer a framework for the critique of institutions and hegemonic structures within the field. How might curators use critique, in its various forms within the context of an artist-run space, as a means of creating new spaces for discourse?

Institutional Critique

The first wave of practitioners who gave birth to the term Institutional Critique, were concerned with investigating and exposing the operations at work within art's institutions. Artists such as Hans Haacke (b. 1936), Michael Asher (1943-2012), and Daniel Buren (b. 1938) cast a spotlight upon the inner workings of art institutions and their policies of inclusion or exclusion, which are by their very nature political. In the early 1990s a second generation of artists, including Fred Wilson (b. 1954), Louise Lawler (b. 1947), and Andrea Fraser (b. 1965), reinvigorated Institutional Critique by further interrogating processes of institutionalisation, of art practice and culture more widely, and the ways in which different modes of representation, and indeed non-representation, attribute status and constitute subjects. By challenging the ways in which institutions strategise through the organisation of objects and subjects, Institutional Critique serves as a means of subjectivising (often excluded) social groups. New modes and modalities of subjectivity can be created through the rejection of institutions, and the ways in which their methods can effectively silence subjects. As the curator Professor Nina Möntmann (Royal University College of Fine Arts, Stockholm) has argued, there is 'a new freedom to be attained in that which is non-formalized and noninstitutional' (2008, p.8); in those art practices that cannot be easily contained by the prevailing categories of value. The first and second waves of Institutional

Critique have arguably been followed by a third wave; institutions that have recuperated and embedded their own critique.

George Dickie's institutional theory of art, as expressed in *Art and the Aesthetic* (1974), defined artworks in accordance with the status and nature of appreciation they are afforded within the social institution of the art world, which serves to both define and limit their field of possibilities. Describing institutions in terms of their regulating discourses and apparatus, Dickie's institutional theory drew together all mediators, forums, interlocutors, and organisations, which combine to constitute the field of knowledge and give flesh to the art world, including galleries, museums, biennales, criticism, and any other site established for the production, mediation, or consumption of art by its 'public'. Any object announced as art, Dickie claimed, is always already 'institutionalized by the system within which it functions' (1974 pg.28). Similarly, without institutions interior to art and internalised by artists, 'there is no art' (1974 pg.28). Born from a deeply felt need to rethink institutionality, forms of Institutional Critique have served to both challenge and uphold institutional theories such as Dickie's, uncovering the ideologies, discourses, and symbolical exchanges that shape the field, and making use of those same methods and mechanisms for the purposes of critique.

The partnership of Institutional Critique and curatorial practice is a contested field, giving birth to a practice that simultaneously works with and against institutional conventions. Institutional Critique is not simply the practice of intervening into the contexts of galleries and museums, it is also a response to the realisation of how these orthodoxies have been internalised. The curator, as a symbol of the institution, is a key target for criticism, and so a paradox is created when curators critique the same institutional frameworks of which they are very much apart. The curator Maria Lind (*Tensta Konsthall*, Stockholm), identified the 'joint venture between curatorial practice and institutional critique' (2011) as being a 'volatile' (2011) combination. This description seems especially relevant to the circumstances surrounding such canonical projects as Wilson's *Mining the Museum* (1992) at *Maryland Historical Society*, and Haacke's *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971* (1971) at the *Guggenheim Museum*, New York, both of which ultimately resulted in the exhibition curators losing their jobs.

Institutions have long co-opted the practices of artist-led culture and experimental alternatives. Indeed, the process of co-option has come to be accepted as an inevitable outcome, and as Beech put it, displays itself to be 'instantaneous, ubiquitous and unexceptional' (2006, p.7). However, rather than collectively mourning the loss of autonomy and avant-garde experimentation, Beech instead argued for a deeper understanding of

institutions and methods for revisiting questions surrounding how institutions can be defined. Beech pointed out that radical artist-run spaces, such as *Cabaret Voltaire* and *Copenhagen Free University* (2001-2007), were themselves also institutions, as they instituted their own sets of values, which paradoxically, could be considered anti-institutional. Rather than becoming overly fixated with the differences between institutions and non-institutions, Beech proposed that artist-run spaces should instead set about instituting their own values if they are to defend themselves against full absorption and dilution within the mainstream. If institutions are only referred to pejoratively and treated as a taboo by artist-run spaces, these practices are themselves in danger of indoctrinating their oppositionality, which in turn could lead to a form of anti-dogma dogmatism. Artist-run spaces that fully invest in a binary opposition between their practices and those of institutions, are in danger of caricaturing their practices as simply contrary, and nothing more than a 'negative image of the institution' (2006, p.9). Beech argued that such a binary is intrinsically flawed, as in his view 'alternative spaces, artist-run galleries and artist-led art magazines' (2006, p.10) are themselves also institutions. Their distinctiveness lies not in the fact that they are non-institutional, but in the ways in which they institute a distinct set of values in a different way.

Beech has offered two distinct strategies for critically responding to the dilemma of art's institutionalisation: firstly, to occupy these institutions in experimental ways that contest their habitualisation, and secondly, to create new institutions that offer alternatives to them in terms of both form and content. Beech argued that 'Institutionalisation for the few' (2006, p.10) needs to be replaced by 'institutionalisation for all' (2006, p.10). However, it is unclear as to whether Beech is proposing that all institutions become expansive enough to be able to provide space for all mainstream and alternative practices equally and simultaneously, or if he is advocating the development of new institutions representative of the more alternative experimental practices they nurture. Both of these proposals are problematic, as the former solution requires that more experimental practices have to wait patiently for their turn in the programme, and the latter suggests that they be partitioned off in experimental institutions, which instantly become less experimental by virtue of their categorisation and containment within these vessels. The relationship between the experimental and the non-experimental is also a matter of relativism, as the identity of experimental institutions is dependent upon the prevalence of normative conventions.

As critics have frequently highlighted, a fundamental limitation of institutional critique is that it is itself institutional. In *From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique* (2011), Andrea Fraser (University of California) argued that the growth of critically engaged art practices, the widespread dissemination of its vernacular, and the popularisation of critical

theory, have combined to form a new institution: the institution of critique. Ironically, a tool frequently deployed in forms of resistance has itself been inverted to become a tool of governance, the authority of which now precedes it. The impact of high-profile exhibitions that questioned the authorial role of the curator, such as Jean-François Lyotard's curation of *Les Immatériaux* (1985) at the *Pompidou Centre*, which could be considered to be both an exhibition of philosophy, and a philosophy of the exhibition, have been influential in the development of self-reflexive exhibitions that exhibit the conditions of their own construction. These strategies and formats have become commonplace in sprawling exhibition constructs such as *Documenta* and *Manifesta*, which make visible, audible, and debated, that which has traditionally been concealed behind the scenes. As part of this opening up discourse, a dramaturgy of the medium of the institution is conducted. Fraser argued that no conceivable form of Institutional Critique is able to exist outside of this same field, and that practitioners can only hope to expand associated discourse or create internal niches. Fraser proposed that the self-enclosing nature of Institutional Critique is not reflective of a 'totally administered society' (2011, p.414), but rather a product of the internalisation of the institution: 'it is inside of us, and we can't get outside of ourselves' (2011, p.414). When applied to artist-run spaces, Fraser's argument can be interpreted as identifying artists as the institutional element.

If either Beech or Fraser's theses can be accepted, they inevitably then lead to the following question: what kind of an institution is an artist-run space? What types of values do they institutionalise, and which forms of practice do they encourage and reward? As a self-organised space begins to define itself, in terms of the practices and network it supports, those practices can quickly become normative and institutionalised by virtue of this process. The plurality of spaces occupying the artist-run category is indicative of the fact that there are many different types of space run by different kinds of artists, each of whom are likely to be instituting different sets of values. This pluralism has resulted in a category that is notable for its cacophonous nature. Similarly, some values may be affirmed with more certainty than others, and at different rates and intensities of institutionalisation. If an artist-run space can be considered to be an institution, what effect does this have upon the relation that exists between artist-run spaces and public or commercial institutions, and between forms of self-organised critical practice and institutional structures?

Self-Reflexivity

In the context of curation, the concept of self-reflexivity refers to the continuous questioning of practice as a means of constructing and scrutinising dialogue and exchange within curatorial processes. As a means of trying to avoid staid conventionalism and paralysis

induced by the unquestioning replication of established practices, practitioners of Institutional Critique must continue to evolve in changing socio-cultural circumstances. This realisation has led to forms of perpetual critique, which open up curating as a responsive practice, concerned not only with institutions, but also with broader questions concerning representation. A practice that is as responsive to its own state of self-awareness and self-doubt, as it is to the possibilities that emerge through what Obrist has referred to as a 'mutual and dialogical relationship with artists' (2007, p.57), and the changing environments and contexts of curated spaces. Professor Brian Holmes (European Graduate School, Saas-Fee) identified the 'new sort of reflexivity' (Raunig *et al* 2009, p.54) active within those progressive curatorial practices that look to move beyond traditionally assigned limits into external fields through 'extradisciplinary investigations' (2009, p.53). Within this conception of reflexive critique, the activity of critique functions as a form of negation and a withdrawal from existing institutions, as a means of opening up new possibilities of expression, analysis, cooperation, and commitment within a given discipline.

Kester identified how the Euro-American conceptualist tradition has often resulted in forms of criticality produced through self-reflexive gestures, focusing on the 'discursive and institutional construction of art' (2012, p.4). Self-reflexivity has become a shorthand means of signifying a level of critical awareness, which constantly calls into question its own position, and the factors upon which it is predicated, in the pursuit of a condition of instability and flux. Akin to what Professor Irit Rogoff (Goldsmiths, University of London) has referred to as a state of 'criticality' (2006, p.1), this critical condition or culture is brought about by prolonged engagement and forms of responsive feedback. Distinct from the focussing of critical attention upon a specific subject, and the negative connotations of criticism, criticality is a state of (self-)consciousness concerning the limitations of practice and the act of critique itself. Rogoff's definition of the term draws from Foucault's influential lecture entitled *What is Critique?* (1978), as published in *The Politics of Truth* (2007), in which Foucault described critique as a series of relations that bind together power, truth, and the subject. Critique is a movement by which the subject questions the effect of power on discourses of truth and vice versa, in a moment of voluntarily insubordination and the 'desubjugation of the subject' (2007, p.32). Foucault drew attention to the inherently paradoxical nature of critique and its dependence upon power. Following Foucault's paradox, the most problematic characteristic of Institutional Critique is the fact that it is itself institutional. At a time when many cultural institutions are being threatened due to funding cuts and the imposition of neoliberal experience-economy agendas, a self-reflexive critical practice informed by the different phases of Institutional Critique is necessary in order to safeguard art production from its own complicity to instrumentalisation. This position marks a return to the curator's role as

custodian, in this case, of the creative autonomy of curatorial practice.

Curators interested in dealing self-reflexively with the structures of mediation inevitably end up privileging and constructing a demand for practices engaged in those same questions. This results in a new form of collective orthodoxy, with a tendency to declare critical oppositions and forms of inwardly directed critique, resulting in endless discursive folds. *BANK's* interest in making tangible the power relations operative in the background of curating, manifested as satirical barbs towards the 'curation-ego and all its trappings' (2001, p.24). However, in an art world that often fetishises properties such as 'uncertainty, provisionality, open-endedness and deferral' (Charlesworth *et al* 2007, p.98), and which is adept at cannibalising its own critique, the target of this satire has become unstable and internalised.

Strategies for self-reflexive critique within curatorial practice have themselves faced criticism for advocating a form of introspective naval-gazing, rather than confronting how curatorial and artistic orthodoxies are engendered by, and contribute to, the formation of institutional relations. On the basis that self-reflexive curation sits alongside more orthodox methods in many contemporary art spaces, their ability to rupture institutional practices sufficiently is called into question. The relationship between variations in approaches to curatorship appears closer to coexistence rather than opposition, and could even be considered to be symbiotic and self-fulfilling, in instances where self-reflexive critique has the effect of providing art institutions with sources of self-legitimacy. The development of a vernacular of self-reflexivity, which advocates properties such as un-decidability, fluidity, and deferral, is closely aligned with wider discourses on contemporary art practice and neoliberal working methods. Without the possibility of transformation or rupture, the self-performed critique of institutions loses its potential to provoke change within those same institutions. In this sense, the artist-curator is disempowered if their practice does not exceed the boundaries of a 'self-consciously controlled sandbox' (Duman 2008, p.49). Curators, who simultaneously produce exhibitions and auto-critique their own role within the curation of exhibitions, are faced with an entangled problem: how can they operate outside of the 'political economy of the curator' (O'Neill *et al* 2007, p.57) and the encumbrance of their own position as an 'institutional figure with a historical discipline?' (2007, p.57).

There is a long history of artist-led activity occupying territories outside of the spaces that have been demarcated for this purpose, especially the avant-garde, which has led to a process whereby the field of production is extended, to be later drawn under the influence of institutions. As Burrows commented, it is the role of chronicler, that 'furnishes the institution

with its power' (1998, p.20), and so by chronicling practices that occur outside or run counter to them, institutions have been able to refresh their critical and cultural significance by association. The recuperation and capitalisation of the first and second waves of Institutional Critique have resulted in contemporary institutional models that self-legitimise through proclamations of self-reflexivity, however contained or cursory these gestures may be. Art is able to affirm itself through such strategies as the negation of institutions, staking claim to creative autonomy, and through forms of inverted capital, which as mentioned, increases in direct proportion to the distance a practitioner takes from institutional valorisation.

The Centre of Attention (TCA), a London-based artist-run organisation run by Pierre Coinde and Gary O'Dwyer, have experimented with self-reflexive strategies in relation to their own position as artist-curators, exhibitors, and taste-makers. When asked about the role of the artist-curator in the 21st Century in an interview, *TCA* pointed out that this is not a new phenomenon, and that forms of 'participatory curating' (2005, p.4), should be interpreted as an encouraging sign that artists are engaged and aware of the significance of spatial considerations and the workings of display. *TCA* coined the term 'Gonzo curation' (2005, p.4) to identify how they consider themselves to be self-reflexive subjects of their own curation. By aligning their practice with the methodologies of gonzo journalism and pornography, whereby the documenters of live events are involved in those very same activities. *TCA* have claimed that they are co-producers of exhibited works, and this position has itself been used as subject matter for a satirical project at *the:artist:network*, New York, entitled *The Curators* (2004). This project posed the question as to whether artists are actually needed at all, by bypassing them in the production chain altogether and simply putting the curators on display as live sculptures. *TCA* have claimed that they have no budget or agenda, and 'no time and no will to over self-justify' (2005, p.8). However, rather than seeking to help cultivate a community of artist-run spaces bound by shared methods and values, *TCA* have voiced concerns over the conventional practices harboured within artist-run spaces, which so often replicate the practices of mainstream institutions on a diminished scale. For *TCA*, the demonstration of 'naive idealism' (2005) and an investment in the 'antechamber function' (2005) of the spaces, has the effect of conventionalising and thus limiting their potentiality.

TCA's self-reflexive and self-aware position is delivered with a manifesto-like gusto, resulting in an uneasy tension between an irony-laden playfulness and an acerbic antagonism, as illustrated by their claim that they are the 'performing monkey' (2005) to the artist's organ-grinding. However, rather than subordinating their position as curators in the overall exhibition hierarchy, this statement instead cements their position as knowing co-authors.

The fact that TCA claim that their approach 'doesn't differ from professional (as in salaried) curators of galleries' (2005, p.7), stresses the conviction they have in their own expertise, and the fact that what is understood to constitute professionalism within a given field is not simply a question of salary. TCA frame their practice as an enquiry into what is possible without the resources that are considered to be 'indispensable' (2005, p.8) to larger spaces. They argue that practical restrictions, coupled with a desire to emulate existing institutions, can mean that artist-run spaces can sometimes propagate a 'surreal expectation shortfall' (2005, p.8), whereby audiences expect outcomes that mirror those presented at larger institutions.

New Institutions

The DIY aesthetic so synonymous with artist-run spaces has been crystallised as a style as much as an expedient way of working, and can be regularly encountered in galleries that are more moneyed, as a form of visual currency. As Gordon Nesbitt argued in her article *Harnessing the Means of Production* (2003), production methods often associated with artist-run spaces, due to a combination of modest budgets and a questioning of the polish of White Cube spaces, have themselves been harnessed as a sensibility by the New Institutions and network economies of neoliberal capitalism. New Institutionalism, a term originating from the social sciences, has come to be used widely in contemporary curatorial discourse to refer to progressive art institutions that centralise audience participation, fluid movement between multiple spatial functions, and embedded forms of self-reflexive Institutional Critique. New Institutions have borrowed much from self-organised artist-led culture, drawing from the 'legacy of artists and alternative spaces to metamorphose from dead repository to vital cultural resource' (Altshuler *et al* 2009, p.14). However, this is a mutual exchange of cultural capital: the institution gains kudos through association with edgier alternatives, and the artist-run space is granted validation and exposure through their expanded distributive channels.

Described by the curator Clare Doherty (University of the West of England) as the 'buzzword of current European curatorial discourse' (2004, p.1), as evidenced by the influential *Transform* (2005-08) project by the *European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies* (*eipcp*), New Institutionalism denotes the widespread turn towards participatory encounters and states of 'flux and open-endedness' (2004, p.1) within institutions. Doherty's own *The institution is dead! Long live the institution!* (2004) identified how these hybridised models fuse together Relational Aesthetics, the methodologies of artist-run spaces, and the immaterial labour of Post-Fordism. Doherty argued that New Institutionalism has assimilated the working methods of 'artist-run initiatives' (2004, p.1), whilst also maintaining a belief in the

gallery or museum as a necessary locus for art. The gallery's shift from showroom to participatory social space has created a new set of conventions built upon 'role-play or prescribed participation' (2004, p.2) within event-based, interactive, or process-based works, rather than 'objects for passive consumption' (2004, p.2). Doherty asked if these New Institutions replicate neoliberal experience economies, will this inevitably lead to yet more 'coded patterns of behaviour' (2004, p.2) for visitors, and widespread loss of contemplative spaces for visual imagination.

In *The Unstable Institution* (2007), Carlos Basualdo (Philadelphia Museum of Art) reflected upon the changing faces of institutions, and how the 'illusion of everlastingness' (2007, p.55) continues to safeguard them 'against their contingent character' (2007, p.55). Institutions serve to regulate the relationships between the individual parts that constitute them, and promote the contexts in which they are carried out. New Institutions, which embrace self-reflexivity and self-criticism, can find themselves trapped in a paradoxical situation. By virtue of cannibalising their own critique, New Institutions are able to reinforce their own authority and re-legitimise themselves. Basualdo argued that it is the aura of art's prestige that is instrumentalised within New Institutions, which trade on the symbolic capital of art's 'presumed autonomy and independence from market logic' (2007, p.58). As Duman has commented, New Institutions that create multiple platforms for different forms of cultural activity and engagement, and which have sterilised the potency of Institutional Critique by performing it themselves, appear to be 'more (tactically) creative than anyone else' (2008, p.48). This development appears to signal a third phase of Institutional Critique and a transition from successive phases to a possible terminus.

Charlesworth has also proposed that self-reflexive strategies and forms of self-performed Institutional Critique can end up taking the form of 'ritual observances' (2007, p.98) rather than result in the desired 'radical contestation' (2007, p.98). By erecting an anti-institutional banner, worded with self-effacing rhetoric, the institution can be seen to have developed a strategy of self-preservation and protectionism. Möntmann has referred to the self-performed critique of New Institutions as a form of cloaking under which 'business can go on as usual' (2008, p.1). Is it possible for self-reflexive strategies and Institutional Critique to re-articulate institutional relationships meaningfully, or does the homogenisation of their practices within New Institutions leave existing power-relations unchallenged and ultimately unchanged?

To mark its tenth anniversary celebrations, *Tate Modern* invited *No Soul For Sale* (2010), a festival of independent cultural activity featuring seventy artist-run spaces, to occupy its cavernous Turbine Hall. This association sought to refresh the image of an institution oft

criticised for its large-scale spectacles, by inviting in the 'alternative' practices of artist-run spaces and granting them a temporary voice through their distributive channels. The act of handing over the monumental space to a large collection of (mostly USA-based) independent artist-run spaces on the occasion of its tenth anniversary appears a cynical act, and a means of pre-empting possible criticism directed towards their legitimacy as an institution representative and supportive of a wide spectrum of contemporary art practices. In this sense, institutions are entangled in a paradoxical bind: if they omit independent artist-run activity they risk being accused of being exclusive and blinkered, but when these are included, they can appear to be cynically recuperating their cultural capital in a way that also reaffirms the existing hierarchy and spatial politics of the inside and outside.

City Racing were invited to collaborate with larger public institutions on several occasions, including a retrospective exhibition at the ICA entitled *City Racing 1988-98: A Partial Account*, which featured a selection of previously exhibited works alongside gallery artefacts. They also participated in the *Life/Live* survey exhibition of British contemporary art at the *Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris* (1996), and as part of *Tate Modern's Century City: Art and Culture in the Modern Metropolis* (2001), were commissioned to create a collaborative work documenting the people, places, and projects connected with the space. As a means of highlighting the fact that regardless of size or resources, 'art comes from people, from communities of artists' (Burgess *et al* 2002), an oversized classroom whiteboard was installed mapping the gallery's field of influence and fifty-one exhibitions during its decade of operation. The work served to spotlight other artist-run spaces that existed locally to them, as well as the role played by those practitioners, who despite being integral to the community from which many well-known artists emerged, did not themselves receive recognition outside of that peer group. However, this laudable gesture was perhaps lost in the format of the work itself, which instead acted as a prompt for visitors to take on the challenge of finding the faces of well-known artists within the densely entangled networks. The format of a retrospective exhibition, within a valorised and valorising institution, could be considered to be at odds with *City Racing's* anti-authoritarian squat beginnings. Indeed, Hale was later critical of the exhibition for trying to project a 'raw, punk-like, do it yourself sensibility' (2002, p.vi) when one did not really exist.

Esche, in a paper entitled *Can everything be Temporary?* (2001), proposed a series of strategies for overcoming processes of institutionalisation, through the embracing of transitory processes. Esche used several of his own projects at the *Roosemuseum*, Malmö (2000-2004), as case studies representative of attempts at de-institutionalisation. Rather than countering the neoliberalisation of cultural institutions with a possible dialectical

antithesis, Esche's self-aware strategies instead sought to replicate aspects of these same neoliberal processes, such as open trade and a predilection for choice and participatory agency. The strategy posited a form of institutional self-critique, which drew from the fluidity and weightlessness of neoliberal capital. The degree to which transitory processes can be seen to constitute an 'alternative structure principle' (2001) and the potentiality of an 'open vector' (2001) capable of challenging the fixed nature of institutions is questionable, as these have already been established as a means of production within New Institutions. It is prudent to remember when reading Esche that his writing often directly promotes the institutions with which he is associated, and his vested interest is embedded within them. Esche's curatorial concept for the *Gwangju Biennale* entitled *P_A_U_S_E* (2002), consisted of inviting twenty-five independent artist-run spaces from Asia and Europe to occupy 1:1 scale floor plans and replica facades of their own spaces located in an outdoor expanse within the city. These facsimile spaces hosted self-curated shows by each of the invited spaces, featuring artists from their respective locations. Like many other Biennale umbrella themes, *P_A_U_S_E* had the effect of raising the profile of discourse upon the spatial politics of margins and centre. In this instance, the margins were temporarily relocated to the centre, which in turn had the effect of dividing opinion upon Esche's strategy. Could the strategy be seen to equate to a co-optive simulacra of grassroots artist-led activity for the benefit of cultural tourism, or a meaningful critique of authorship and value within the context of the global institution of the Biennale, or indeed both?

Hegemony

A sociocultural model focussing upon power relations, hegemony refers to the relationship between a dominant agent and the sub-ordinate agents over which it presides. Within this model of culture, separate groups of producers are layered hierarchically. Members of each group are expected to behave in a manner particular to that group, through the exertion of implicit and soft power, rather than explicit command or direct force. The process by which particularities within a given society are reaffirmed to become universalities can be understood as being hegemonic, and once indoctrinated, these universalities begin to function as components of a pre-given ontology. The political philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), who popularised theories of cultural hegemony, argued that dominant agents and bodies have the effect of collapsing and homogenising value systems in order to replicate the status-quo and the prevailing cultural norms. Gramsci described how hegemonic relations are in place to uphold the power of the bourgeois ruling class, and that these constructs must not be permitted to appear naturalised or given the status of universal 'common sense' (1998, p.6). Laclau and Mouffe revisited Gramsci's theories, most notably in their influential *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985). This work attempted to articulate a

post-structuralist concept of political resistance, which following Foucault, identified the necessary interdependence of resistance and power, between forms of struggle and complicity. Mouffe in particular has gone on to apply these theories, and the related concepts of antagonism and agonism, to examples of counter-cultural and artist-led practices

So what then are the structures and relations that can be seen to exert a hegemonic control upon and within the field of artist-run spaces? I argue that artist-run spaces are engaged in an ongoing struggle for autonomy from the hegemony of institutional practices and the effects of institutionalism, and from flows of neoliberal determinism in the form of market power and the working conditions of precarious labour. As Obrist has stated, even outside of commercial contexts, the effects of the market are substantial and pervasive, having a 'bigger effect on the ground than curators and critics' (2011, p.113). As the practices of artist-run spaces have themselves been adopted by neoliberal capitalism and hybridised New Institutions, the hegemonic relation has become pre-given and internalised. Despite their susceptibility to co-option, forms of critique and direct or indirect contestation, continue to be the primary tools with which to resist the loss of creative autonomy. This dialectic is further complicated by the recuperation of forms of critique, and the fact that, as Fraser has argued, critique has itself become institutionalised. In addition to having been constituted within institutions, critique now also operates as an abstracted cultural institution of its own. Similarly, Laclau and Mouffe's theories on hegemony not only provide a toolbox for critiquing dominant cultural paradigms, they are themselves also dominant paradigms; hegemonic theories of hegemony.

Mouffe has argued that it is not useful to make distinctions between political or non-political art, on the basis that all art is political, in the sense that it either serves to maintain symbolic orders or it contests them (2007, p.4). Political by default then, Mouffe asked whether art can maintain a critically engaged role in society when it is so often formulated as a Debordian spectacle, and at a time when cultural labour and the creative industries have become so embedded within the ideologies, working methods, and labour conditions of neoliberalism. Indeed, the development of the creative industries has played a significant role in the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism. Mouffe identified the hegemonic nature of all forms of consensus, which serve to stimulate antagonism by discarding that which lies outside of consensus, at a particular time within a given field. The visibility of contestation within cultural spaces, as a means or resultant effect of dissensus, can enable new ways of seeing those same spaces, giving a voice to those who have been silenced within the existing hegemony (2007, p.5).

Methodologies developed by counter-cultural movements of the 1960s, which became synonymous with forms of self-organised culture, the search for authenticity, and a spirit of 'anti-hierarchical exigency' (2007, p.1), have themselves come to be harnessed by post-Fordist network economies, and re-tooled as methods for perpetuating conditions required by capitalism and administering control. Forms of self-management and self-critique have replaced the 'disciplinary framework of the Fordist period' (2012, p.38) and have been integrated into capitalist productivity. Mouffe has argued for an increased merging of art and life, in order to articulate a sense of realism outside of the habituated behaviours of institutions and their propensity for alienation. A resistance to homogeneity and hegemonic forms can appear to be at odds with curatorial authorship, on the basis that all selections imply the exclusion of other possibilities. Self-reflexive attempts at resisting the hegemonic relations accompanying curatorial authority and thematic filtration can present a challenge to this order. However, all acts of curation are responsible for producing exclusion as well as inclusion, and it is not possible for curators to practice outside of this entangled position. Gordon Nesbitt has previously dismissed the potentially compromised nature of this entanglement, instead emphasising a non-reducible polemical distinctiveness between the hegemony of dominant institutions and artist-led initiatives that focus upon contemporary practice. Gordon Nesbitt added a distinctly ethical dimension to her polemic when she proposed that artist-run spaces, by virtue of their fight to gain control of the means of production of their own work, could be thought of in the same terms as members of the 'Global Justice Movement' (2003).

Mouffe dismissed the possibility that artists are able to offer the same degree of radical critique as they have in past eras, but that this (loss of) conviction is not in itself a reason to renounce their political role in the hegemonic struggle. Art is still capable of subverting its own dominant hegemony through the production of new subjectivities. Critical artistic practices, and the possible forms they can take in order to contribute to challenges towards the dominant hegemony, continue to be an important dimension of democratic politics. However, it would be a mistake to believe that artistic activism can, on its own, 'bring about the end of neo-liberal hegemony' (2007, p.5). Shifts in the canon of art practice can be seen to be representative of the evolving nature of hegemonic relations and forms of consensus around what is admissible and granted visibility within a given field at a particular point in time. It could be argued that the figure of the artist-curator has recently developed into a hegemon of contemporary art, and the degree to which this is either embraced or resisted is representative of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic struggles within exhibition making and the organisation of practice.

The artist-run space, which can be seen to be both marginal and central to the production and consumption of art, is a space in which these hegemonic struggles can unfold and take material form. This condition, of being both marginal and central, holds within it a fractured and unstable duplicity that epitomises their contested nature. It is crucial that this critique remains self-reflexive, especially in terms of being privy to the political nature of visibility, and how political dimensions are defined by what may, or may not, be permitted visibility within a given field. By making visible that which the dominant consensus obscures, a curatorial practice can highlight the dissensual nature of hegemonic structures and their relations. Strategies for making visible can have the effect of opening up discourse upon the political nature of these structures and their marginalising effects, as well as how a social particularity can become hegemonically constructed into universality. However, an agent of change that enhances democracy in one context can also become a new form of hegemony in another.

In the early years of its operation the online journal *Mute*, which focuses on critical cultural theory after the Web, parodied the format of the *Financial Times* as a means of subverting an instantly recognisable institutional format. *Mute* has adapted its constitution and materiality on several occasions in an attempt to achieve financial sustainability; including reverting to print after its core funding was severed. At the same time, the editors were also engaged in a struggle to remain faithful to their founding objectives by continuously re-examining their own position and influence within the field. Although not an artist-run space, *Mute* have long been engaged in similar questions pertaining to the politics of self-organised culture, and they provide a valuable platform for related critical discourse. One of *Mute*'s founding members, Pauline van Mourik Broekman, spoke upon *Mute*'s battle with institutionalisation over the years, and how growth and stability meant that their anti-authoritarian identity was haunted by a 'seemingly inevitable process of becoming a hegemon oneself' (Ellegaard 2011). Self-reflexive strategies can enable the constant reappraisal of a subject as it evolves. However, outside of this subject focus lies the more slippery dilemma of being able to develop a critical position in relation to hegemony, in a way that is also able to resist repeating the same 'transcendental hegemonic position' (Hall 2008, p.148) that the theory of hegemony can itself provide and rely upon.

Freee Art Collective (USB Appendix 1), which comprises of Dave Beech, Mel Jordan (Loughborough University), and Andy Hewitt (Wolverhampton University), explore the role of the artist in relation to the 'public sphere' (Habermas 1992), in particular the concept of a dominant, bourgeois sphere as articulated by Jürgen Habermas (b. 1929). Working across a range of institutional contexts, from artist-run spaces to international biennials, *Freee* utilise the vernacular of avant-garde manifestos within text works that directly refer to Mouffe's

ideas upon counter-hegemony and antagonism, as a means of publically addressing the possibility of emancipation for both the artist and spectator. *Freee* frame their focus upon hegemonic struggles as an attempt at reinvigorating the concept of art as an agent of resistance. This resistance manifests as proposals for the reclaiming of the public sphere, which they argue has been annexed by capital, and through the creation of works speaking against art's 'professionalization, marketization and bureaucratization' (Beech *et al* 2010, p.3). *Freee* are not simply advocating the un-professional, amateur, or unsalable, but also condemning the knee-jerk dismissal of these practices. The figure of the curator is here being caricatured as an embodiment of art's instrumentalisation, and *Freee* call for an abolishment of the monopoly of curators over the organisation and management of art. This reaches a crescendo in which they call for the demolition of the 'LITTLE MANAGERIAL CHEMIST THE CURATOR!' (2010, p.7). *Freee* have emphasised the importance of developing counter-public spheres, as a means of using forms of dissent to open up spaces in which individuals can congregate to discuss matters of mutual interest. Artist-led activity must be dissensual and 'courageous enough to be monstrous to its core' (2010, p.3). However, acting upon such an objective is becoming increasingly difficult to judge soundly, as a level of responsive self-awareness of the hegemonic structures of contemporary art has become part of the hegemonic process itself.

The curator Matthew Poole's introduction to the inaugural *Anti-Humanist Curating* seminar (Goldsmiths, 2010) outlined the objectives of the research group, which focus upon exploring how forms of anti-Humanism could potentially open up new possibilities for thinking about how works are made manifest as exhibitions, collections, and discourse. The seminar aimed to challenge the ways in which curatorial practice has been functionalised by institutions emphasising the societal value of contemporary art. This functionalisation, coupled with the UK government's promotion of 'good citizenship' (2010, p.6) through engagement with the arts, has created a culture in which the role of the curator has been instrumentalised as an enabler of these external objectives. The figure of the curator, Poole claimed, has been instrumentalised to become a 'diplomat, go-between, middleman, or advocate' (2010, p.1) of these pre-determined 'socially beneficial' goals. In light of this development, Poole argued that it has become necessary to mobilise strategies for resisting material that appears to prioritise liberal Humanist agendas, if curators are to be able to resist the totalisation of neoliberalism. Poole identified the regrettably close affinity between the core principles of Humanism, as expressed in the *Humanist Manifesto* (Kurtz 1986) in relation to the rights of sovereign individuals, and the conditions required to sustain democracy in neoliberal economies. By challenging this paradoxical affinity between Humanism and neoliberalism through the interfacing of people and objects within exhibitions, it may be possible for

curators to develop new strategies for resisting the effects of post-Fordist capitalism and reclaim levels of creative autonomy.

Antagonism

Interest in the concept of antagonism as developed by Laclau and Mouffe, was re-sparked by Professor Claire Bishop's (City University of New York) influential critique of Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), in which Bishop championed the importance of antagonism, conflict, and dissensus within socially-constituted projects. If they are to be more fully representative of the different agendas within both democratic and non-democratic societies, Bishop argued, forms of antagonism and conflict cannot be maligned in favour of positive rhetoric about the benefits of constructive engagement. Professor Oliver Marchart (University of Lucerne, Switzerland) supported Bishop's argument on the importance of antagonism as a 'feature of the *political* (and not simply of *politics*)' (2011, p.44) in the creation of spaces for the exploration of difference. Following Mouffe, Marchart emphasised the need to distinguish between the political as an engaged state of discourse and possibility, and politics as being the localised and pre-constituted variant. Marchart argued that politics in their institutional forms, are representative of consensus, bargaining, and misleading forms of '(pseudo) conflict' (2011, p.43). By contrast, the political is in flux, and constituted by antagonistic relationships that lead to moments of rupture within which culture can be re-imagined.

In some senses, curating can be seen to be an antagonistic act, whereby criteria for inclusion or exclusion within a specific framework are administered upon subjects and objects. Any alternative form, which challenges the constitution and maintenance of a 'silently presumed' (2011, p.43) symbolic order through new work-constructs, can be perceived as being antagonistic to the status quo. The conceptualisation of antagonism as a curatorial strategy is however problematic, as any attempt at staging or prescribing antagonism would require a contradictory level of pre-emptive organisation and a containment of conflict. Although curators may court or catalyse antagonisms through their practice, it does not necessarily follow that these practices will be antagonistic, as there is no guarantee that this intention will necessarily result in the desired effect. The contingent nature of antagonism dictates that these conflictual relations cannot be organised so easily.

As has been described in Chapter 1.2, *City Racing* and *BANK* were both founded as proactive responses to the antagonistic exclusivity of the establishment at that time, and they in turn were antagonistic towards the status quo through their idiosyncratic curatorial approaches. As their practices grew in status, and were valorised within public and

commercial institutions, the veracity of this critique was nullified somewhat in its recuperation, resulting in a form of hegemonic struggle. *BANK* have described this acceptance into more mainstream channels as an equally alienating experience to the sense of being excluded from them, likening it to feeling like 'gatecrashers' (2001) at a ceremony. Perhaps the most infamous of *BANK*'s antagonisms, of which there were many, was *Fax-Bak* (1998-99), in which corrective additions were made to gallery press releases, which were then faxed back to their galleries of origin. The artists adopted the role of critics, covering this promotional material with amendments and grading, in an act of *détournement* whereby the waves of institutional paraphernalia could be used as raw material for taking direct critical action as a means of speaking back to power. As self-appointed commentators upon the London art scene, a kind of ethical prefect to its excesses, *BANK* faced the challenge of focussing an equivalent level of self-critique upon their own practice. Russell later acknowledged the danger of positioning oneself as a knowing manipulator of the art world, as this position is itself susceptible to manipulation and can easily be disarmed through a sense of self-importance and the dwindling of impact over time.

Professor John Holloway (University of Puebla, Mexico) analysed several models of self-organised culture in his books *Change the world without taking Power* (2002) and *Crack Capitalism* (2010), discussing their relationship with neoliberal capitalism in terms of reciprocal antagonism. Holloway argued that the global recession and banking crisis have revealed cracks upon the monolithic edifice of capitalism, and activities that offer an alternative to its logic, such as not-for-profit and non-hierarchical communities of practitioners, have an emancipatory potential that can help to further deepen those cracks and create new fissures. The act of thinking against that which is possible within the constrictive boundaries of normalised hegemonic structures is of vital importance if we are to be able to conceive of other possible ways of being, which lay beyond their dogmatism. Holloway cites the *Zapatista* movement as an example of sustained self-organised dissent, which has succeeded in creating spaces and moments of 'refusal-and-creation' (2010, p.32). The concept of 'refusal-and-creation' is especially pertinent to those artist-run spaces that were founded due to a shared feeling of despondency or sense of separateness from prevailing institutions, and which aim to counter or negate their influence. Through the proactive rejection of a set of values, these spaces are able to create new self-organised platforms with their own unique value systems.

Holloway outlined a distinction between those cultural institutions that seek to implement smooth methods for reaffirming values, and alternatives that develop out of resonances between like-minded people who are seeking to break from capitalism's flow of

determination. Holloway's dialectic, which sets up a binary between not-for-profit organisations as forms of authentic culture, versus commercial or institutional equivalents portrayed as being cumbersome and mechanical, is however highly oversimplified, as his opposition neglects to acknowledge how entangled they have become, and just how creative a force neoliberalism can be. Holloway highlighted the antagonistic potential of any non-productive activity in capitalist terms, on the basis that their disinterested nature is conducive to the production of post-capitalist subjectivity. The co-optive strategies of neoliberalism have absorbed many of the values associated with self-organised collective practices, but a culture of individualism persists within many of the closed mechanisms that permit institutions to replicate themselves, despite their rhetorical emphasis upon public participation.

Agonism

Mouffe was asked to define her use of the concept of agonism by the architect and writer Marcus Miessen (*Studio Miessen*, Berlin), with whom she participated in a series of 1:1 discussions on the subject (2006-2011), a selection of which feature in *The Space of Agonism* (2012). Outlining the irreducible nature of the antagonistic relation, Mouffe described the impossibility of being able to reconcile opposing hegemonic projects rationally. By definition, there can be no consensus without exclusion, and every consensus is a stabilisation of a set of relations that are otherwise unstable and chaotic. Similarly, there can be no hegemon without an antagonistic relation with another. Mouffe instead advocated the creation of spaces in which hegemonic consensus can be contested as part of a pluralist dissensual approach. The pursuit of rational consensus is not possible without a hegemonic struggle, and it is the important role played by this struggle and its affirmative dimension that are key. According to Mouffe, agonistic spaces within the public sphere are discursive and plural by nature, functioning as a 'battleground where different hegemonic projects are confronted' (2007, p.3), and which crucially also have no 'possibility of final reconciliation' (2007, p.3).

An agonistic space is one in which pluralism is foregrounded, not through a sense of collectivity or liberal tolerance, but as part of a cacophony of disparate subjective voices and competing hegemonic projects. In Mouffe's terms, the agonistic conception of democracy fully acknowledges the contingent character of 'hegemonic politico-economic articulations' (2007, p.3), and the agonistic struggles among adversaries that determine the specific configuration of a society at a given moment. Indeed, every consensus can be seen to manifest as a 'temporary result of a provisional hegemony' (2012, p.40). Mouffe argued that the present 'stabilization of power' (2012, p.40) of the neoliberal hegemony has been

normalised to the degree to which it is becoming increasingly difficult to imagine alternatives, thus highlighting the need for different ways of producing subjectivity and agonistic relations. Mouffe advocated the establishment or reengagement of institutions that function as micro-political forums in which these conflicts can emerge and unfurl. The objective of these performative spaces, Mouffe argued, is to work towards transforming antagonism into agonism, through a respect of difference, as both a productive and destructive force. Antagonism is a product of pluralism, and hegemonic structures grow from, and indeed require, a diversity of spaces. However, the antagonistic relation becomes agonistic, when the irreconcilability of contesting agents is acknowledged.

Agonism calls for opposing agents to be reconsidered and viewed in light of their shared adversarial relation rather than as enemies locked in absolute opposition. The category of adversary allows more space for nuance in terms of how these relations are perceived and impact upon each other, in a way that also acknowledges the more constructive and creative aspects of adversarial relationships. Adversaries may actually improve one another through their competition and mutual struggle, rather than always be motivated by the other's eradication. The acknowledgement of adversarial relationships in this way does not eliminate antagonism, but rather acknowledges the complexity of struggles that cannot exist without specific opponents. Practitioners addressing these concepts through curatorial strategies must look beyond the representation of forms of contestation with hegemonic structures, in order to gain a fuller understanding of their presence and agency within the familiar and controlled context of exhibitions within exhibition spaces.

The intention to explore the concept of agonism as a curatorial framework can be seen as a critique of hegemony, and an awareness of how the terrain of hegemonic intervention is itself always the outcome of previous hegemonic practices. Agonism can be seen as a critical response to the failures of forms of idealism to correlate with reality in their application. As Mouffe argued, a principle concern regarding critique in this context is the possible manifestations that critical art can take, and the different ways in which art practice can contribute to questioning the dominant hegemony. Artist-run spaces that aim to foster agonistic public spheres, where the objective is to 'unveil all that is repressed by the dominant consensus' (2007, p.4), are likely to perceive of the relationship between their curatorial practices and their public in a very different way to those institutions that aspire to create or uphold forms of consensus building. In the context of Mouffe's version of agonistic space, critical art practice is that which produces and sustains dissensus, and which 'makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate' (2007, p.4). This strategy must give way to a degree of open-endedness, as a means of attempting to reach a

level of meta-critique capable of enabling the formation and governing of new subject positions, moving beyond what can be discerned or predicted through analysis. Actually existing antagonism and agonism, as opposed to their abstracted conceptualisations, are likely to overflow their categorisation, resulting in states of uncertainty and un-decidability.

The theory of hegemony is a specific formulation of political struggle rather than a universal one, and Mouffe has reflected upon how the flattening and occlusion of difference within the contemporary post-political era, and the apparent impossibility of plausible alternatives to the current neoliberal hegemony, may have led us to a post-hegemonic epoch. In addition to wider questions relating to the relevance of hegemonic readings of contemporary cultural production, the way in which hegemonic struggles and resistance can be articulated within curatorial projects as a 'ready-made' preconception of politics can also be problematic, by virtue of foreclosing other possible interpretations and points of departure for discourse. Mouffe reduced possible courses of action for critical practice to two distinct directions, which aimed to either directly transform institutions, or else desert them completely in the pursuit of alternatives. On the basis that small-scale negation or exodus does not directly affect the hegemony of institutions, Mouffe instead argued for radical forms of 'engagement with institutions' (2013, P.71) that strive to convert them into 'sites of opposition to the neoliberal market' (2013, P.71). The act of withdrawal from existing institutions, in keeping with the Autonomist tradition, may contribute to the production of new social relations outside of their frameworks. However, as Mouffe argued, it may be possible to initiate a greater degree of change from the fostering of dissent and agonistic multiplicities from within, which imagine and cultivate democratic alternatives that contest the constitutive elements that serve to secure and reproduce the dominant hegemony.

Dissensus

When asked why his writing has become increasingly focused on politico-aesthetic readings of contemporary art, Jacques Rancière (University of Paris-VIII) responded by describing his steadfast belief in the emancipatory potential of art and artistic egalitarianism. This potential, he argued, cannot be fulfilled through a nostalgia for the more radical counter-cultures of the 20th Century, but through a persistent contestation of the authority of the 'imposed message' (2007, p.264). This contestation must also take into account the contradictory nature of attacks on old aesthetic hierarchies at the same time as trying to maintain notions of autonomy directly passed down from those same hierarchies. Like Mouffe, Rancière has argued that visibility is political in nature; in the sense that the politics of a given society can be defined by that which may, or may not, be permitted visibility. The contestation of artistic boundaries is therefore deemed symbolic of struggles for political equality. Once the 'idea of

an alternative to the existing configuration of power disappears' (2007, p.264), so too does the very possibility of a legitimate form of expression for 'resistances against the dominant power relations' (2007, p.264). Rancière argued that the act of stimulating discourse around the nature of this visibility, has a greater transformative capacity than more explicitly politicised projects that capitalise on the denouncement of consumer naivety and instrumentalising spectacles. Rancière proposed that one way of moving beyond the repetitive 'declaration of our powerlessness' (2007, p.264) within consensus-based politics, is to be guided by less directed forms of curiosity.

On the basis that the main 'enemy of artistic creativity as well as of political creativity is consensus' (2007, p.264), Rancière proposed a conception of dissensus that seeks to continually re-examine the boundaries between that which has been normalised, and which is considered to be subversive, between politics that are either active or passive. Dissensus, Rancière argued, causes fissures within the established order, by confronting that same order with that which it considers to be inadmissible. Much like agonism, dissensus involves a level of (dis)agreement or contestation that does not neutralise the opposing opinions of others, as these exist as pluralities within a liberal democracy. Rancière described dissensus as a moment of alleviation from the forces of consensus and hegemony, which in turn creates spaces in which to re-evaluate and re-imagine longstanding structures. Rancière's own *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009b) is widely considered a radical challenge to the legacy of Debord's work, and an influential example of a re-examination of assumptions pertaining to the recent past, in order to construct a fuller understanding of the present. Rancière drew attention to how many artists and curators claiming to challenge institutionalism, hegemony, and the alienating effects of the spectacle through 'oppositional rhetoric' (2007, p.264), often resort to well-worn critiques of stereotypes that are themselves entirely 'integrated within the space of consensus' (2007, p.264). Artist-run spaces are a means of producing subjectivity, and their politics are performed in the struggle for equal recognition in the established order, thereby challenging the 'natural order of bodies' (2007, p.264). By creating strategies that explore the concept of dissensus and directly challenge that which can be considered sensible, through schisms and glitches, artists and curators can explore new ways of organising spaces and contesting consensus.

Professor Gregory Schollete's (City University of New York) concept of 'Dark Matter' (2010) shares similarities with Rancière's definition of dissensus, by drawing attention to the political significance of forms of cultural production that have been traditionally maligned and edged to the periphery by hegemonic institutional structures. Dark Matter accounts for disparate forms of artistic production that exists outside of mainstream institutions and the market, and

which have a significant, yet frequently unseen, presence and influence. Schollete described Dark Matter in terms of an agonistic pluralism and the dispersed formation of a counter-public sphere by self-organised initiatives outside of institutional valorisation. A recurrent theme of Dark Matter is that of subverting dominant cultural values from within the official archives of institutions. Examples of artists' dissent and political exclusion are taken into the care of institutions, providing an inoculating dose and then later worn as a mark of difference in a way that further legitimises their dominance. However, Schollete argued that once ingested, these practices have the potential to bruise and infect the body politic. Despite this belief, Sholette also acknowledged the limitations of critical curatorial practice and Institutional Critique generally, unless these practices are willing to give up their occupational identity.

A strategy of restlessness, constant re-positioning, and reflexivity, can all be considered integral to critical discourse, but paradoxically these strategies can also govern power structures at the same time as scrutinising them. Curatorial strategies for countering hegemony need not necessarily adopt the form of an explicit contestation of specific hegemonic practices. Forms of soft resistance and critique, such as negation or the creation of more independent self-organised platforms can also have this effect. Several key questions from Chapter 1 will be carried forward and explored through curatorial strategies, and will also inform a series of interviews with curators of artist-run spaces in the West Midlands, including how a self-reflexive critical curatorial practice might be explored within the context of an artist-run space. As a symbol of the institution, the figure of the curator is frequently a target of critique, as well as being the principle agent within my practice and the subject position of my authorship of this thesis. Is it possible for a curator to maintain a critical position and move beyond the hegemony of the institution, the artist subject position, and indoctrinated practices? How do these contested and contradictory positions materialise within an artist-run space?

Chapter 2: Methodology

Contents

1. Overview
2. Curatorial Research
3. *Meter Room*
4. *Grey Area*
5. *Occupant & Input*
6. A Protest Against Forgetting
7. *Curatorial Interventions*
8. Evaluation

Overview

The aim of this chapter is to define the methodologies that were developed to generate practice-based research, from exploratory curatorial work to the testing and realisation of three specific curatorial strategies. These three projects will be analysed in the context of contemporary discourse surrounding the conceptualisation of the exhibition as both a medium and subject of research within the specific context of an artist-run space. Chapter 1 presented a largely secondary-source review of existing subject material, mapping the terrain of prevailing discourse regarding the agent of the artist-curator within the framework of artist-run spaces. The practice-based strategies devised for this research provide a distinct lens through which to view artist-run spaces, the first of which positions the project space of *Meter Room* as a *Curatorial Studio* rather than a gallery, as a means of foregrounding the agent of the artist-curator within a process-led environment. The signification of space in this way is a statement of intent and part of a methodological approach, which explores the contingent and fluctuating nature of curatorial practice within, through, and upon a specific space. Chapters 3.1-3.3 combine to offer an account of the research results and analysis.

Chapter 3.1 presents a *Critical Commentary* of the formation of *Meter Room*, the curation of which commenced upon the very first day of occupancy. The *Curatorial Studio* has shaped and been shaped by exploratory projects such as the *Artist-in-Renovation*, *Input* curatorial residencies, specific facets of exhibitions, and the labour conditions involved in its DIY construction such as gift economy, sweat equity, and *Caretaking*.

Chapter 3.2 describes and analyses the second strategy, entitled *Artist-run Collection*, central to which is a method of layering artworks and their vestiges on-site as a means of

chronologically generating a collection of works, which accumulates pieces during the course of successive exhibitions. Artist-run spaces most frequently adopt the kunsthalle model of spatiotemporal exhibitions, rather than a collection-based approach, and so these spaces offer new possibilities for the ways in which the concept of a gallery collection can be occupied, and how works and their evidences can be organised within a space and initiate forms of inter-project dialogue.

The third and final strategy, entitled *Floor Plan for an Institution*, is presented in Chapter 3.3. This was a collaborative durational project, which brought together curators, artists, and directors, from five artist-run spaces based in the West Midlands region. Each of these spaces were invited to create a room typical of a public art institution: *The Reception*, *The Auditorium*, *The Cafe & Bookshop*, *The Archive*, and finally, *The Gallery* itself. The sum total of these different rooms, and their interplay over a five-month period, was conceptualised as a process through which a new model for an artist-run institution could be speculated upon. *Floor Plan for an Institution* explored the ways in which art institutions and the processes of instituting collective values, might be performed, contested, and negotiated by the producers involved, rather than simply inherited, or adhered to. This project aimed to explore a new method for creating an artist-run institution, as a speculative process of collective re-imagining.

Curatorial Research

The interdisciplinary nature of curatorial practice-based research, coupled with the academic framework of the PhD program, has resulted in a multi-layered methodology, which is often full of contradiction. My research has been given a further twist by virtue of the fact that definitions of curating continue to be clouded by live ongoing processes of continued expansion, diversification and revision. Curating requires a fluctuating and often elusive balance between an awareness of the historical and theoretical contexts of exhibition making, combined with openness to the creative possibilities of spontaneity and change. This research project has been framed by the wider context of the growth in curatorial research as an academic subject, and the struggle to carve out a research culture specific to curating in its own right, rather than as an adjunct to other established disciplines. A scholarly research culture that acknowledges the emergence of curation as a semi-autonomous and individually authored form of mediation and production that structures the experience of art. It has been challenging to consolidate the process of reviewing existing sources and identifying the interaction of key agents within the field, with the tacit skills of curation as an activity and material process. Central to this struggle was how best to devise a set of interrogative strategies through expanded authorship (artist/curator,

individual/collective), at the same time as enabling enough time and space for exploratory curatorial practice, without the pressure of goal-based outcomes.

The application of the term 'research' to the methods of artist-curators serves to valorise them with an academic respectability inherited from the scholarly traditions of the sciences and humanities. Andrea Philips (Goldsmiths, University of London), a Reader in Fine Art herself, has decried forms of 'scientification' (2010, p.92) imposed upon artistic research in order to process, measure, and confine artistic practices in accordance with academic and governmental demands. Philips summarised the oft-encountered polemic within practice-based artistic research, which she described in terms of an ethical struggle between creative autonomy and absolute instrumentalisation. Exhibition making is being increasingly framed as a research output within academia, and this in turn poses new questions about how their diverse spatiotemporal manifestations can be most effectively evidenced, preserved, and fed back into the research community as knowledge. Knowledge needs to be transferred in order to be constituted as such, and the epistemological field of artist-run spaces can be defined in terms of access to, and participation in, forms of transfer. The tendency for curatorial practitioners to adopt a first-person narrative as a primary mode of address, and the recoding of practice as discourse within contemporary art, and vice versa, helps to construct a field of knowledge with unstable foundations. For most curators, research is an everyday activity, in terms of participating in dialogue within peer groups, online networks, attending seminars, studio visits, composing exhibition statements, as well as the production of forms of self-knowledge through practice. In each of the three projects described in Chapters 3.1-3.3, written statements were presented alongside the work as framing devices and integral components of the overall constructs. The activity of thesis writing was guided by the aim to locate empirical curatorial research within the context of both prior knowledge and forms of exchange with other practitioners from a range of disciplines. The claims made to original contributions to knowledge in the field are outlined in Chapter 4.

Like many other practitioners, I frequently incubate ideas and actively court varying degrees of uncertainty, such as repressing the impulse to finalise projects in order to provide them with enough space to breathe. At the *Trade Secrets: Education/Collection/History* (2008) conference held at the *Banff Centre*, Canada, the curator Cuauhtémoc Medina (National University of Mexico) argued that unschooled curators might actually be better placed within the field than those equipped with PhDs. Not only in the sense that these 'Frankenstein' (2011, p.30) curators are perhaps less likely to rigidly follow academic procedures, and may be more adept at negotiating the discursivity of the art world, but also in light of expanding postgraduate pathways, they are becoming an increasingly rare species. At the time of

conducting this research, there are approximately thirty-two postgraduate courses in curating in the UK (Target 2013), which amongst others, attract visual arts graduates seeking future work in the profession, and art history and cultural theory students, who also learn practical skills. Curators may in fact need to work with a degree of un-professionalism in order to challenge the orthodoxies of what is and is not considered 'professional'. The set procedures and codes of conduct, which serve to define professionalism in a given field, are not necessarily conducive to progressive developments or breakthroughs within that same field. Indeed, such developments are suggestive of a transgressive departure from the predefined parameters surrounding normative practice. The question of professionalism seems all the more pertinent when such a large proportion of contemporary practitioners and institutions are laying claim to acts of transgression within their projects, through acts of subversion and resistance.

In the role of curator of these projects, my subject position has moved fluidly at various stages of their development, between that of an artist, curator, artist-curator, producer, and the overarching role of researcher. All of these roles combine to account for the generation and gathering of data through exploratory practice, collaboration, and case study interviews. This research project has been faced with the challenge of developing a series of curatorial projects and a written thesis that are mutually integral to one another, at the same time as being sensitive to the methods and intentions of the other artists and curators who have contributed to those same projects. The activity of curating often requires a balance of subjective authorship and an application of skills deriving from its custodial tradition. Contemporary curators often face criticism for didactic or illustrative methods, but this can equally be received for a lack of commitment to a concept, or a sense that the selection methods employed evidence a degree of arbitrariness. Such a tentative balance inevitably leads to a struggle between the two, which is further complicated by the engagement of the tacit skills of curating a selection of objects within exhibition spaces.

John Baldessari (California Institute of the Arts), who generously contributed a work to the *Turtle Salon* project described in Chapter 3.2, has previously expressed a wariness of a perceived trend in other creative professionals appearing to desire to become artists. In addition to this coveting of the artist's role and status, Baldessari has also voiced concerns upon how artists are increasingly being used by curators as 'art materials' (2005) or ingredients for an 'exhibition recipe' (2005) that has been concocted to 'illustrate a curator's thesis' (2005). A key consideration in my approach to practice-based research is to try to avoid producing practical work that appears to be didactically illustrative of my theoretical work, and vice versa. A model of curating whereby the curator as author composes texts,

using artists and artworks as content. In some senses, this can be seen as an act of resistance to the use of artworks as illustrative fragments within thematic ahistorical group exhibitions. It has been my intention throughout the research to integrate practice-based outcomes (exhibitions, events, etc.) with thesis writing so that they develop symbiotically and their relationship is mutually informing. The relationship between theory and practice, and its coexistence within forms of informed critical praxis, can often become problematic and seemingly incompatible. The thesis element of this project does not attempt to explain the work resolutely, but rather aims to contextualise it in relation to specific strands of discourse. Rather than a retrospective report, the thesis has been written simultaneously alongside the practice-based work, creating a form of cross-pollination and a dual synchronicity. The activity of writing has altered the perception of my curatorial practice throughout and vice versa, and they are not necessarily distinct from one another. Chapter 3.1, which I describe as a *Critical Commentary*, includes additional methodological material upon *Meter Room*, with the aim of revealing processes behind specific curatorial decisions, which may otherwise have been left unsaid in the exhibition itself.

In response to an article in which the critic Sue Hubbard (*Time Out, Artillery*) criticised the 'fashion among curators' (2006) for first selecting group exhibition themes, and then clumsily matching works deemed to fit the subject, Hoffmann came to the defence of the profession against such a sweeping criticism. Far from being a recent phenomenon, concerns about how artists can sometimes be misused and eclipsed by overzealous curators, have been widely discussed since Buren's *Exhibition of an Exhibition* (1972), which also featured in Hoffmann's own *The Next Documenta Should Be Curated By An Artist* (2005). Hoffmann acknowledged the charge against those curators who are guilty of mechanically illustrating concepts with works contorted to fit rigid thematic templates. However, on the basis that 'every exhibition needs a premise' (2006), Hoffmann pointed out that any exhibited work, regardless of the exhibition's origin or theme, has been filtered according to some criteria through curation, even when that criteria is declared to be open or un-curated. Bedwyr Williams' *Curator Cadaver at Frieze* (2012) continued the tradition of targeting curators for their symbolic function as institutional representatives, by satirically offering up the edible corpse of an anonymous curator upon which visitors could all feast.

Meter Room

Meter Room constitutes practice-as-research via the development and contextualisation of a model of curatorial practice as realised through the creation of a new artist-run space. A key resource for this project has been the securing of premises within Coventry city centre to be used as a *Curatorial Studio* for practice-based experimentation and ongoing project

generation. Shortly after commencing my research, I approached Coventry City Council about the possibility of acquiring commercial premises suitable for use as a contemporary art gallery, and after viewing several properties, terms were negotiated for a two-year lease of the former *Coventry Volunteer Service Council* offices at 58-64 Corporation Street in the city centre (Appendix 3). It quickly became apparent upon viewing the derelict 1960's office building that the existing layout of the partitioned offices would lend themselves very well to reconfiguration as a large project space and seven self-enclosed studios. The possibility of creating new studio spaces for contemporary practitioners, much needed in a city with a very low existing provision of studios, aligned well with my intention to establish and develop a space that operates as a studio for curation and a production site for new exhibitions. The charitable aims of this organisational structure and its not-for-profit economic model were designed to be self-sustaining through the revenue generated by the low cost studio rentals. This model will be compared with several other regional case studies in Chapter 3.3. As part of the lease agreement, the Council were required to change the registered function of the building from offices to an art gallery and studios. This act was symbolic, as it marked the commencement of the curation of the building as a space for the production and encounter of contemporary art. Even after *Meter Room* has vacated the premises sometime in the future, it will still need to be used as a gallery and studios, unless the use of the building is changed again through a lengthy registration process.

Meter Room's exhibition space has been framed as a project space rather than a gallery, so as to avoid being perceived as a container for the display and valorisation of pre-constituted culture. More specifically, the project space has been conceptualised as a *Curatorial Studio* as a means of foregrounding the authorial role of the artist-curator, and placing emphasis upon production processes and undefined potentiality. The signification of the space in this way can be seen as a statement of intent and part of a methodological framework, which seeks to explore the contingent nature of curating as a process, and as a set of relations between objects and subjects. The historical lineage of the *Curatorial Studio* can be traced from canonical exhibitions such as Szeemann's *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form* (1969), through to the experimental curatorship of art collectives such as *Group Material* (1979-1996), *BANK* (1991-2003), *Copenhagen Free University* (2001-2007), and the self-reflexive institutional models developed by *Eastside Projects* (est. 2008) and *W139* (est. 1979). Szeemann's radical re-conceptualisation of the gallery as a site of production provided a responsive apparatus for the changing methods and materiality of art practice during the 1960s.

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Figure 1: Pryde-Jarman, D. (2011), Project space during its renovation, Feb 2011

Another key principle of the *Curatorial Studio* strategy is the intention to commence curatorial activity on the very first day of occupying the building, thereby demarcating it as a space for art at the very point of inception and arrival. The resulting curatorial works can be considered products of the inter-personal dialogues and exchanges that occur between participants and other organisations within and through the space. Within this framework, studio-based enquiry is not concealed behind studio doors, but rather takes place in a more publicly accessible environment. The materiality of my practice is engaged in a variety of ways, from permanent interventions into the fabric of the building, to ephemeral and de-materialised forms. These elements become further layered through the documentation process and the *Critical Commentary* (Chapter 3.1), the writing of which aims to unpack and articulate the processes involved in the initial stages of constructing and programming the space. Within this self-reflexive meta-framework, *Meter Room* constitutes a practice-based curatorial enquiry that is simultaneously the subject, method, and outcome of my research. It is both artist-curator-run and researcher-led, and the interrelation and interstices between these practices are central to the reflexivity of the project and forms of interdisciplinary knowledge exchange.

Meter Room is a facilitative framework and a test-bed for an academic research project that responds to itself as its own subject. It has taken form through practice-based research rather than as a self-organised initiative developed by Coventry-based artists at a grassroots level. In this sense, *Meter Room* has very different beginnings to *Grey Area*, which was

instead born out of a proactive response to the frustration that I felt as an artist towards the lack of verve and critical engagement evidenced by the existing art spaces in Brighton at that time. Despite being the 11th largest city in the UK, Coventry did not already have an artist-run project space dedicated to contemporary art practice, meaning that *Meter Room* quickly found a purpose in response to this absence, and a niche within the city's cultural ecology. *Meter Room* can be described both in terms of academic research, and in relation to the artist-led culture in the West Midlands region. Although the *Meter Room's Curatorial Studio* is the main point of focus for this study, it will also be analysed in relation to its wider context, which is inseparable within a discursive practice, including the need for art venues and studio facilities within the region. The close relationship between the project space and studio activity at *Meter Room* is another significant factor, and I will elaborate on their interrelation, the development of a community of practice, and ongoing practical considerations such as volunteer labour. Reflections upon the DIY labour and aesthetic are featured in the *Critical Commentary* in Chapter 3.1.

Chapter 3.3 analyses results from the *Floor Plan for an Institution* project, which drew inspiration from previous exploratory projects developed at *Grey Area*, including Bob & Roberta Smith's *A Floating Studio* (2007), *Third Floor Right, 3* (2009), and *Vacation Grey Area* (2012). The former involved constructing a floating wooden replica of the artist's London studio, which was then launched on the English Channel to coincide with the opening of the *Brighton Fringe Festival* (2007). The studio structure, which was later exhibited at *Grey Area* alongside event documentation, was conceived of as a peripatetic site of production and a performative sculptural object. *Floor Plan for an Institution* has also been informed by another work by Bob & Roberta Smith entitled *Leytonstone Centre for Contemporary Art (LCCA)*, which consists of a shed-like wooden structure located in the garden of his suburban terraced house in Leytonstone. Smith frames the *LCCA* as a regional art centre, which in the context of its modest size, lack of programme, and inaccessibility, can be considered an ironic gesture and a comment on the material expectations of the structures that give flesh to institutions. The *LCCA* was temporarily relocated to the grounds of the *Serpentine Gallery* as part of the *Hearing Voices Seeing Things* (2006) project, and several replicas were commissioned for the *Hijack Reality: Let 100,000 Kunstvereine Bloom!* exhibition at the *Mead Gallery, Warwick Arts Centre*. After this project, one of the kunstvereine structures was donated to Coventry School of Art & Design, functioning as an occasional exhibition space outside of the Graham Sutherland building until its dismantlement in 2013. Another influential resource in the development of *Floor Plan for an Institution* has been a collection of texts upon the composite spaces of institutions entitled *A Manual for a 21st Century Institution* (Altshuler *et al* 2009). This publication, which features

chapters upon the composite departments of larger art institutions, reflects upon how the relations that define the social and spatial functions of institutions have evolved over time.

Precursors to the strategy at work within *Floor Plan for an Institution* include the collaborative projects *Transmission at City Racing* (1992) and *City Racing at Transmission* (1992), which sought to explore parallel histories between the spaces and their mutual enquiry into 'fringe topics' (2002, p. 48). Other comparable projects include *Aid & Abet's Space Exchange* (2011), in which several other artist-run spaces were invited to occupy their project space, and *JT Project 09*, in which *James Taylor Gallery* invited six other London-based spaces (*Fieldgate Gallery*, *Five Years*, *Katie Guggenheim*, *Supine Studios*, *The Centre of the Universe*, *Transition Gallery*) to curate events within their sprawling warehouse space. *The Institute of Beyond* (2011), curated by *Wysing Arts Centre*, Cambridge, developed a model for a fictitious institution, made up of departments with esoteric specialisations, such as wrong answers, psychedelic studies, and overlooked histories. *Simple Rational Approximations* (2011), an associated project of *Artissima 18*, Turin, co-curated by Manacorda, explored a collaborative model for generating a fictional contemporary art museum, the impermanence of which was paralleled by the immaterial objects contained within it. Vidokle and Tan's video piece entitled *2084* (2012), which was featured at the *Institutions by Artists* conference (2012), Vancouver, speculated upon the fate of institutions in a future world in which art has fully colonised every aspect of daily life. Tan highlighted how discourse surrounding artist-run spaces and collectives has to date primarily focussed upon their 'structures of resistance to prevailing economical and political conditions' (2007, p.2), providing case studies for institutional change. More locally, *Anti-curate* (2011) at the *Midland Art Centre (MAC)*, Birmingham, experimented with generating a non-curated exhibition, through a very similar strategy to the one developed by Hopps in *Thirty-Six Hours*.

Grey Area

Founded as a dual studio and gallery in March 2006, *Grey Area* is an artist-run space located in the basement of a commercial building in Brighton's city centre. Initially nepotistic in its programming, the gallery function began to take priority over time, and it has grown to become an established venue for experimental contemporary art events. Whereas *Meter Room* was specifically developed as a practice-based curatorial research project, *Grey Area*, by contrast, precedes this research, providing a different context in which to generate experimental practice. This thesis does not present an account of all of the curatorial projects that I have been involved in during the course of the PhD. Instead, Chapter 3.1 reflects upon a selection of *Grey Area* projects, which grew out of exploratory practice,

focussing upon facets of these exhibitions that are particularly relevant to the development of the research.

The way in which *Grey Area* operates as an organisation is epitomised in its manner of conducting Steering Group meetings. Similar in form to the method (or non-method) described by *City Racing*, issues pertaining to event programming and the allocation of tasks are voted upon informally within a bar setting. How, when, and where these meetings take place are reflective of the organisation, and although these meetings are arranged on an ad hoc basis, they are far from being unprofessional or lacking in critical attention. An account upon *Matt's Gallery* (Grayson 2008), London, which itself grew from an artist-run space to a commercial gallery with a focus upon practice, highlighted the importance of informal exchanges that happen in the different non-gallery spaces of a gallery, around the offices and the cluttered storage rooms.

Occupant & Input

The first project at *Grey Area* to be initiated after commencing the PhD was a series of successive weeklong artist and curator residencies entitled *Occupant*. As *Grey Area* was originally founded as a dual studio-gallery, this project marked a return of function to the space. The function of the gallery was reassigned to that of a studio, as a means of switching emphasis from distribution and consumption, to practice-based processes and production. *Occupant* also made a connection with the citywide network of *Open Houses*, in which artists, designers, and craftspeople, share their work with the public in domestic spaces. These resident-led initiatives have the benefit of sidestepping institutional mediation and selection processes, but the spaces themselves become stultified as studios when they are temporarily transformed into pseudo-White Cubes, or domestic interiors that have been de-cluttered in order to meet the expectations of art audiences. The *Occupant* residencies were devised as a testing ground and a prototype for the *Input* curatorial residencies within the *Curatorial Studio*.

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Figure 2: Pryde-Jarman, D. (2011), *The Lombard Method* during their *Input* residency

Each occupant received a set of keys to the premises on the first day of their residency, with the agreement that they would return these on the final day of that same week. An inventory of tools and staple materials was made available upon arrival. Occupants were not expected to produce anything in particular during their residency, but simply to treat *Grey Area* as their own studio, with the secondary consideration that they might also consider organising a public event of some description at a time of their own choosing during their weeklong stay. Occupants were encouraged to create new work during their residency, as a product of the particular spatiotemporal conditions, rather than simply importing pre-existing works into the space. This strategy maintained an element of risk and the potential for failure throughout, by neglecting to guarantee that any new work would materialise at the end of each residency. The public event could have taken a variety of forms (artist talk, screening, reading, etc.), but crucially if occupants had not produced any work (due to the timescale, creative blocks, or a number of other reasons), this would also be embraced as an appropriate outcome. Studios cannot always be hives of productivity, particularly when restricted by limited time and resources, and so emphasis was instead placed upon the potentiality of a temporary repurposing of space rather than results-orientated schedules. The lack of a budget was a fundamental restriction, but also a condition that gave the work that was produced 'its very quality' (BANK 2001, p.98). In the absence of a fixed criteria with which to evaluate outcomes, the relative success of each project, as opposed to the specific works that were or were not produced, was gauged by the degree to which the artists engaged with the ethos of the format. With this principle in mind, the non-production of new

work could not be considered unsuccessful by default, as long as this could be considered the product of the occupancy.

A Protest Against Forgetting

A key element of my methodology has been the conducting of a series of interviews with directors and curators of artist-run spaces. As previously stated, the aim of this thesis is not to compile a comprehensive survey of all of the different kinds of curatorial practices and organisational structures in the UK that fall under the banner of 'artist-run'. In their autobiographical account, *Transmission* make the point that no artist-run space can be comprehensively accounted for by a singular authorial voice, as each of these spaces is the sum of a 'huge number of personal accounts from various perspectives' (2002, p.7). The aim of this research then, is to present a spectrum of distinct viewpoints, which highlight the key recurring considerations and challenges for those involved in organising and curating these spaces. Practitioners from seven artist-run spaces based in the West Midlands region have been interviewed, and this material forms the basis for a selection of case studies. The interview material, which is primarily qualitative and frequently discursive in nature, has been analysed to provide an outline and a cross-section of the artist-run spaces within a shared geographic region at the time of conducting this research.

Obrist's *Protest against forgetting* (2011) project is a direct response to the problem of considerable gaps within the history of curating, largely caused by the rapid expansion and diversification of the subject towards the end of the 20th Century. Obrist conducted a series of research interviews with fellow practitioners as a means of assembling autobiographical histories, a selection of which are featured in *A Brief History of Curating* (2008). Exhibitions have long been the medium through which the work of most artists comes to be known, and the primary space of exchange in which meaning and value are negotiated and stabilised. As the curator Lisa Le Feuvre (Goldsmiths, University of London) has stated, the history of modern and contemporary art can be considered a 'history of exhibitions' (2011). Like Obrist, Le Feuvre has raised concerns for how the activities of curators are frequently left undocumented or not adequately preserved for posterity. Le Feuvre has also highlighted how Szeemann's *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form* (1969), was preceded by Wim Beeren's equally influential *Op Losse Schroeven* at the *Stedelijk Museum*, Amsterdam, and yet Beeren's exhibition has been significantly less celebrated due to the simple fact that the exhibition material was written in Dutch rather than English. In the case of artist-run spaces, the histories of exhibitions and organisations are often shared, but not necessarily committed to written accounts, the absence of which can affect both long and short-term memory.

I approach the format of the interview as a discursive and dialogical tool for documenting contemporaneous debate, in a field with a growing but largely incomplete body of knowledge. Each of the research interviews was either voice or video recorded (or both), and then transcribed as closely as possible to the original conversations. The transcripts can be viewed along with participant biographies in the separate appendix document. Similar in form to Obrist's method, in which he frames the interview as a tool for 'endless conversation' (2008), these inter-subjective exchanges are made up of rhythm, subtexts, and the 'highs and lows, intervals, pauses, and silences' (2011, p.16) of natural speech. The material generated through the interviews can be looked upon as fragments belonging to a wider shared discourse upon the artist-curator and artist-run spaces: a small part of a deductive whole. The 1:1 interview format can be singularly focused and discursive, dialogical and monological, depending upon the technique and approach. Direct contact with practitioners enables precise information to be obtained, which could not have been acquired from other sources, performing real-time inter-subjective exchanges. A staple form of art journalism since the 1960s, practitioner-focussed interviews have come to be a principle means of communication on biennale platforms, whereby artists, curators, and theorists become the subject of numerous interviews, round table discussions, symposia, and public forums. The fact that these events have become increasingly curator-focussed and curator-led further emphasises the shift from the primacy of the artist subject position to that of the curator.

Interviews and conversations can be an efficient tool for recording primary artistic discourses, and recording the direct spontaneous cognitive processes of practitioners. The 1:1 interview format is a performative and processual research method, and the act of engaging and provoking a subject to make statements through the posing of questions engages with very complex flows of knowledge and power. Conversation, private and public, personal and collective, anecdotal and scientific, the part and the whole, can become functionalised through the interview process, becoming research material and knowledge. There can be great value in the spontaneous, the un-guarded, and the off-the-cuff, and through saying aloud what has previously been unsaid, but a degree of critical distance must also be exercised. The interview questions (USB Appendix 2) were not distributed in advance, and were standardised to enable responses to be grouped together and analysed comparatively, a summary of which is presented in Chapter 3.3.

As part of the AHRC's *Knowledge Exchange Program* (KEP), I initiated a research residency at the *Ikon* gallery Birmingham, from January - March 2013. The partnership, which was formed between AHRC, Coventry University, Birmingham City University, and *Ikon*, aligned

with each participant's interest in supporting inter-institutional knowledge exchange. In the capacity of researcher-in-residence, I worked alongside staff at *Ikon* to conduct the research interviews with curators, directors, and artists from artist-run spaces based in the West Midlands, both past and present. Conducted weekly over this period, the interviews focussed upon the largely undocumented history of artist-run spaces in the region, and the transcripts will be made available to *Ikon* for their archive resource after completion of the PhD. From its beginnings as an artist-run space located in a kiosk in Birmingham's Bullring, *Ikon* has developed over a 40-year period to become an international art institution with educational charity status. This transition, from artist-run space to public institution, made *Ikon* a resonant environment in which to conduct the interviews, as well as being a familiar and accessible venue for the interviewees. The interviewees and transcript appendices are as follows:

Artist-run spaces

- | | | |
|----|--|-------------|
| 1. | Mona Casey, <i>Colony</i> , Birmingham | Appendix 6 |
| 2. | Cheryl Jones, <i>Grand Union</i> , Birmingham | Appendix 7 |
| 3. | Nathaniel Pitt, <i>PITT Studios & Division of Labour</i> , Worcester | Appendix 8 |
| 4. | Nina Coulson & Alex Johnson, <i>Movement</i> , Worcester | Appendix 9 |
| 5. | Andre de Jong, <i>Vinyl Art Space</i> , Birmingham | Appendix 10 |
| 6. | Karin Kharlberg & Reuben Henry, <i>Springhill Institute</i> , Birmingham | Appendix 11 |
| 7. | Craig Barnes, <i>Down Stairs</i> , Hereford | Appendix 12 |

Theorists

- | | | |
|----|---|-------------|
| 8. | Professor Neil Mulholland, Edinburgh University | Appendix 2 |
| 9. | Gijs Frieling, <i>W139</i> , Amsterdam | Appendix 13 |

Curatorial Interventions

As part of a wider methodology for participating in subject discourse and sharing my research, I organised a series of regular public talks with artists, curators, and theorists at *LGP*. Originally focussing upon the practices of artist-run spaces, the focus of these talks expanded to accommodate broader topics relating to critical practices, collaborative methodologies, and the political economy of art. The audio recordings and promotional material for these talks are included in the appendix (Appendix 14). The speakers and their affiliations were as follows:

Curatorial Interventions

- | | | | |
|----|--|----------|----------------|
| 1. | Cathy Lomax, <i>Transition Gallery</i> | 22/11/10 | USB Appendix 3 |
|----|--|----------|----------------|

| | | | |
|-----|--|----------|-----------------|
| 2. | Pil & Galia Kollektiv, <i>xero, kline & coma</i> | 18/01/11 | USB Appendix 4 |
| 3. | Matt Fleming & Lee Shearman, <i>Permanent Bookshop</i> | 07/02/11 | USB Appendix 5 |
| 4. | Orion Maxted, <i>protoPLAY</i> | 21/02/11 | USB Appendix 6 |
| 5. | Michael O'Connell & Huw Bartlett, <i>Doomsbury Set</i> | 10/05/11 | USB Appendix 7 |
| 6. | Elly Clarke, <i>Clarke Gallery</i> | 06/07/11 | USB Appendix 8 |
| 7. | Dr Jonathan Gilhooly | 25/10/12 | USB Appendix 9 |
| 8. | Dr Simon O'Sullivan | 06/12/12 | USB Appendix 10 |
| 9. | Mel Jordan and Andy Hewitt, <i>Freee</i> | 24/01/13 | USB Appendix 1 |
| 10. | Karin Kihlberg & Reuben Henry, <i>Springhill Institute</i> | 28/03/13 | USB Appendix 11 |
| 11. | Professor John Roberts | 06/06/13 | USB Appendix 12 |

In addition to organising the *Curatorial Interventions* talks, I hosted numerous talks and discussion events at *Grey Area* and *Meter Room* in relation to the exhibitions described in Chapters 3.1-3.3, and have presented papers at several academic conferences in the UK as a means of further disseminating my research findings (USB Appendix). The discussion event with the members of *Freee* art collective led to the offer of work as an editorial and promotions assistant for the *Art and the Public Sphere* journal (USB Appendix 13). Published by *Intellect*, this journal provides a platform for interdisciplinary practitioners who are broadly concerned with contemporary art's relation to the public sphere. Other collaborative projects during the course of my research have included the inaugural exhibition at *LGP* entitled *Évasion* (201) and its accompanying glossy publication *VUOTO* (USB Appendix), which explored Institutional Critique through post-feminist theories, and *Where's the Toilet?*, *Glasgow International* (2012), which featured a billboard display of WC facilities from a range of artist-run spaces across the UK (USB Appendix).

Evaluation

The aims of the three curatorial strategies are outlined at the beginning of Chapters 3.1-3.3, and an initial conclusion drawn from the results generated by each strategy is located at the end of each section to allow for clear referencing between aims and outcomes. The relative effectiveness of the strategies and their method of exploration will be evaluated in accordance with how the aims were or were not met, and where those explorations led. The findings identified in each of the three conclusions will then be carried into the overall project conclusion in Chapter 4. This chapter will summarise the research findings, reflect upon how the outcomes were shaped by the methodologies at work within the three strategies, and formulate claims upon their relative impact on the field and contribution to knowledge.

This research project has had the challenge of negotiating several different channels of

requisite administration and bureaucracy in order for the activities of the *Meter Room* to exist within both public and academic spheres. An ongoing struggle has been to try to ensure that processes such as risk assessments and research ethics approvals, have not become overly restrictive or had the effect of shackling the organisation with bureaucratic processes that would likely be sidestepped by many other artist-run spaces. Risk assessments and ethics approval documents for the interviews are located in the appendix (Appendix 4), along with signed agreement forms from each of the interviewees (Appendix 5).

Chapter 3.1: *Curatorial Studio*

Contents

1. Aims
2. *Curatorial Studio*
3. *Artist-in-Renovation*
4. *Caretaking*
5. Void Space
6. Exploratory projects
7. *Grey Area*
8. Conclusion

Aims

In this, the third chapter, I describe and analyse the outcomes of exploring three curatorial strategies at *Meter Room*, in addition to reflections upon exploratory projects at *Grey Area* and *Movement* gallery.

As has been outlined in the previous chapter, the process of re-functioning the former Coventry City Council offices located at 58-64 Corporation Street, for the purposes of *Meter Room* project space and studios, has been central to my practice-based research. The project space has been conceived of as a *Curatorial Studio*, within which curatorial practice is explored in the context of both studio-based practice and gallery-based exhibition making. The *Curatorial Studio* is an attempt at developing a curatorial approach to a form and function of space responsive to recent developments in contemporary practice, including the merging roles of the artist and curator, overlapping studio and gallery functions, self-reflexive institutional models, and critical approaches to binaries within the field (e.g. artist/curator, studio/gallery, institutional/non-institutional, etc.). The *Curatorial Studio* has been referred to as such, in order to indicate how the space is an active component of each project, and not simply a vessel for the containment of exhibitions or specific modes of display. The three key aims of the *Curatorial Studio* strategy have been as follows:

1. The aim behind signifying the project space as a hybridised studio-gallery is an attempt at shifting emphasis away from the valorising effects of the gallery construct as a predetermined vessel for the showcasing of pre-constituted artworks. Within and through the material and conceptual framework of the *Curatorial Studio*, I aim to explore the spaces that lie in-between studio and gallery functions in this context. Commencing on the very first day of occupancy, I aim to develop a series of projects that explore this strategy, in terms of the curatorial processes involved and the situations encountered through collaborative practices.

2. I aim to explore the role and agency of the artist-curator within the *Curatorial Studio*. Drawing from Hoffmann's concept of the 'paracuratorial' (2011), the aim is to develop an expanded curatorial practice, paying equal attention to interrelated activities taking place before, alongside, or after the curation of art works.

3. The aim of this chapter is to compile a *Critical Commentary* of the processes and decision-making involved in developing a curatorial practice within the *Curatorial Studio*. The objective here is not to attempt to present a comprehensive account of all of the activities involved in each of the projects discussed in the chapter, but to write instead a commentary that is reflective of the often discursive and self-reflexive elements of a collaborative process-based curatorial practice.

Curatorial Studio

The name *Meter Room* is derived from a sign mounted upon the door of a small room located adjacent to the main entrance to the premises, which contains the electricity meters and fuse-boards for the building. Totalling seventeen, there is a perplexing overabundance of meters for a single property, which indicates that each of the separate partitioned offices has previously been equipped with its own dedicated on and off-peak meters. Although this arrangement would have enabled very precise readings of the electrical consumption for each of the individual units, it would also have resulted in very high standing charges for the meters, as each one of them had an individual rate and provider. The fact that there was a dedicated room for measuring the building's power consumption in such a complex manner for a single floor of offices, evokes a Kafkaesque image of a bureaucratic environment in which 'common sense' logic has been displaced by decentralised procedures. The resultant effect of this process is an impression of seemingly wilful institutional dysfunction. During negotiations with Coventry City Council for the lease of the property, the complexity of having to process seventeen individual electricity readings and separate bills became a point of contention. Indeed, so much so, that the words *Meter Room* became a form of shorthand for the premises themselves, and were used in this way by Council officers from the commercial property portfolio department in several voicemail messages regarding my lease application. In this sense, the property was re-signified in the process of dialogical negotiation, and the name of the room containing this point of contention, became symbolic of the premises, and my proposal for its future use. By adopting the room name as the identity for the organisation, I signalled my intention to respond self-reflectively to the site and the multiple processes involved in re-purposing it as a space for contemporary art.

The processes involved in the ongoing formulation of *Meter Room* as an unfixed and evolving space, are integral to my practice as a curator predominantly working with, and responding to, a specific site with a situated practice. 'Situated' in the sense that as a director and artist-curator, I

am responding to both self-initiated and encountered situations, within a specific geographical and material space. These have led to the development of contingent and consequential processes that have shaped my practice within this habitus. *Meter Room* is site-specific, but my practice-based research within, and through it, are more accurately defined as situated. As the concept of the *Curatorial Studio* was not devised exclusively for these particular premises, the possibilities for what a *Curatorial Studio* could be have been introduced to a given location, which has subsequently shaped and articulated them over time through practice. It is problematic to summarise an overarching strategy for how *Meter Room* has been made manifest, as it is the accumulated result of many diverse yet interdependent processes, each guided by varying degrees of impulse, intuition, measured problem solving, and the tacit skills of curating. However, the processes involved in constructing, and to a degree aestheticising the *Meter Room* as a space for the production of contemporary art, can be seen to constitute primers and catalysts for curatorial responses to date, and those that are yet to come.

The context of the *Curatorial Studio* enables curatorial activity to take place within a framework less encumbered by the goal-based pressure of having to achieve finalised thematic exhibitions. However, it has not been my intention to downplay the historical ties between galleries, and the evolution of the project space model or the *Curatorial Studio*. Rather than conveniently sidestepping concerns associated with the gallery as a dominant culturally recognisable construct, this act of signification instead adopts aspects of another spatial identity that is equally laden with signs and habitual relations. The concept of the gallery lives on within event-based project spaces and studio-galleries, and its symbolic power has not been eroded away, but instead now functions as a counterpoint and a normative framework to be responded to. The labour conditions of freelance art workers in a neoliberal economy are becoming less dependent upon the function of traditional studio premises, in favour of ad hoc workspaces and 'hot-desking'. The studio has shifted from a private 'ivory tower' (Buren 1971, p.51), to become the expanded workspace of any given project, and similarly the exhibition of art has become non-dependent upon physical gallery spaces. The materiality of the studio or gallery no longer functions as the boundary that serves to define and isolate works in their respective states of production or display. They instead function as normative reference points for artists to cite, flex, or negate. Neither the gallery nor the studio is a neutral referent, but their overlapping can create new possibilities for reconsidering the gallery as an extension of the studio and vice versa, the division of roles between artists and curators as exhibitors or caretakers of these spatial constructs, and the format of the exhibition as a medium for their simultaneous enquiry.

Artist-in-Renovation

Meter Room's inaugural exhibition, entitled *Diving into the Wreck* (2011), marked the culmination of

an eight-week artist residency whereby the US artist Paige Perkins, who is now based in Warwickshire, created new work from materials found on-site during the renovation of the project space (Appendix 15). This project was entitled *Artist-in-Renovation* as a means of signifying how the residency was deliberately integrated into the renovation process, and how each stage involved in the ongoing formation of *Meter Room* has been treated as an integral part of the overall curatorial processes at work. Pre-curation processes, such as the labour-intensive renovation of the building, are given equal significance to the events that have followed it as content. Within the context of the *Curatorial Studio*, the pre and post curation of exhibitions are regarded to be an extension of, and therefore indivisible from, the curatorial practice at work within the space. The *Artist-in-Renovation* project performed the concept of simultaneous work production and curatorial processes, and applied a comparable simultaneity and equitability between working in the space as a resident artist, and the labour carried out within it by a renovator. I undertook the manual labour involved in the renovation of the space, with some ad hoc assistance from studio volunteers, and two curatorial interns from the MA International Performance course at Warwick University (USB Appendix 14). Many of the processes involved during Perkins' residency, from the renovation of the building, to the opening of the inaugural exhibition, were captured in the local filmmaker Alan van Wijgerden's *Meter Room: Reading the Meter* (2011): a 15min documentary viewable from the *Meter Room* website and included in the appendix (USB Appendix 15).

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Figure 3: Perkins, P. (2011), *Nest*, reclaimed materials, *Meter Room*

Diving into the Wreck, the title of which was taken from an Adrienne Rich poem, featured an accumulation of artefacts retrieved from the skeletal remains of the site, which were then used to piece together new works, peeling back the building's frayed fabric to expose its bones. The

discarded materials were transmuted through low-tech means, and tempered by an almost absurdist theatricality with an unsettling sense of foreboding. I worked closely with the artist to create several new site-specific responses, including a large sculptural work entitled *Nest* (Figure 3), fabricated from the remains of the suspended ceiling, partition walls, and discarded strip-lights. Rather than hollowing out the premises to enable a crisp installation of a new White Cube space within which to exhibit a selection of pre-constituted works, the transition from 'void' to public exhibition space, can be better understood in terms of a process of re-configuration. Throughout the *Artist-in-Renovation* project, the *Curatorial Studio* was comparable to a building site in terms of its look and feel, and the large skip located to the rear of the building functioned as a toolbox and materials store from which to work.

Upon first viewing the disused premises at 58-64 Corporation Street, I noticed that a timer for the electricity meters was still ticking, despite the fact that the building had been left derelict for a decade. I engaged in a dialogue with the artist about the poetics of this event, whereby a meter continued to measure the (electrical) activity of an office over the course of such a long period of inactivity. The pulse continued to be taken long after the body had been laid to rest. We decided to create a new work that would simply amplify this live sound, and using contact microphones, and a simple mixer and amplifier, the metronymic tick was amplified to fill the room. Artificial turf and an amber filter from a grow-light were added to the environment, creating a chamber-like space with a heightened sense of the passing of time and slow incremental growth.

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Figure 4: Perkins, P. (2011), *Meter Room, Diving into the Wreck*, installation view, *Meter Room*

Located on the opposite side of the corridor to this piece, was an installation entitled *Mutant Meter*, which responded to the abundance of antiquated meters within the building. The casing of a defunct meter unit found on-site was altered to house LED lights and a small motor with which to power its central dial. This object was then installed within a purpose-built mirrored box connected to the hatch of the former reception counter of the *Coventry Volunteer Service Council*. Again, attention was drawn to the phenomena of passing time within displaced and disorientating chambers; the studios, the gallery, the offices, the room of meters, and the internal and external spaces of the works themselves.

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Figure 5: Perkins, P. (2011), *Mutant Meter, Diving into the Wreck*, reclaimed materials, *Meter Room*

A later discussion with Perkins about the process of renovating the studio spaces, led to the idea of building an additional studio space in the communal area of the central corridor. This studio would not be made available for lease, or for the production of work, but would rather have a symbolic function within the larger installation. Entitled *And the cherry rolled down the hill from the Fool's Palace* (2011), this 'phantom' studio was constructed so as to be deliberately uncomfortable, lined with tooth-like ceiling tiles, some crumbling, with others piercing through its false ceiling. A fictional narrative was generated around the piece, whereby a studio space remained, twisted in form, but the artist remained absent. The work drew an affinity with the concept of void spaces, such as the temporary voids created when studios are empty and artists are absent; a void studio as work. It was my intention to 'upcycle' (Langdon 2012, p.2) the structure after the exhibition, by removing the tiles and making use of it as an ad hoc workspace for smaller projects, installations, and storage. However, unfortunately my strategy of layering works and their remains on-site was impeded by miscommunication about my intention to maintain this structure, resulting in its accidental removal by one of the artist's assistants.

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Figure 6: Perkins, P. (2011), *And the Cherry...*, unrealised studio structure, *Meter Room*

Although initially disappointing, the removal of the studio structure led to the use of this vacant area as an exhibition space in later projects, including *The Mobility Project* (2012) and *Turtle Salon* (2012), at which point it was used as the site for a text installation by Louise Lawler (Figure 19), as described in Chapter 3.2. By incorporating dialogical and discursive processes, the strategies behind the *Curatorial Studio* have been equally likely to result in miscommunication and misinterpretation, as they have in definitive exchanges. Contingent and born of collaborative processes, the *Curatorial Studio*, as a series of interconnected strategies, has responded to circumstantial changes and the decision making of multiple agents within the space, whether intentional or otherwise. Adaptation through miscommunication becomes another layer over which future responses are laid. This culture of responsivity was also evidenced during the selection of the promotional image for *Diving into the Wreck*, which featured a photograph of a duster, mallet, and clamps lying on the studio floor during the residency (USB Appendix 16). These objects, which had been assembled together as a means of reducing the spread of dust during the breaking of ceiling tiles, bore a resemblance to a lifejacket, which had seemingly drifted across the studio floor from the wreck of the large *Nest* sculpture.

Caretaking

Whilst there are exceptions to the rule, such as the model put in place at *Eastside Projects* described in Chapter 1.2, the majority of artist-run spaces are initiated without the benefit of substantial construction budgets, and are frequently held together with voluntary labour, gift

economy, sweat equity, and quid pro quo. By virtue of having undertaking all aspects of the renovation labour myself, I have formed an especially haptic relationship with *Meter Room* in terms of its materiality and in the production of spaces for the production of art. *Meter Room* is the product of a self-organised unpaid labour that is means-apparent of its modest resources. The methods used in the renovation process have been distinct from the equivalent processes of public institutions, as in the case of *Meter Room* it has been I as the curator who has constructed both studio and exhibition spaces in which to curate, rather than contracted professionals. The division of labour within *Meter Room* has been flattened and compressed, so that I undertake almost all of the labour, with the exception of occasional volunteering from interns and invigilators. In this sense, there has primarily been a non-division of labour. Within *Meter Room*, the curator's responsibilities stretch from replenishing toilet paper to exhibition programming and writing public funding bids. As a way of foregrounding this labour and accounting for the multifaceted nature of running an artist-run space, I have used the term *Caretaker* to identify my role. This term refers to the caretaking duties of maintaining the project space and studio premises, at the same time as making a link with the custodial tradition of curating and the taking care of exhibits. My practice at *Meter Room* has been concerned with taking care of the building, the organisation, exhibitions, and a growing collection of works.

The labour undertaken at *Meter Room* can be considered to be both 'concrete' (Harvie 2003, p.5) and 'unproductive' (2003, p.5) in terms of the capitalist mode of production. 'Concrete' in the sense that the unpaid labour results in use value within the context of *Meter Room's* activities, and unproductive in the sense that surplus value may result in the accumulation of cultural, but not economic, capital. The ACE grant awarded for the *Floor Plan for an Institution* project allowed for a modest curator's fee to be paid, thereby creating a pocket of paid part-time employment, despite the fact that there was no discernible difference or segregation in the roles and tasks undertaken.

Located in the far corner of the *Curatorial Studio* is a small partitioned office, which formerly accommodated the manager of the *Coventry Volunteer Service Council*. An office within an office, fitted with indoor windows and walls that stretch to only half of the overall ceiling height. Although the removal of this structure would have resulted in an even larger uninterrupted project space with increased levels of natural light, I made the decision to preserve it as an idiosyncratic architectural feature, and reassigned it as the *Meter Room* office within the *Curatorial Studio*. As the only partitioned area of an otherwise open-plan office space, the structure appears to be symbolic of a past spatialised power relationship. The function of the structure, and the emphasis placed upon visibility by virtue of its six windows, is ambiguous. It could be suggestive of how the activities of office workers were watched over by the office manager from within, or alternatively, how the activities of the manager were made visible to those in the larger office space. By re-functioning

the structure in this way, a parallel was drawn with the notion of the curator as a watch-keeper and institutional guardian. I have made use of this resonance as a point of departure for several curatorial responses to the construction and its function within the space as a narrative object, which can be re-imagined within different curatorial schemas. Within the context of the *Curatorial Studio*, the office has become an apparatus, of and for, visibility.

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Figure 7: Pryde-Jarman, D. (2012), Office with reverse projections, *Turtle Salon, Meter Room*

The partitioned office was re-functioned from a tool for management, to an apparatus for the display and encounter of work. The office windows, unusual for the fact that they separate two indoor spaces within the same room, have been used as a surface for displaying work in several projects. For example, during the *Turtle Salon* project (see Chapter 3.2), the windows were lined with tracing paper to become smooth diffused surfaces upon which a selection of films were reverse projected.

Void Space

The premises at 58-64 Corporation Street had remained unused for a decade, spending much of this time towards the bottom of a list of void office spaces owned by Coventry City Council, which is made available to prospective tenants with the possibility of more flexible terms due to their various states of disrepair. The absence of recent commercial activity meant that this space was categorised as a void, but the opposite is true, as the building is dense with markers of its own history. Thus, the building is non-neutral, and it is this lack of neutrality that has likely contributed to

the low level of interest from other potential occupants during this period. In addition to complexities surrounding the power supply, the redundancy of the building has also been connected to its dated decor and poor disability access.

The lack of productivity that leads to properties being categorised as void spaces, indicates a break with the continuity and function of an urban environment. A state of uncertainty is created, which can result in the formation of accidental and in-between spaces, which contest the smooth realisation of city planning. To be void of use is an indication of the possibility of a range of new spatial functions and speculative re-readings of space. Although appearing to be symptomatic of the recent economic downturn and property crises, these demarcated voids are as integral to the city as any other form of space, and are reflective of change as sites move in and out of focus during processes of urban redevelopment.

By virtue of becoming void of economic activity or City Council productivity, the space became available for a different kind of purpose, with the keys passing hands from one industry to another. A new form of institution with an autonomous set of objectives now occupies these Council-owned offices, which have been symbolic of local government. A spatial and industrial transition has taken place; passing from state administration to culture, and from one clearly defined institution to an institution which is yet to be defined. This transition is not a routine or orderly process, despite the fact that the appropriation of void spaces has become a commonly encountered practice in urban regeneration, and more specifically in the creative industries. During the 1990s, many post-industrial spaces previously deemed unsuitable for this purpose were becoming increasingly common as a 'non-corporate-looking way of doing things' (BANK 2001, p.4). As Klonk has remarked, the process of repurposing dysfunctional industrial buildings has grown to become almost standardised, so much so that whenever one is painted white it can be assumed that from this point onwards 'there will be art here' (2011).

Several strategies for exploring the situated nature of the *Curatorial Studio* as a specific space have been applied during the renovation, including near archaeological processes of unearthing latent spatial functions through primarily subtractive processes (e.g. the removal of dividing walls, carpets, suspended ceilings, office furniture, etc.). These activities were not meant to imply that the possibility of *Meter Room* has always been a latent presence on-site, but rather that the act of stripping away layers of material and signifiers has enabled the building to be re-imagined in different ways as a space for encountering contemporary art. A key objective that guided much of the initial decision-making upon how *Meter Room* would take shape was the intention to avoid installing a new White Cube gallery within the building by simply adding the component parts. Instead, it has been my intention to tease out a form for the project space from underneath the

dusty remnants of the decommissioned *Coventry Volunteer Service Council*, elements of which quickly began to fuse with a familial aesthetic; namely, that of an artist-run space. This fusing has been achieved through the re-contextualisation of features left unaltered, and a process of change catalysed by the addition of material to the environment. Whilst not deliberately trying to avoid an aesthetic that could be considered to be synonymous with artist-run spaces (low budget, DIY labour, etc.), it was important to avoid applying a treatment to the space that simply replicated familiar tropes, as a means of attempting to avoid inherited dogma. In this sense, *Meter Room* is a conception of space creation that is acutely self-aware of its position within the field.

The materials and surfaces that give flesh to artist-run spaces (plaster, paint, fittings, etc.) are often indicative of their DIY means of production, thus enabling a materialist reading of these spaces. In much the same way as the seamless surfaces of White Cube spaces help to construct the illusory promise of infinity, coarser surfaces can be equally fetishised as being representative of an edgier 'truth to materials' approach, free from superficial decoration. When painting the faded institutional green walls it was my intention to act with immediacy rather than meticulously prepare the surfaces, often painting over drill holes and protruding wall plugs. Similarly, the decision was made to maintain the plaster scars where the wall-mounted temperature controls for the under-floor heating were once located. In their absence, a past presence is evidenced in a sprawling patina of residual marks. As the sociologist Professor Kevin Hetherington (Open University) once stated, a gallery is not waiting to be filled with objects, rather its conditions of possibility are brought into play through the 'tensions established around subjects, objects, discourses and signs' (2010, p.116).

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Figure 8: Pryde-Jarman, D. (2011), Project space floor surface, *Meter Room*

Upon the removal of the dust-strewn carpets, black floor tiles were revealed and then later restored in some areas with filler and paint. It is rare to encounter a black floor within a White Cube, as they are often considered to have the undesirable effect of making a given space appear smaller. The floor tiles were left as a roughly finished expanse as a way of maintaining an industrial feel, which was evoked upon the removal of the carpets and through exposing the lintels and corrugated steel ceiling underneath the suspended tiles. Like the walls, the floor surface is marked by evidences of past exhibitions, including a large square of tiles with a different colouration (Figure 8). This vestige was revealed when a large sculpture was removed from the *Diving into the Wreck* installation, creating an unintended form reminiscent of a Formalist floor piece. It was also my intention to attain a non-reflective floor surface in order to avoid the reflected dazzle of the numerous overhead fluorescent strip lights inherited from the offices. Maintaining the two parallel lines of strip lights running length-ways through the rectangular project space was the most cost-effective lighting solution, but this decision was also influenced by the image of former council workers' desks that I encountered upon first entering the premises. Formerly, each individual strip-light was used to illuminate the surface of a single desk positioned directly underneath it. Although the office desks were moved into the *Meter Room* studio spaces to be used by studio holders, a memory of their presence remains in the spaces below each light, and in future responses to their absence.

I invited the London-based artist Simon Morse (Appendix 16) to respond to the archaic electricity meters, junction boxes, and sockets that pepper the *Meter Room*. Having previously worked with Morse on several *Grey Area* projects, I recognised an affinity between his practice, which involves creating fictional hyperbolic devices, and the *Meter Room's* myriad of idiosyncratic fixtures and fittings. Rather than removing these features as a means of neutralising the space in the course of creating an environment consistent with a White Cube, I instead invited Morse to make use of them as points of departure for new work and prompts for speculative scenarios. To visitors of the resultant exhibition, entitled *The Evaporating Office* (2012), the project space may actually have appeared empty at first glance. The works required a greater degree of scrutiny of *Meter Room's* surfaces and fittings throughout the project space and communal areas, at which point the works slowly emerged as appropriated objects that had been re-signified. *The Evaporating Office* was the sixth exhibition within the project space and a deliberate attempt at diversifying and slowing down exhibitions, which up to this point, had been densely populated with works and supporting material. Within the wider context of the curatorial programming of the space, *The Evaporating Office* was conceived as a dynamic gear change, which deployed more subtle curatorial gestures to propose a different approach to exhibition making within the space.

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Figure 9: Morse, S. (2012), *Between Hiccup and Hiccough*, stickers on found object, *Meter Room*

The Evaporating Office was a response to how the building's history and previous use as City Council offices is slowly dissipating from the space, in parallel with how its signification as an art venue has expanded and stabilised over time. *The Evaporating Office* built upon the Kafkaesque dysfunction described earlier in relation to *Diving into the Wreck*, and the imagining of an office space located at a liminal site between materiality and de-materiality, between an institution and its void. During the second year of occupancy, Coventry City Council made the decision to replace the existing seventeen electricity meters with a single meter to allow for readings that are more manageable. The work carried out for this was delayed several times, meaning that the *Meter Room* was left without a power supply for a fortnight, which impacted significantly upon productivity within the space. During this period, an electrical engineer from the City Council made a deliberate alteration to one of Morse's pieces from *The Evaporating Office*. The work, which consisted of a series of text stickers on the fascia of a broken thermostat controller for the under-floor heating, was 'fixed' by being glued back into its original place. A momentary imposition of a different set of behaviours and judgements upon an object within an exhibition, which served to affirm the artist's interest in the dichotomous nature of (language) objects as tools which invariably lead to problems, new solutions, and then problems again.

Within the context of Coventry's urban regeneration over the course of the 20th Century, the now pallid appearance of many of the civic buildings built in accordance with Modernist principles is evocative of a dystopic aesthetic. The post-industrial landscape that lies outside of Coventry's infamous ring road is mirrored in the decline of multiple public service buildings within the city centre, including the *Meter Room* premises. Upon entry, the derelict building had not been

emptied, meaning that large quantities of office equipment and documents belonging to the previous tenants had to be reorganised or removed. The transition of the building from one function to another has been deliberately prolonged by maintaining traces, which have been left to prompt future responses to the space. Whereas some archaeological remnants have been maintained, other information pertaining to *Meter Room* has not been made immediately available to audiences, or has been partly concealed. The *Curatorial Studio* is shaped by entangled processes that are intensely conscious of themselves and each other.

Exploratory projects

Several exploratory projects within the *Curatorial Studio* involved the overlaying of different spatial functions, which further added to the layers of gallery and studio by temporarily re-signifying the space as a gymnasium, office, and zoo. The *Curatorial Studio* has functioned as a multipurpose space in which curatorial experimentation has been explored through different spatial filters and display devices, drawing an affinity with a research laboratory. Popularised by Obrist and Bourriaud, the notion of framing a gallery as a form of laboratory has been adopted by several New Institutions, most notably the *Palais de Tokyo*, Paris, which describes itself as a 'utopia on the move' (Carda 2012). In the case of the *Palais de Tokyo*, the laboratory concept is performed through a kunsthalle model of spatiotemporal exhibits within the context of a museum (or anti-museum), and given material form through an expansive and deliberately unfinished space resembling a construction site. The strategy of the *Curatorial Studio* has enabled me to take two institutional structures, that of a former City Council office building, and a model for an artist-run space, and to occupy their forms and functions in different ways, through practice.

The *Curatorial Studio* was re-imagined as a gallery-gymnasium in Lawrence Preece's solo exhibition entitled *Limber Gym* (2011), which combined the dystopian aesthetic of the former Council offices with notions of self-improvement through the exercising of physical and cultural faculties. The gallery and the gymnasium, as social spaces similarly bound by distinctive codes of behaviour and the promise of a positivist ascent towards self-improvement, were playfully overlaid. A fictional narrative was constructed, whereby the void premises had been filled by a members-only gym in the process of inner city gentrification. The press release (Appendix 17) combined the vernacular of a Modernist manifesto with the motivational slogans of gym promotion. A large window text piece viewable from street level was installed, as well as posters promising *Limber Gym's* immanent arrival (Appendix 17) in a deliberately ambiguous manner. A selection of paintings, photographs, and sculptures could be distinguished as either apparatus for aesthetic exercise, or figurative users of *Limber Gym*. In addition to re-contextualising the *Curatorial Studio* as a kind of *Curatorial Fitness Studio*, *Limber Gym* also offered the opportunity to curate multiple works in a way that directly interacted with the architectural features of the space. This included

large figurative sculptures appearing to bear the weight of the ceiling, a figurative sculpture positioned in such a way as to appear as though it had fallen or dived through the reception counter hatch (Figure 10), and a series of departmental signs (Figure 11) hanging throughout the *Limber Gym*.

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Figure 10: Preece, L. (2011), *Limber Gym*, wooden figure, *Meter Room*
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Figure 11: Preece, L. (2011), *Library Deselector*, *Limber Gym*, hanging sign, *Meter Room*

Limber Gym was followed by a group exhibition entitled *Zoo* (2011), which was developed in collaboration with *Transition* gallery, an artist-run space based in London (USB Appendix 3). As the title suggests, this project drew comparisons between the gallery and a zoo, as two heterotopic spaces with widely recognisable architectures of display and displaced subject-object relations. Other collaborative projects within the *Curatorial Studio* have included *Tainted Love* (2012), a collaboration with *Transition* and *Down Stairs* exploring notions of lost and unrequited love through shrine-like display devices, and the *Mobility Project* in partnership with *Clarke Gallery* (2012), an artist-run space that relocated from Berlin to Birmingham (USB Appendix 8). In keeping with the paracuratorial ethos of the *Curatorial Studio*, other resonant terms such as 'para-gallery', 'para-studio', and 'para-exhibition', could all be used to describe how these projects were shaped by, and also supplemented, the three core curatorial strategies described in Chapters 3.1-3.3. Each exhibition was also partnered by several collateral and interpretative events such as artist and curator talks and Crit Groups. *Mobility Project*, for example, featured a series of discussion events upon the politics of mobility, the openness of scholarly communication and cultural spaces, and platforms for self-organised publishing.

Grey Area

As stated in the methodology chapter, exploratory projects were generated at two different artist-run spaces throughout the first two years of my research, which led to the development and testing of three specific curatorial strategies in greater depth. In addition to the *Occupant* residency project described in Chapter 2, I curated three Arts Council funded projects at *Grey Area*: *Voodoo Chanel* (2011) by the German art collective *Chicks on Speed* (Appendix 18); *Impossible Diagrams* (2011) by *Plastique Fantastique* (Appendix 19); and *Preying Mantiss* (2011), a solo show by John Russell (Appendix 20). Each of these collaborators has been highly involved with the activities of artist-run spaces and collective exhibition making, and both John Russell and David Burrows (*Plastique Fantastique*) were formerly members of *BANK*.

Grey Area was transformed into a fictional pop-up shop for the launch of an artist-led fashion label entitled *Voodoo Chanel*. A range of handcrafted objects adorned with the *Voodoo Chanel* logo was haphazardly displayed within the basement space, which was laid out into three distinct areas, resembling a DIY boutique shop complete with indoor fountain, a room filled with appropriated objects, and a bar serving cocktails created by the artists. As announced in the *VOODOOFESTO* press release (Appendix 18), *Voodoo Chanel* was conceptualised as both a 'collective work' (Jessen and Logan 2011) and a 'growing network' (2011) of artists and makers. A form of détournement, *Voodoo Chanel* was a satirical occupation of a fashion house, and a critique of the recent trend of pop-up bijou shops and their role in inner city gentrification. The DIY production

played with a tension between the immediacy and economy of means of these material forms, and their subsequent cooption as an 'off the shelf' aesthetic. The main shop space was scattered with *VOODOOFESTO* documents hanging from the low-slung ceiling on clothes hangers, and one of the walls featured a large wall-mounted logo made from glued human hair, donated by the barbershop next-door. Outside of the building, several hand-painted banners were erected at street level (Figure 13). *Voodoo Chanel* engaged with discourse surrounding Relational Aesthetics, by inviting visitors/participants/consumers into an exaggerated social space whereby acts of exchange and interaction were heightened or displaced. The cocktail bar, which took the form of an altar-like wooden structure, was run with a pricing policy that fluctuated dramatically, so that the price of drinks changed constantly over the course of the private view. On occasions, this switched to a policy whereby visitors were requested to bring their own drinks to the bar rather than take them away. Another experiment with notions of exchange value within *Grey Area* included the decision not to inform invigilators about whether the branded items were or were not for sale, resulting in a series of awkward conversations with visitors, which later fed into the scripting of an absurdist discussion event between Fashion and Death (USB Appendix). A series of local press interviews were also conducted in character by the artists, under the pseudonyms of Coco Cartier and Ezili Lagerfeld.

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Figure 12: *Chicks on Speed*. (2011), *Voodoo Chanel*, installation view, *Grey Area*

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Figure 13: *Chicks on Speed*. (2011), *Voodoo Chanel*, outdoor banner, *Grey Area*

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Figure 14: *Plastique Fantastique*. (2011), *Impossible Diagrams*, *Grey Area*

Impossible Diagrams explored the ways in which art, as a diagrammatic practice, facilitates the production of 'impossible' objects and events. Founded by David Burrows and Dr Simon O'Sullivan (Goldsmiths, University of London), *Plastique Fantastique* produce performances and installations collaboratively as a 'fictive guerrilla group' (2011). The diagram was used as a means of capturing the relations and experiences produced through performance art and the act of ritualised performance. Consisting of a projected film, three monitor works, and twenty-three handmade

posters, *Impossible Diagrams* explored discourse surrounding the function and agency of objects used in performative acts, when displayed after the event within an exhibition context. *Plastique Fantastique*'s interest in what happens to these objects through and after performance, resonated with the ideas explored within *Meter Room's Curatorial Studio*, whereby traces, shadows, remnants, and vestiges of curated works continue to be curated after the exhibitions have ended and the works de-installed. Post-performance, these objects are 'inverted' (2011) and 'All is frozen-still' (2011), yet they continue to have agency as artworks or para-works. *Impossible Diagrams* articulated this transformation thusly: 'The dead Thing is a living Thing; the living Thing is a dead Thing' (2011).

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Figure 15: Russell, J. (2011), *Preying Mantiss*, *Grey Area*

I contacted Russell about the possibility of developing a solo exhibition after reading his article entitled *Dear Living Person* (2011a). Narrated from the subject position of a rotting corpse, the text takes the form of a discursive monologue upon the condition of art in the context of expanded and transgressed boundaries. Russell, through the voice of a deceased orator, maps out the state of Institutional Critique, which is described in terms of its inability to step outside of the same legitimising structures it critiques and exposes, as it continues to rely upon these for its own visibility. Artists and curators are unable to escape the instrumentalising influence of institutions, whereby artistic production is transformed into a tool of cultural legitimation and control. The result of this is a perpetual staging of the institutional as a discourse of limits, despite the fact that it is widely accepted that outside positions are no longer possible within contemporary art's expanded

field. Russell's narrator goes on to argue that this emphasis upon limits within the context of institutions that continually expand their frames, is not so much a crisis of limits as an overworked 'trauma of limits' (2011a). The zombie, as post-human subject, is used to draw a comparison between cultural objects that harbour outdated or lifeless discourse with a decomposing body, which continues to be animate long after its critical impetus has ceased to be. Although now (conceptually) dead, these objects and ideologies not only manage to continue living, but can also continue to dominate institutional discourse.

Preying Mantiss evolved from a piece of historical information passed on to the artist when he first visited *Grey Area*, recounting how the previous tenant used to live in the basement without running water, heating, or WC. I negotiated a month-long rent-free period at the commencement of the lease for agreeing to clear the space of the possessions he had left on-site after his forced eviction, some of which related to his former profession as a male model. This image of poverty and displacement lends the space a sense of otherness, which also resonates with the low ceiling and light levels of its subterranean location. The intention behind *Preying Mantiss* was not to recount or represent this biographical turn of events, but to use instead the mythologised narrative of one man's decline as a point of departure for a series of events to be depicted through a range of media. This included pasted posters, a glossy magazine publication, painted wall texts with gaffa tape, and an animated film with a live mixed soundtrack. *Preying Mantiss* explored ideas relating to the limits of performing site-specific responses and self-reflexive narrative structures, by starting with an imagined endpoint, in this case a post-apocalyptic crucifixion scene, which was then 'retro-coded' (2011) backwards to the beginning.

Some of the works developed for *Preying Mantiss* were later shown at *Embassy* gallery, Edinburgh; an artist-run space mentioned in Chapter 1.2. Another project developed at *Grey Area* during the course of the PhD entitled *Their Wonderlands* (2010-11), curated by the art collective *They Are Here*, was also exhibited again shortly after the *Grey Area* show, in this case on an expanded scale and budget at *Midlands Art Centre (MAC)*, Birmingham. *Their Wonderlands* provided a first-hand example of how an experimental project can be developed at the testing grounds of an artist-run space, before being polished and magnified in material form at a large public institution.

Although the exploratory projects at *Grey Area* were separated from *Meter Room* as a means of being able to develop experimental projects within different contexts, as my research progressed their separateness led to a less desirable sense of disconnectedness, which I responded to by increasingly focussing my practice upon the specific spatial context of the *Curatorial Studio*.

Conclusion

Meter Room is a working model for how an artist-run space can take form and operate, and so any outcomes derived from the *Curatorial Studio* strategy need to be understood in relation to the context of ongoing curatorial processes, as moments of crystallisation rather than terminus. In order to summarise the outcomes of the *Curatorial Studio* strategy, I have referenced these against the numbers of the original aims as set out at the beginning of this chapter:

1. The *Curatorial Studio* came to function as the main context and primary medium for the realisation of new work. It has provided space for the development of a practice that blends the oft-separated processes of making and display, as a means of exploring the effects of overlapping sites of production and distribution upon curatorial practice. The *Artist-in Renovation* is the first project I am aware of to use the renovation of a building, for the purposes of a new exhibition space, as the context for an artist residency. This resulted in the production of new work on-site using those same materials: a series of interventions that were uniquely embedded within the fabric of the building. The works within the *Curatorial Studio*, as outcomes of curatorial processes, have not been framed as termination points for these processes, but rather as phases or possible versions. Even though the studio, as a distinctively signified space, is as equally loaded as that of the gallery, it has nevertheless been a valuable conceptual apparatus with which to frame and facilitate the processual and discursive nature of my curatorial practice. The way in which the *Curatorial Studio* drew attention to the oft-encountered separateness of studio and gallery functions, may have actually had the inadvertent effect of propagating their polarisation. As the form and function of the *Curatorial Studio* became increasingly familiar and habitualised over time, further attempts were made to readdress an engagement with the dialectical relationship between studio and gallery, through the introduction of new elements or the modification of its existing components.

2. The model of *Caretaking* was developed as a response to the need for an expanded conceptualisation of the curatorial, capable of stretching from exhibition making, to the maintenance of premises and organisational structures. This was necessary in order to reflect the diversity of tasks involved in my curatorial practice and the requirements of running an artist-run space. In this expanded sense of the curatorial, the selections of fixtures and fittings for the building have been curated, as have the selected studio members. The considerations at work here range from the activity of inhabiting and intervening within a void council-owned space, to the decisions made as part of an attempt to cultivate a vibrant studio ecology for contemporary practice. In his introduction to *Curating in the 21st century* (Wade 2001), Beech remarked that curating is 'all in the doing' (2001, p.9); it is an activity understood through practice. However my own practice, as developed within the *Curatorial Studio*, has also been engaged with the doing,

before and around, the curation of works within the space for the purposes of exhibition. In much the same way that the artist has agency upon processes within their studio, whether making or ruminating, the *Caretaker* has agency within the *Curatorial Studio*.

3. This chapter, which I have referred to as a *Critical Commentary*, has been an attempt at compiling a subjective account of the processes and decision-making involved in developing the *Curatorial Studio*. The intention behind this chapter has been to present a commentary more akin to journal entries than an objective analysis, on the basis that it felt important to describe and reflect upon outcomes of the strategy in a similar way to how those same outcomes were themselves developed. This chapter does not present a comprehensive account of these processes, but a method for bringing together discursive information pertaining to significant moments in the development of the *Curatorial Studio*. It has also been an attempt at capturing the responsive thoughts and incidentals that may otherwise pass through the net of the PhD framework. The discursivity of this chapter can be considered reflective of how the discursivity of the space has become a key premise to the curation of exhibitions within it. In the context of the *Meter Room*, the studio is a gallery, the gallery is a studio, and the artist-run space is an evolving work-construct in flux.

Chapter 3.2: *Artist-run Collection*

Contents

1. Aims
2. *Artist-run Collection*
3. Layering
4. *Turtle Salon*
5. *The Door That Does Not Fit The Frame*
6. *Smuggling*
7. Conclusion

Aims

Devised as an alternative method for occupying the concept of a gallery collection, the *Artist-run Collection* is a curatorial strategy implemented within the project space and communal areas at *Meter Room*. The *Curatorial Studio* strategy, as described in Chapter 3.1, raised a series of questions in relation to how work could be produced and located within the space, and what would become of these generated works and assemblages over time. Rather than simply deleting this material from the environment, I instead made the decision to integrate many of these objects into the fabric of the building, within the context of a working model for what an artist-run space could be. Every exhibition that has taken place within *Meter Room* has contributed at least one work to this collection, or some other form of residual evidence relating to the curatorial activity within that same exhibition. As the number of exhibitions has progressed sequentially, so too has the accumulation of evidences from each project. The *Artist-run Collection* is the result of this strategy; an ongoing topographic history of the *Curatorial Studio*, and the collaborators and artworks that have responded to it. The key aims of the *Artist-run Collection* strategy have been as follows:

1. The aim of the *Artist-run Collection* is to explore how an artist-run space might occupy the concept and methods of a collection-based institution. There are very few examples of artist-run spaces that acquire a permanent collection of art works, and the collection-based model has traditionally been regarded as separate to the ways in which artist-run spaces operate. The majority of artist-run spaces in the UK adopt a kunsthalle model of temporary group or solo exhibitions, and are often associated with qualities such as transience and change, rather than permanence and posterity. On this basis, I aim to explore how the artist-run space can provide a different context for the generation of a collection of works and vice versa.
2. In order to meet the first aim of exploring how a collection-based model may function within the context of an artist-run space, a strategy for layering works and their traces within the *Artist-run Collection* was devised. The aim behind the process of layering was to explore other methods of

exhibition making that question the following: the hierarchy and interrelation between works and non-works within curated spaces, the process of neutralising spaces pre and post-exhibition, the thematic curation of temporary group exhibitions, and how a collection can take form and function as an integral part of an artist-run space.

Artist-run Collection

The *Artist-run Collection* is a sequential accumulation of situated works and their residual evidences generated in response to the space and curatorial contexts, each of which has remained in situ after their respective exhibitions have run their course. The layering strategy has resulted in a series of dialogical exchanges, prompts, and responses between participating artists and curators within a changing and contingent environment. Here, the space of the exhibition is framed as an agent of production as well as distribution, and visitors to the building witness the collection at different stages of its evolution. A key feature of this strategy was the decision not to distinguish between art works exhibited within the space, their component parts, nor their evidences, such as the marks they may have left behind on the floor or walls. This has had the effect of establishing a form of equitability within the space, whereby each object, regardless of its status as art, or a facet of a larger work-construct, could be maintained as an aspect of the space's ongoing articulation, and integral to the *Meter Room* as a tableau of its fledgling history as an artist-run space. The *Artist-run Collection* has been framed as a method of collecting rather than archiving, as a means of maintaining a tension with the concept of an art collection within an institution. The layering strategy can be seen as a form of self-archiving of successive projects, but a distinction must be made with notions of preservation and posterity associated with archiving, as the *Curatorial Studio* is an environment where all of these works could be responded to or altered within future projects. The strategy was devised as a direct attempt to confront the problem of assumed neutrality within gallery spaces, as embodied by the White Cube model, whereby curatorial activity in the form of exhibitions and events can be wiped from the space after they have run their course, akin to a 'tabula rasa'.

Layering

The term 'layering' best describes the processes involved in the accumulation of the *Artist-run Collection*, whereby each exhibition leaves a new layer of physical and conceptual relations within the space, which entwine with the building and one another to create a constantly evolving environment. By layering works within the space, it has been my intention to accumulate a collection in a manner distinct from the process of selecting completed pieces, or the overall aim of completing a collection. The collection is a form of curated 'gesamtkunstwerk'; an interconnected series of works and objects, which combine to make a larger curatorial gesture. Harold Szeemann once referred to his curatorial output as an 'archive in transformation' (Obrist and Serra 2005,

p.80), and described his curation of the *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk* (1983) exhibition at *Kunsthhaus Zurich* as a 'poetic zone of thought construction' (2005, p.80). Translated as *The Tendency towards the Total Work of Art*, the project explored notions of utopia and completeness by synchronising exhibition with production, in and as the gallery-space. The concept of the gesamtkunstwerk, famously pursued by Richard Wagner, has long been maligned for its flawed utopian idealism, and is a premise considered at odds with contemporary notions of fragmentation and multiple subjective narratives within exhibitions. Obrist has cited his repeat visits to *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk* as an especially formative experience for his practice, in particular Szeemann's use of the exhibition as a toolbox and a Foucauldian 'archaeology of knowledge' (2005, p.80), with which to bridge the gap between past and present. The *Artist-run Collection* draws from ideas pertaining to totality and inter-connected synthesis associated with the concept of the gesamtkunstwerk, but without the ideological premise or promise of completeness. The totality of the collection is its very state of perpetual incompleteness, in which the materiality and intentions of past works continue to feed back into the present, and additions that are yet to come. An accumulative process shaped by both direct and indirect dialogical exchange.

The layering of works was not a pre-planned strategy that preceded practice, but was instead born from experimentation within *Meter Room*. The strategy was implemented tentatively at first, as I was unsure of how best to materialise the concept, and the first works layered within the space were pieces that did not significantly encroach upon one another in terms of their physical placement. This initially tentative approach enabled a period of testing the impact of the strategy upon the space and the ways in which it was encountered by contributors and visitors alike. I decided against implementing the strategy more fully, or rather in a more visibly dominant way. This would have led to a different set of results generated by a more explicit intention to ensure that the strategy resulted in dialogical exchanges between artists and works. Although it was my intention to stimulate dialogue, collaborative processes, and interventional responses, I also wanted to avoid over-determining these by appearing insistent upon them. It was instead my intention to act with a level of in-built flexibility, and to enable myself with enough time and space with which to tease out the question of what the *Artist-run Collection* could be, before an assured response to this question could be given.

A requirement of the layering strategy has been the attaining of permission from each of the participating artists, in order to maintain possession of the selected works as layers. This agreement can be interpreted as a form of donation to the *Meter Room* on the part of the artist; an act of generosity in the spirit of hospitality and ongoing collaborative inquiry. A future stage of development may be reached whereby the visibility of the strategy begins to impart a determining force over that which is possible within the space, leading to more strategic responses. Each of the

layers has previously functioned as an integral component of a previous exhibition, meaning that a spatiotemporal trace of that project has been accrued rather than a more deliberate curation of a collection, or the addition of selected works from outside of the framework of the *Curatorial Studio*. The *Artist-run Collection* has accumulated concurrently with separate exhibitions and events, feeling both integral and distinct at different stages. It has been my intention to avoid illustrating the concept of layering, or over-determining the parameters for what form the collection should take in accordance with existing dominant models. The *Artist-run Collection* also proposes a different approach to developing group exhibitions, outside of the now dominant curatorial mode of selecting a series of works and artists in accordance with their perceived relevance to a highlighted theme. The works and traces in the collection are accumulating in more uncharted ways, through forms of prolonged engagement. Unrestrained by thematic ties, they are a product of the specific relations at work within the *Curatorial Studio*, and encompass formal, poetic, anecdotal, incidental, and non-linear curatorial relations.

The layering strategy was developed through exploratory practice within *Meter Room*, and later informed by projects previously initiated by Wade at *Eastside Projects*, and Gijs Frieling at *W139*, Amsterdam. Both curators have explored an interest in producing cumulative exhibitions, whereby artworks remain in-situ within the gallery space or are recycled or up-cycled to create a multilayered topology; the gallery as exhibition matrix and total artwork. During his four year directorship of *W139* (2006-2010), Frieling was keen to explore methods for circumnavigating the conventional practice of spatially isolating individual works, a mode of display synonymous with Modernism, leading him to devise a series of 'layered' (2010, p.32) and 'semi-permanent site-specific works' (2010, p.32). Part anecdotal biography, part subjectivised history, Frieling's article for *Manifesta* entitled *Desire and Relevance: Curating for the Many at W139* (2010, pp.26–37) reflected upon how his curatorial approach was underpinned by an aversion against the cult of individualism in contemporary art and the figure of the individualised 'artist as the author' (2010, p.32). Frieling invited participating artists from his initial three exhibitions at *W139* to contribute works that would remain in-situ beyond the duration of individual exhibitions, thus resulting in a collection of 'integrated architectural sculptures and murals' (2010, p.32) interweaving throughout the gallery's spaces. Frieling intended to employ this single overarching strategy for the duration of his directorship, so that by the end the accumulation of works within the gallery would have been built up to such a degree that the sheer density of accrued pieces would be conducive to an 'overwhelming' (2010, p.32) encounter for visitors, akin to a concert or cinematic experience.

As a means of gaining a greater degree of insight into his experiences of implementing this strategy, I conducted an interview with Frieling (Appendix 13), in which he described his ambition to create an environment so dense with works that people could 'spend hours and hours in the

space and still not see every piece or combination' (2012). A space that is demanding of attention, multiple visits, and a sophisticated level of understanding in order to be able to decipher combinations of works. Frieling drew similarities between the resultant environment and a 'medieval church' (2010, p.31), but crucially he also emphasised how this space must also be distinct from the solemnity or 'holy atmosphere' (2010, p.31) of White Cubes and museums. *W139*, Frieling thought, should function as a publicly accessible social space, complete with well-worn vintage sofas for relaxing with exhibition literature, which counteracts the 'slightly arrogant atmosphere' (2010, p.31) and exclusivity of 'discourse-based institutes' (2010, p.31).

Having generated a collection of works over the course of two exhibitions and a screening event in which video works were projected between wall-mounted pieces, which were temporarily repurposed as framing devices, Frieling's strategy met with resistance from a group of painters, who had accepted the invitation to exhibit, but who pointedly refused to participate in the strategy. Arguing that this curatorial method was likely to displace visitor attention away from their own individual pieces, the artists anxiously refused to work with or around what was already active within the space. They instead insisted that the environment be returned to an empty White Cube state. On this development Frieling commented, 'we talked and we talked, but I really wasn't able to convince them' (2012). In retrospect, Frieling reflected that as this was only his third exhibition as director, he had acted tentatively and his eagerness to please the exhibiting artists had overruled his conviction to maintain the strategy. Although Frieling had a fixed objective in his mind of creating a densely packed environment, he also allowed for a substantial degree of flexibility in how a multitude of works could be accumulated and relate to one another. In some senses, Frieling was championing a form of anti-curation, by diminishing its high status and the value bestowed upon objects through curation, with the aim of creating a less hierarchical and more equitable space.

In several later projects Frieling returned to his intention to create a 'filled' space' (2012), including his final exhibition, a narrative show inspired by Thomas Mann's *Dr Faustus* (1947). When asked about the effect of this strategy upon the gallery, Frieling responded that he was surprised at how easily he was able to apply it, and how the eradication of 'meters and meters of white paint in-between works' (2012) did not disable the ability of those works to assert themselves individually, or be contemplated in isolation. Frieling described this position as his antagonism, against the dogma of separating objects with white space, making the point that in our daily lives we have become very adept at 'focussing on single things amongst very busy and complex environments' (2012). Art that is located in public spaces, homes, palaces, or churches, is similarly situated within a context other to bleached environments. Why then should this capacity to decipher between individual objects and their environments be discredited in the context of displaying art within a

gallery?

When asked about the loss of flexibility within a space that applies a single dominant curatorial strategy, Frieling pointed out that there are thousands of project spaces across the world that are flexible in terms of being able to be 'returned to a white space after each project' (2012). In this sense, when a singular desire to maintain flexibility results in the ubiquitous assimilation of a single way of responding to this problem, it seemed fitting that *W139* decided to 'try something else' (2012). Frieling referred to the strategy as 'a way of also challenging the artist' (2012), as the inheritance of a pristine White Cube at the beginning of each installation, a state which is often referred to as a challenge, is actually 'no challenge at all' (2012). It is instead a congenital condition and a presumed state of being, whereas other works offer immediate challenges. Frieling's densely packed experiments raised questions about the value of individual works and individualised intentions within sprawling constructs, activating discourses upon collaborative making and issues relating to over-production.

Frieling claimed that the principle reason as to why *W139* has been able to maintain its artist-run identity despite significant pressure from funders to increasingly formalise and institutionalise their activities, is due to the fact that the majority of previous directors have themselves also been practicing artists. However, his claim that *W139* has been able to develop a self-reflexive critical practice through site-specific projects and counter-institutional discourse, whilst at the same time managing to ensure that audiences do not ever feel alienated by a perceived intellectual snobbery, seems both questionable and un-provable.

Eastside Projects' strategy for collecting works is encountered upon first arriving at the space, in the form of Matthew Harrison's *Willkommen. Bienvenue. Welcome. C'mon in.* (2008): a bespoke wooden handle on the main entrance of the gallery. Referred to as a learning process, the spatial configuration of the gallery and its subsequent function is continually reconsidered in response to the objectives of each new project. Artworks and their support structures are recycled and up-cycled as part of this strategy, resulting in layered and reconfigured environments. *Eastside Projects'* history is writ large in this materialist approach, as and when each new addition 'responds to and alters the existing conditions' (Langdon 2012, p.2) of the gallery. *Eastside Project's* inaugural exhibition, entitled *This is the Gallery and the Gallery is Many Things* (2008), drew inspiration from an influential curatorial project staged in the artist Peter Nadin's New York apartment, which housed an evolving exhibition entitled *The work shown in this space is a response to the existing conditions and/or work previously shown within this space* (1978-79). Within this discursive space, in which public and private overlapped, artists directly responded to one another's work over the course of five months, as a means of collaboratively developing a

changing cumulative environment, which unravelled from an empty space to a complex accumulation of works and processes in various stages of convergence and divergence. Nadin's project, which was later re-worked at *303 Gallery* (1992), New York, and *Neugerriemschneider* (2000), Berlin, also carried the subtitle 'We have joined together to execute functional constructions and to alter or refurbish existing structures as a means of surviving in a capitalist economy' (Eichler 2000, p.124). To mark the launch of *Eastside Projects*, a large billboard piece by Liam Gillick was erected outside of the building, which read 'The Doors Of The Administration Building Will Remain Open' (2008). This work served to declare *Eastside Projects'* interest in a self-reflexive investigation into the art institution, acknowledging itself as a contested space of administration and spontaneity.

Eastside Projects looks to challenge the concept of a neutral 'default display environment' (2012, p.12) by developing projects that overlap or extend beyond the traditional spatiotemporal constraints of monthly exhibition programming, as exemplified by *Narrative Show* (2011), which made use of theatrical devices as a framework for an expanded exhibition. Wade has previously employed narrative structures such as scenes, acts, plays, and actors, as a means of attempting to forge long-term dialogues, which create chronological yet fractured narratives. These strategies are framed as an attempt at avoiding certain trappings of institutionalism, with the aim of creating spaces for encountering art that are as complex and demanding as the work being exhibited within them. The issue of separateness between works and their means of display within overall constructs is being foregrounded for its problematic nature, and *Eastside Projects* appear to advocate a reading of the gallery in terms of its integration into any exhibited work:

'Work may remain. Work may be responded to. The gallery is a collection. The gallery is an artwork. The artist-run space is a public good.' (Langdon 2012, p.5)

Unlike *Meter Room*, which contained large quantities of abandoned furniture and detritus dating back to its previous use, *Eastside Projects* took over an empty warehouse space, meaning that 'everything in it has been generated by projects' (Hamilton 2012). Notable within this assemblage is the curator's office, which is currently housed within a re-functioned artwork by Heather and Ivan Morrison entitled *Pleasure Island* (2007). An affinity can be drawn here between *Meter Room* and *Eastside projects*, in terms of how traditionally screened spaces within institutions such as the director's office, are approached as an apparatus for art within both organisations. *Pleasure Island* now functions as a workspace in addition to an artwork, whereas the *Meter Room* office has become a structure for showing art within the context of the overall work-construct of the *Curatorial Studio*. The culture of site-responsivity within the *Curatorial Studio* led to the construction of *Bibliothèque* (Figure 16); a permanent freestanding library of artists' books, which was constructed

from recycled office desks left on-site by the *Coventry Volunteer Service Council*. Responsivity to the repairs and renovation of the building fed into the display mechanisms at work within the space, such as the re-functioning of a large electrical cable reel found on-site as a monitor plinth (Figure 17).

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Figure 16: Pryde-Jarman, D. (2012), *Bibliothèque*, recycled office desk, *Meter Room*
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Figure 17: Pryde-Jarman, D. (2012), cable drum plinth, *Meter Room*

Turtle Salon

The *Turtle Salon* project (Appendix 21) grew from a chance email exchange with the renowned US film maker Michael Shamberg (b. 1952), and developed to become a large two-part exhibition,

featuring work gathered from Shamberg's sprawling network of artists, friends, projects, and places. Hailing from New York, Shamberg has previously worked closely with Lawrence Weiner, Patti Smith, and *New Order*, amongst many others (Appendix 21). Shamberg has referred to the project as an 'anarchic salon' (Krolyi 2007) and a 'love letter' (2007), dense with contributions that weave art and life, and professional relationships with the deeply personal. It is a continuous work, which reanimates and re-remembers past creative collaborations, and instigates new encounters between its contributors. *Turtle Salon* is a changing collection of works, which expands and contracts depending upon where and when it is hosted, and by whom. I developed a version of the salon as an opportunity to experiment with different ways of responding to the challenge of hosting an external collection, both within the context of the *Curatorial Studio*, and as part of a touring show across the two spaces I have been running during the research. How might a network of contributors constitute a collection, and how might this collection take form within two different artist-run spaces? Works by established artists such as Carl Andre, John Baldessari, and Yvonne Rainer, sat alongside gifts sent to Shamberg and *Meter Room* from friends and well-wishers. The network of participants and supporters of both *Meter Room* and *Grey Area* were also invited to contribute a piece to the project.

Lawrence Weiner (b. 1942), a frequent collaborator with Shamberg in New York during the 1970s, created a new permanent window text piece for the exhibition entitled *When the Stars Stand Still the Sky Moves* (Figure 16). This piece can be considered to belong to several collections: one of many layers within the *Artist-run Collection*, and a static member of Shamberg's *Turtle Salon* project. Having such a high profile artist contribute a new work to *Meter Room* helped to raise the profile of the *Turtle Salon* project and public awareness of *Meter Room* generally. The significance of this piece, and its omnipresence in the *Curatorial Studio* as a large horizontal text across one side of it, has the potential to dominate the space conceptually and psychologically. Having a work of significant cultural and economic value may have the effect of causing future participants in the strategy to feel daunted or anxious about exhibiting work alongside it, or responding to it more directly. There is a potential for the work to cast a shadow over neighbouring pieces, either physically or conceptually, or conversely it may also stimulate aspiration.

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Figure 18: Weiner, L. (2012), *When the Stars Stand Still the Sky Moves*, *Meter Room*

The installation of *When the Stars Stand Still the Sky Moves* marked a significant moment in *Meter Room*'s fledgling history, whereby a permanent work by a highly influential conceptual artist was added to the *Curatorial Studio*, and which now sits alongside work-in-progress experimentation. As part of this same philosophy, the piece is also not necessarily a permanent feature in its current state, as it may be altered by a participant in a future project. Indeed, a work was once hung directly from a section of the vinyl text during *The Archive* project (see Chapter 3.3), but was quickly removed again when the artist was informed by their collaborator that the piece was by Weiner. The installation of Weiner's work represented a shift in terms of the profile and status of *Meter Room*, and has an affinity with a pivotal moment in the development of *Transmission* gallery, which in 1990, hosted Weiner's first solo exhibition in Glasgow. This exhibition was described by the artist Simon Starling as a highly influential experience for the young artists involved, who had the opportunity to work closely with an artist whom they admired, in a way that was both 'empowering and demystifying' (Russeth 2012).

Other layered additions to the *Artist-run Collection* not yet mentioned in this thesis include: US artist Louise Lawler's *Once there was a little boy...* (Figure 19); a wall drawing by Berlin-based duo *Plan B* entitled *All the Journeys We have made in the UK since 2007* (USB Appendix 17); a collection of works by Simon Morse created for *The Evaporating Office* (USB Appendix 18); a light fitting from Perkin's *Diving into the Wreck* installation (USB Appendix 19); Anton Goldenstein's *Away from the Flock* (USB Appendix 20); and donated paintings from Zoo (USB Appendix 21) and *Tainted Love* (USB Appendix 22). A full list of works and traces held within the *Artist-run Collection* can also be found in Appendix 22.

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Figure 19: Lawler, L. (2012), *Once there was a little boy...*, *Meter Room*

The Door That Does Not Fit The Frame

The Door That Does Not Fit The Frame (2012), a one-month artist-curator residency at *Movement* gallery alongside artist Jonathan Gilhooly (University of Brighton), involved working with *Movement's* archive of accumulated exhibition material and paraphernalia from past events. I had previously visited the gallery on several occasions prior to the residency when familiarising myself with the artist-run spaces located in the region. Upon entering the gallery, visitors encounter a wall of white fitted storage units to the far end of the space, which could at first glance be mistaken for a blank wall. Densely packed with equipment, supplies, and archive boxes, these units function as highly pressurised chambers that enable the larger gallery space to be decompressed and free of visual and spatial interference. Much like *Grey Area*, *Movement's* lack of physical space has resulted in the blending of public and private material in storage, and like *Meter Room*, *Movement* is also conceived of as a total artwork, engaged with site-specific narratives. The promotional material for *The Door That Does Not Fit The Frame* was consistent with *Movement's* platform location, and the format used by *First Great Western* rail service (Appendix 23).

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Figure 20: Pryde-Jarman, D and Gilhooly, J. (2012), reception desk, *Movement*

The residency provided an opportunity to work with the archive of another artist-run space, materially and symbolically, and to re-consider the role of the archive in the early stages of a gallery's development, and wider questions pertaining to the self-organisation of forms of institutional self-knowledge. The curators of *Worcester Art Gallery & Museum* were approached about a possible collaborative project, which proposed combining the archive of the museum with that of a local artist-run space. The museum, which was built towards the end of the 19th century, but which houses a collection that originated several decades earlier, embodies all of the challenges and idiosyncrasies that result from prolonged acquisition. This condition can be considered to position it at the opposite end of the temporal spectrum to that of *Movement*. A loan request was made for several of the museum's currently unused display cabinets, for the purposes of creating possible alternative archival solutions for *Movement's* accumulated material. Taxonomical cases were loaned for the duration of the project and used to reorganise the archive material, along with taxidermy creatures, which were used as aberrant elements within the collection. Central to the installation was a reception desk constructed from timber and filing stationary found on-site. The plans for the desk were designed by the directors of *Movement* when they first acquired the premises, but these plans were later forgotten and left in storage. Once uncovered, the found design was treated as a readymade concept for the space, which was then materialised and donated to *Movement* in the spirit of reciprocal hospitality. At the time of writing this thesis, the structure continues to function as the gallery's reception desk.

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Figure 21: Pryde-Jarman, D and Gilhooly, J. (2012), *The Door That Does Not Fit The Frame, Movement*

The project was contextualised by the frequently short lifespan of artist-run spaces, and the ways in which archival (non-)activities are shaped by economic, temporal, and spatial constraints. The frequently transient nature of these spaces means that archiving can often be a de-prioritised concern, and experimental events can be lost to history, or else endure only in the recounted memories of those in attendance. Without the distribution and archiving resources of larger public institutions, there is a danger that a form of cultural memory loss will be responsible for continuing to omit the significant activities of these spaces, and that the history of the relatively embryonic subject of curatorial practice will continue to be dominated by the international exhibitions of mainstream institutions. Memory loss may actually be a misleading term in this context, as event attendances can often suffer from limited promotion and distribution, making it a matter of a limited knowledge of these activities, rather than a process of collective forgetting. In the article *Minor Curating?* (Hunt, 2010), the curator Andy Hunt (*Focal Point* gallery, Southend-on-Sea) made reference to the minor curatorial histories of artist-run spaces and smaller institutions, in relation to forms of specialisation and more peripheral geographical locations. If skewed historical accounts are to be avoided the curatorial activities of artist-run spaces must themselves also be curated, in and outside of official records. Such an activity would necessitate a return to the custodial function of the curator, in this instance as one who curates the history of curatorial practice itself.

There have been a number of projects within artist-run spaces whereby artist-curators have taken the lead in their own archiving, acknowledging the historical lineage of their curatorial practices.

The Centre of Attention's Fast and loose (my dead gallery) (2006) was one such example, whereby a selection of other 'radical, interesting, avant-garde spaces' (O'Dwyer and Coinde 2006) based in London during the previous fifty years, were invited to take part in a group exhibition at the *Fieldgate* gallery, London. The project emphasised the inherent temporality of these spaces, and how their subjective histories are often unaccounted for, or else diluted to quote-friendly anecdotes as the years progress. Described as a form of 'Ancestor Worship' (2006), *TCA* sought to uncover some of the largely undocumented endeavours of several now defunct artist-run spaces and collectives, with an interest in assembling a *gesamtkunstwerk* from the collective practices of these spaces, which were presented as having ideological affinities and a shared 'curatorial quality' (2006). The periods of activity of the fourteen participants ranged from the *New Vision Centre* (1956-1965) and the *London Free School* (1966), to the more recent artist-curatorship of *BANK* and *workfortheeyetodo* (1992-1998). Despite the eclectic and disparate outputs of these collectives, *TCA* pointed to their shared 'underground relation to the cultural mainstream' (2005).

Smuggling

Irit Rogoff developed the concept of 'Smuggling' (2006) in collaboration with Dr Simon Harvey, who explored the concept in his PhD research (2004), and the Bulgarian artist Ergin Çavusoglu (Middlesex University), to reflect upon how curation might be understood as a means of covertly smuggling content into the framework of an exhibition. Rogoff proposed that this perception of curation can enable access to two separate yet entwined spaces, one of which is made visible as a thematic subject within an exhibition, and another that is intentionally shrouded in order to permit alternative content to be passed through that same body of work. Rogoff deliberately avoids making any universal claims for the concept, nor does she tie it to the work of any specific practitioners, but instead proposes that a range of very diverse projects may share concealed methodologies for smuggling content underneath the authorial radar of regulative bodies. By resisting the urge to dismiss the concept for its capriciousness, Rogoff suggested that smuggling and its related 'shadow play' (2006, p.3) can be used as a means of drawing together a range of disparate projects that share the goal of subverting the ways in which exhibitions, and indeed individual works, are assumed to act as conduits for meaning. Smuggling then, can be understood as a form of movement between structures of knowledge, within which certain ideas cannot settle, instead thriving in-between a 'legitimizing frame or environment' (2006, p.4).

Rogoff elaborated on the concept by drawing a metaphor between the artist or curator with the figure of the pirate, in control of an uncharted trade network concealed from the public eye and the policing of institutions. Rogoff's symbolic use of the pirate may be alluding to Foucault's *Other Spaces* (1988), in which Foucault argued for the emancipatory potential of the pirate as a symbol of transgression against the policing of the state. A further metaphor was drawn between the

curation of diverse objects and a vibrant multicultural street market or bazaar consisting of artefacts whose journeys 'cannot be told in an overt and straight forward way' (2006, p.5). The use of such metaphors are demonstrative of Rogoff's intention to maintain a level of ambiguity and open-endedness, as any attempt at categorically defining the concept is likely to lead to the same kind of didacticism and belief in 'immanent meanings' (2006, p.5) that Rogoff contests.

It has been my intention to explore what might constitute a collection within the context of an artist-run space, through forms of movement between such binaries as artist-curator, gallery-studio, and collection-dispersion. The boundary blurring caused by these forms of cross-border exchange, share an affinity with Rogoff's interest in trying to break through the outmoded separateness of other conceptual binaries such as 'art *and* politics', or 'theory *and* practice', or 'analysis *and* action' (2006, p.1). Practices that aim to critique these binaries can often become entangled with them, highlighting the need to make cuts from this entanglement where possible. By approaching the *Artist-run Collection* in terms of either layering or smuggling, I have sought to reconsider the relations between 'that which is in plain sight, that which is in partial sight and that which is invisible' (2006, p.5) when different objects and subjects are interfaced through curation. The concept of smuggling has provided a useful lens through which to focus upon less distinct forms of exchange and movement within normative structures of knowledge such as a collection, an archive, an institution, and PhD research.

Smuggling can also be used to identify the use of deliberately disruptive devices within a curatorial schema. The planting of an aberrant element or an act of deliberate concealment; a means of spoiling flows of determination and disrupting full absorption into particular hegemonic readings. The process of layering has involved positioning textures alongside one another, resulting in points of disruption and redirection in the semiotic flow. Professor Beatrice von Bismarck (HGB, Leipzig) referred to the concept of smuggling as a 'realm where culture and society intersect and overlap' (2012, p.6). However, despite the resonance of smuggling in relation to many of the processes involved in the formulation of the *Artist-run Collection*, I have used the concept with caution. Ironically, it is the intention to locate a space of 'unboundedness' (2006, p.6) that has also served to dilute the potency and appropriateness of Rogoff's concept, as the parameters for its use are torn down by the very nature of the concept itself, even before they can be sufficiently established. The resultant effect of this is that any number of conflicting intentions and interpretations can too readily be smuggled into the concept of smuggling itself.

Conclusion

My aim has not been to preserve frozen immutable works on-site, but to instead explore contingent relations over prolonged periods, outside of the context of singular thematic exhibitions. Similarly, I

have intended to explore the possibility of developing forms of archival activity within the space as part of discursive and often fragmented processes, rather than the more conventional taxonomy of chronological exhibitions. In order to summarise the outcomes of the *Artist-Run Collection*, I have numbered these in reference to the original aims of the strategy as identified at the beginning of this chapter:

1. An important aim of the project has been to try to ensure that *Meter Room* does not evolve to become a form of post-museum of works by established artists, but instead continues to thrive as a space where artists are encouraged to respond to the existing environment. As part of this ethos, I have informed artists that direct responses, alterations, and the re-working of existing works in situ are all possible, at the same time as being careful not to appear to be didactically insisting upon these types of engagement. Although I recognise my authorial role as the overall curator of the space, it is not my intention to be authoritatively instructive of predetermined levels of responsivity, or to create a hierarchy within the space whereby this particular way of working is prioritised. It has instead been my aim to facilitate a more open environment, whereby participation within the strategy is not over-determined or pre-emptive. A holistic approach is being advocated within the *Curatorial Studio*, whereby the overall concept is given primacy over discrete readings of the curation of individual works, as part of a practice that is distinct from the forms of separateness that are synonymous with the White Cube model. The method of occupying a collection-based model in the *Artist-run Collection*, placed emphasis upon the temporality of the exhibition of art, resulting in an evolving assemblage of artefacts.

2. Unlike Frieling's experiences at *W139*, I have not directly encountered concerns from participating artists regarding the potentially negative effect of the strategy upon their individual works, in terms of their material or conceptual form, or the intentions behind them. The strategy of layering works, and embedding them within the patina of a building, has the potential to overpower individual pieces or provoke new and unintended narratives. However, the antagonistic potential of this strategy has been tempered by the way it has been foregrounded, as each participant was made aware of it prior to his or her involvement. I am not however claiming that these concerns did not exist, as they may have manifested in other ways that I have not been privy to. The potential for generating a collection of works and vestiges has been explored through practice, without the finite goal of compiling a completed collection. The flexible and responsive method of occupying a collection-based model enabled it to be explored in a way that allowed other approaches to run currently, which could then overlap or diverge. In this sense, the *Artist-run Collection* has become a material and conceptual infrastructure over which other projects can be assembled or disassembled. The *Artist-run Collection* is a long-term project that will likely continue for as long as *Meter Room* exists. However, in keeping with the culture of the *Curatorial Studio*, it is also

important that it could be transposed or discontinued.

Chapter 3.3: *Floor Plan for an Institution*

Contents

1. Aims
2. *Floor Plan for an Institution*
3. Curating the Institution
4. *The Reception*
5. *The Auditorium*
6. *The Cafe & Bookshop*
7. *The Archive*
8. *The Gallery*
9. Instituent Practices
10. Interviews
11. Conclusion

Aims

This, the final section of the results chapter, focuses on *Floor Plan for an Institution*; a collaborative project that took place within the *Curatorial Studio* between October 2012 - February 2013. Five artist-run spaces, each based in the West Midlands region, were invited to contribute to the collective realisation of a speculative artist-run institution. Artist-run spaces are themselves also a form of institution subject to the influence of institutional frameworks (Beech 2006). This strategy highlighted the importance of trying to identify their distinctiveness within shared fields, with the aim of exploring how existing institutional structures can be occupied in different ways. The project re-approached the oft simplified relationship between artist-run spaces, and their more established institutional counterparts, by asking how either can be defined relative to the other, and the nature of the contested spaces that lie in-between this binary.

The artist-run spaces invited to take part in the project were (in order of appearance): *Pitt Studio* (Worcester) & *Division of Labour* (Malvern), *Vinyl Art Space* (Birmingham), *Movement* (Worcester), *Down Stairs* (Hereford), and *Grand Union* (Birmingham). Aside from all being artist-run, these spaces were also selected for their like-minded emphasis upon experimental critically engaged practice. Artists/curators/directors from each of these spaces were invited to design one of the rooms for the project, each one typical of a non-specific public art institution. The following names of rooms were provided as a stimulus: *The Reception*, *The Auditorium*, *The Cafe & Bookshop*, *The Archive*, and finally, *The Gallery*. This format allowed for five successive construction phases, which punctuated the overall exhibition throughout the duration of the project, providing points of focus and change. The aims of *Floor Plan for an Institution* and the research interviews were as follows:

1. To implement a curatorial strategy within the *Curatorial Studio* that explores how an artist-run institution might take form through collaborative processes of instituting values and occupying institutional structures. Taking the subject of the 'artist-run space as institution' as its point of departure, this strategy aims to explore alternative methods for performing and negotiating the processes involved in instituting, in a way that addresses the subject as a contested field, within the context of an existing artist-run space and the specific ethos of the *Curatorial Studio*.
2. To conduct a series of interviews with curators from each of the spaces participating in *Floor Plan for an Institution*, in addition to interviews with the curators of *Springhill Institute* and *Colony*, Birmingham. The material obtained in these interviews will be analysed in this chapter to provide a cross-section and a snapshot of the artist-run spaces within the shared geographic context of the West Midlands region at the time of conducting this research.

Floor Plan for an Institution

Floor Plan for an Institution provided a case study for how a curatorial strategy, which took as its subject the artist-run space as institution, could be implemented within the context of an existing artist-run space. The project approached the concept of the institution, so often synonymous with notions of permanence and the upkeep of safeguarded values, as an opportunity to develop a new model for what an artist-run institution is, and could be. The project was designed to utilise and maintain a sense of instability and contradiction, whereby values associated with institutions, such as continuity and longevity, sat uncomfortably alongside such properties as spatiotemporality and precariousness. *Floor Plan for an Institution* explored different possibilities for how institutional structures and processes of instituting could be negotiated, performed, and contested by the parties involved, rather than simply inherited. Here, the institution was approached as a discursive field as well as a material form, as part of an open-ended process, which reflected upon the frequently paradoxical conditions that make critically engaged institutions possible.

Each of the artist-run spaces were hosted away from their geographical locations, in a form of temporary divergence from the habitual practices that can become instilled within specific locations, thereby exploring how their curatorial practices might take shape within the exhibition space and context of a different artist-run space. None of the participating spaces could be considered to specialise in specific material practices, and so the question of materiality was asked and readdressed throughout the project. Located within the specific geographical context of the West Midlands, *Floor Plan for an Institution* was also framed by localised discourse concerning the role of artist-led culture and larger institutional bodies within the region. Processes of mass de-industrialisation have had a significant impact upon each of the towns and cities, not only as a

cause and effect of socioeconomic decline, but also as a catalyst for urban diversification and regeneration initiatives, including those focussing upon the creative industries. By virtue of this geographical context, the project made a connection with the development of new contemporary art institutions within the region, and the role they play within the cultural ecology. Several of these institutions, such as *The Public*, *New Art Gallery Walsall*, and *Midlands Art Centre*, evidence the characteristics of New Institutions as discussed in Chapter 1.3. For example, *The Public* (est. 2008), West Bromwich, is described in its promotional material as a space of 'fluidity' (2012), and a building that is both a 'work of art' (2012) in itself and a multifunctional space in which to 'do business, hold community activities, host performances and events or just relax' (2012).

Curating the Institution

Floor Plan for an Institution addressed how *Meter Room*, by virtue of having supported certain curatorial practices from its inception, had moved towards instituting these values and approaches over time. The coalescence of these practices within a specific habitus has meant that processes of instituting and cementing particular values have been supported, and perhaps even accelerated, by a building-based materialism. The practices taking place within the *Curatorial Studio* are as susceptible to habit and repetition as any other form of studio space. The project did not seek to represent an institution, or to institute the working practices of *Meter Room*. Neither has it been my intention to frame *Meter Room* as a form of counter-institution, but to locate it instead within discourse surrounding a curatorial practice concerned with self-organisation, self-reflexivity, and the struggle for creative autonomy. *Floor Plan for an Institution* sought to create a practice-led platform, which facilitated dialogue between a selection of independent practitioners, and to stimulate ongoing and non-prescriptive encounters.

As the curator of the project overall, it was necessary for me to adopt a variety of different roles, fluidly and with regularity, at different stages of the project's evolution. These included selecting, hosting, facilitating, co-producing, editing, and archiving, amongst many others. This inventory of curatorial roles and functions is reminiscent of the list of varied descriptors pertaining to the activities of contemporary curators in Chapter 1.1. The strategy of layering within the *Curatorial Studio*, as described in the previous chapter, was further developed within *Floor Plan for an Institution*. Art and artefacts accumulated during the project remained in-situ within the *Curatorial Studio* after each exhibition, giving a sense of movement between each room, both metaphorically and physically. This strategy, and indeed the specific material accumulated within the space, functioned as an instrument for prompting dialogue between consecutive responses as part of an ongoing exchange. Participants were able to alter the material present within the space during their phase of the project, through subtraction or addition, continuation or divergence. This strategy meant that each participant entered into a space composed of material generated from the

preceding rooms, with the exception of the inaugural phase: *The Reception*. However, even at its commencement *Pitt Studio* and *DoL* did not enter into an empty container, as the *Curatorial Studio* was already populated with layered objects from the *Artist-run Collection*.

The promotional material for the project aimed to communicate the occupation of a familiar institutional aesthetic and visual identity, at the same time as referencing a DIY sensibility. The final logo design (Figure 22) depicted the project title as an outline of an interior floor plan, whereby the letters extended to become architectural features of an internal space. The background image for the text features a photograph of one of the blank white walls of the *Curatorial Studio*; alluding to the exhibitionary function that lies behind the diverse collaborative and dialogical processes involved. Different promotional images were created for each phase of the project (Appendices 25-29), and the poster design (Appendix 24) referenced multi-level floor plans frequently encountered in larger public institutions. Rather than provide printed interpretive material for each of the phases, a short introductory statement was projected onto the walls using an OHP (Figure 23). This again lent the project a sense of both fixity, through the enlarged projection of a prepared text, and impermanence, due to the OHP being relocated and adjusted throughout the project.

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Figure 22: *Floor Plan for an Institution* logo, 2012

Fraser advocated the development of critical institutions through an 'institution of critique' (Fraser 2011), established through strategies of self-questioning and self-reflection, which despite the apparent impossibility of an outside to institutions, aim to create new spaces for exchange and modalities of being. It can be considered a simpler task to generate critical content as the premise

or subject of the curatorial strategy for a temporary project, than it is to re-orientate an existing institution in such a way that it becomes able to reinvent itself consistently and self-reflexively. *Floor Plan for an Institution* posed the question of how artist-run spaces might work collaboratively towards speculating upon institutional change, in the knowledge of how institutional structures have become internalised. Multiple authors and agents co-inhabited a space and a conceptual framework, functioning as a community of practitioners in diverse, conjoined, and sometimes contradictory ways. *Floor Plan for an Institution* synchronised the spaces of studio, gallery, and institution, in an attempt to negate the symbolic status of individual artists, curators, and institutional identities. The overall curation of the project required the role of curator to transform at different stages of the project, from author to facilitator, catalyst to custodian. The custodial role included the documentation and archiving of project material, for which a time-lapse camera (Figure 23) was installed within the *Curatorial Studio* from a fixed vantage point, enabling daily documentation of the space as it evolved over the duration of the project (USB Appendix 23).

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Figure 23: Pryde-Jarman, D. (2012), *The Reception*, time-lapse photograph

The Reception

The first phase of the project, which responded to the concept of *The Reception*, was curated by Nathaniel Pitt, the director of *Pitt Studio* and *DoL* (Appendix 25). Founded in 2006, *Pitt Studio* is an artist-run project space located in a former coach house building attached to Pitt's home in Worcester. The domestic context of the space is acknowledged in promotional material, which invites prospective visitors not to feel intimidated about 'crossing the drive to access the gallery'

(2012). Pitt later opened *DoL*, a commercial 'representational' (2012) gallery in Malvern, Worcestershire, as a means of extending his curatorial activities into the contemporary art market. After some discussion, we decided that *The Reception* would be undertaken by both galleries to enable a degree of flexibility, and for the tension between the contrasting agendas of these two initiatives to feed into the project. During the interview (Appendix 8), Pitt described how *Division of Labour* is an attempt at creating a hybrid commercial model, which builds upon the project space ethos of *Pitt Studio* in a way that also enables him to explore the market and attempt to overcome the frustration of not being able to pay participating artists. Pitt described how this model enables him to establish ongoing relationships with represented artists, with the overall goal of being involved in museum acquisitions. For the purposes of trading and financial security, it was also necessary for *Division of Labour* to be located separately to the domestic context of *Pitt Studio*, as there is also a very real 'possibility of failure' (2013).

Pivotal to *The Reception* was a reception area displaying an updated work by Antoni Muntadas (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), a Spanish artist known for his practice of Institutional Critique, including the influential *Quarto do Fundo - backroom* (1987). Pitt approached Muntadas about the possibility of creating a version of this piece, which has previously been restaged in several galleries over a number of years. A CCTV camera was positioned in the rear office of the *Louisa Strina Gallery*, a commercial gallery in São Paulo, initiating debate around the public and private spaces in every institution and the transparency of the activities that take place therein. Muntadas threw a spotlight on to the offices that exist alongside or adjacent to galleries. The delegated functions of these offices spans from rooms for archiving, storage, and bureaucracy, and in the context of Muntadas' work, are symbolic of trading conducted within the art market. The version exhibited within *Meter Room*, entitled *Backroom 1987-2012* (Figure 24), featured a more modern LCD CCTV system with a smart phone application, which allowed a live feed of the *Meter Room* office space to be streamed into *Pitt Studio*. The use of CCTV technology as a medium has come to be known as a staple of digital media art, but within the context of Muntadas' original work, this technology was still reserved for wealthier institutions requiring more sophisticated security systems. As with the original piece, this installation served to reveal the traditionally concealed activities of a gallery office, but crucially on this occasion, the subject being scrutinised under the lens was switched from a commercial operation to that of an artist-run space. The lack of commercial activity at *Meter Room* meant that the subject of scrutiny became the symbolic quality of this very absence. In place of a corporate office environment was a disorganised ad hoc office/storeroom. However, regardless of a potentially decreased effect due to this substitution, the director's office still has an authoritative power in this context, and Muntadas' original work was further mythologised.

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Figure 24: Pitt, N. (2012), *The Reception, Meter Room*

The *Backroom 1987-2012* installation was given an additional performative element, as it was occasionally staffed during opening hours by a receptionist whose task was to be as unresponsive to visitors as possible. During the course of *The Reception*, the desk area, which was constructed from modified flat-pack units and found office equipment previously belonging to Coventry City Council, became the focus of occasional performances and a meeting space for studio members. Located at the opposite end of the *Curatorial Studio* was *Untitled 2012* (Figure 25), which comprised of three erected wall clocks illuminated by a large theatrical spotlight. Referencing the work of Michael Asher, this piece touched upon the chronology of conceptualism and the cyclical relevance of Institutional Critique in a contemporary post-studio context. In addition to Muntandas and Asher, other artists from the canon of Institutional Critique were referenced within the exhibition statement (Appendix 25), including Judith Barry, Allen Kaprow and Hans Haacke. Institutional Critique has done much to highlight the power structures that prop up the art world, however, rather than attempting to eradicate institutional structures, this critique is better understood as a form of critical advocacy for more democratic institutions.

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Figure 25: Pitt, N. (2012), *Untitled 2012, The Reception*, clocks and spotlight

The Auditorium

Vinyl Art Space used the invitation to respond to *The Auditorium* (Appendix 26) as an opportunity to organise a month-long group residency of eleven artists within the *Curatorial Studio*. Previously, *Vinyl Art Space* had been located within the domestic setting of the curator Andre de Jong's home, and so *The Auditorium* presented an opportunity to reimagine the conceptual and material form of the organisation off-site and outside of this context. *The Auditorium* was conceptualised as a curatorial auditorium, in which possible directions for *Vinyl Art Space* could be discussed and constructed dialogically within the group. The narrative of *Vinyl Art Space*'s growth from a small-scale singularly authored DIY initiative, to a nomadic and more organic collaborative platform, was further layered with the practices and intentions of each of the individual artists. Participants were invited to bring recent works to a series of residency workshops and to pass these on to other participants to be re-worked, prompting them to reflect upon 'their performative value within the group' (de Jong 2012). This process was repeated in order to 'de-code the practices of a heterogeneous group of artists' (de Jong 2012), and also rescaled in pair and group work, resulting in a series of displacements; of authorship, intention, and material, akin to a Surrealist game of 'exquisite corpse'. As with any collaborative practice, a politics of participation emerged specific to the project framework, whereby participants who distanced themselves from the concerns of singular modes of authorship were rewarded and encouraged within the group. A series of public discussion events took place during *The Auditorium* (Figure 26), further emphasising the discursive nature of the project and the processes involved in the formation of 'a group where there was none

before' (de Jong 2012). The *Curatorial Studio* functioned as a site, context, and active agent to respond to, and several works within the *Artist-run Collection* were temporarily adjusted or appropriated within provisional assemblages by resident artists (Figure 27).

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Figure 26: de Jong, A. (2012), *The Auditorium*, Vinyl Art Space group residency
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Figure 27: de Jong, A. (2012), *The Auditorium*, Vinyl Art Space, modified signage

The Cafe & Bookshop

In response to *The Cafe & Bookshop*, *Movement* gallery, in collaboration with the artist duo Yoke & Zoom (Appendix 27), installed a free non-fiction bookshop, a selection of small oil paintings, and a participatory seating sculpture. *Movement's* response to *The Cafe & Bookshop* focussed upon how the cafes of art institutions function as spaces for relaxing, socialising, and post-exhibition

discussion. *Movement* aimed to draw attention to how this function, and specifically 1:1 social interaction within the subsidiary spaces of institutions, is being increasingly diminished by the distractions of social media through pervasive mobile technology. Citing Sherry Turkle's arguments upon the subject of alienation through hyper-connectivity (2012), *Movement* drew attention to how these spaces have become hubs for freelance creative workers, whereby the connotations of sitting, working, and socialising alone have changed. *Yoke & Zoom*, who describe themselves as an 'artist-led family' (Coulson and Johnson 2013), built upon their interest in the dynamics of communication within public spaces through *The Art of Conversation* (2012), which took the form of a relational sculpture accommodating two people at a time, who are encouraged to initiate a conversation whilst seated upon adjacent stools (Figure 28). A selection of *Micro-oil Paintings* (2013) were hung aside the sculpture, which each depicted figures interacting with mobile technology during public transport journeys. *The Art of Conversation* reflected upon questions relating to the politics of Relational Aesthetics and the shift in spectatorship within participatory and socially constituted works. The deliberate awkwardness of the particular kind of social interaction being encouraged, whereby the intimacy of 1:1 conversation is put on public display, meant that its stated purpose was infrequently realised. The fact that participation with this piece was only occasional was not perceived as being problematic, as the work instead adopted a more symbolic function in relation to issues posed by private/public interaction within gallery spaces.

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Figure 28: Coulson, N & Johnson, A. (2013), *The Art of Conversation, The Cafe & Bookshop*

Over a tonne of second-hand non-fiction books, which were due to be pulped, were acquired for

the creation of a free bookshop within the *Curatorial Studio* (Figure 29). Visitors to *Meter Room* were invited to help themselves to these books, which were stacked on top of a palette and positioned in the centre of the space. The offer of free books had the effect of attracting a more diverse non-specialised art audience to the space. A train refreshment trolley (Figure 28) was re-functioned as a mobile shop for artist editions, and later re-functioned again as a bar for *Floor Plan for an Institution* events. The trolley travelled to *Meter Room* from *Movement* via the train network, in keeping with *Movement's* curatorial interest in the 'total artwork' (Sheerin 2013) of their location on a railway platform and exploration of concepts linked to mobility and public space.

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Figure 29: Coulson, N & Johnson, A. (2013), *The Cafe & Bookshop*

The Archive

The Archive, curated by Craig Barnes of *Down Stairs*, explored a variety of methods for organising and generating a new body of archive material. This was Barnes' first curated project outside of *Down Stairs*, a 6000 sq ft artist-run space located at *Great Brampton House*, Madley, Herefordshire (Appendix 28). Rather than planning to archive material generated by the different stages of *Floor Plan for an Institution*, *The Archive* instead sought to document the incidentals that are usually left unrecorded, such as the conversations that took place between people in person within the *Meter Room*. The project asked how, in light of recent advances in pervasive mobile technology, whereby we now produce more data and documentation than we are able to consume, can it be possible to create and upkeep a gallery archive? How should the hierarchies of value and the power relations associated with archival processes be best negotiated in the context of self-organised collaborative curatorial practices? On the basis that the material to be archived grows at

an exponential rate, why then initiate an archive in the knowledge that it is likely to quickly become un-navigable without constant administration?

The project provided space for Barnes to reflect upon the form and function of *Down Stairs* away from its permanent location and the habitual behaviours derived from its specific context. In an interview with Barnes (Appendix 12), he expressed how there is a clear division within the exhibition programme at *Down Stairs*, between the exhibition programme devised by the artists running the space, and the programme as guided by the proprietor and patron Martin Miller. *Down Stairs'* location on the basement level of a large country house that is otherwise lavishly furnished with antiques, means that the material boundaries of these two spaces is symbolic of the two different forces shaping their exhibition programme. Public and private spaces are blurred by internal movement between the public space of the *Down Stairs* gallery and the privacy of Miller's home, and externally between the common grounds and private cottages where the artists live.

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Figure 30: Barnes, C. (2013), *Breakout Zone*, *The Archive*

Barnes constructed a series of large carpeted sculptures, entitled *Breakout Zone* (Figure 30), which also functioned as ad hoc furniture and the location for a series of small meetings, discussions, and workshops within the *Curatorial Studio*. Barnes used the existing work in the space as material to be reorganised, resulting in a more intent process of reformatting of the previous rooms of the institution. The more direct curatorial methods at work within *The Archive*, including sprawling wall texts and the redistribution of *Movement's* bookshop (Figure 31), resulted in a series of antagonistic gestures towards the preceding three rooms of *Floor Plan for an Institution*, and what might follow in *The Gallery*. Handwritten minutes containing details from

meetings taking place during *The Archive* were circulated within *Meter Room*. The material for these digests reflected upon such eclectic subjects as the coupling of discipline and invention, the role of storytelling in contemporary society, the redundancy of traditional craft skills in post-artisanal art practices, strategies for increasing the effectiveness of memory, and the politics of task delegation within collaborative art practices. A rhetorical question was used as a framework for generating this discursive material, which simply asked the following: Should everybody, regardless of profession, take part in a Monday meeting?

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Figure 31: Barnes, C. (2013), *The Archive*, re-organised artworks

The Gallery

Grand Union, which is an artist-run project space and studio group based in the Eastside area of Birmingham (see Chapter 1.2), responded to *The Gallery* by curating a 12-hour internet radio programme, which was broadcast from the *Curatorial Studio* and played live in the space via a PA system. The broadcast featured a series of sound pieces, readings, and music, curated around the concept of *The Gallery*, followed by a sound performance by Scott Mason (Appendix 29), which consisted of room-tone recordings collected from exhibitions at a range of different galleries around the UK, including artist-run spaces and public collections. *The Gallery* was a collaboration between *Grand Union*, the curatorial platform *or-bits.com* (Ghidini 2012), and *basic.fm* (Wilson 2013). As this was the fifth and final phase of the project, the *Curatorial Studio* had grown dense with accumulated works, prompting the curator Cheryl Jones (Appendix 7) to respond with a dematerialised intervention, which could then exist alongside the other contributions without

competing with them for space and visibility. As intended, the project reflected upon the question of what a gallery is, abstractly and within the specific context of this project. *The Gallery*, as a dematerialised curated programme, put forth the proposition that the gallery is a pervasive space, both material and immaterial. Within the context of this project and contemporary practice more generally, the gallery is an idea; a rarefied and valorising context for art, which has been internalised by producers and audiences alike.

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Figure 32: Jones, C. (2013), *The Gallery*, internet radio broadcast

Instituent Practices

The concept of 'instituent practices' (2009, p.3), as developed by Professor Gerald Raunig (Zürich University of the Arts), refers to artistic and curatorial strategies that 'take their bearings from traditions of institutional critique' (2009, p.xv), and which explore the relationship between new ways of articulating critique, and the processes involved in the formation and upholding of institutions. Raunig draws from Negri's distinction between forms of 'constituted' (2001, p.43) power that are stabilised and upheld within institutional structures, and 'constituent' (2001, p.43) power, which by contrast refers to the potentiality of transformative processes and radical cuts from that which is already constituted. Negri, himself drawing from Spinoza, used the term 'potestas' (1999 pg.xi) to identify power in its fixed, institutional, or constituted form, in contrast to 'potentia' (1999 pg.xi), which refers to power in its fluid, dynamic, or constitutive form. As power is a relation, its different iterations are non-dialectical and immanent. In Raunig's terms then, 'instituted practices' serve to perform and maintain that which is already institutional, whereas 'instituent

practices' are forms of cultural practices that are in flux, adaptive, and carry in them the collective power of their producers. Instituent practices respond reflexively to institutions and the institutional through practice, crucially seeking to resist processes of institutionalisation through the generation of new methods for instituting values and producing subjectivity through the occupation of institutional structures in new ways. Negri's distinction between constituted and constituent power sits within the wider context of his concept of the 'multitude' (2011); an emergent revolutionary class of producers, whose emancipatory potential derives from the constituent power of self-organised collective production. For Raunig, the constituent power drawn from collaborative creation is crucially distinct from the all-encompassing '(self-) obligation to be creative' (2013 p.171) of post-Fordism, and the 'false choice' (2013 p.172) between neoliberal co-option and reactionary responses to the imperative to participate.

Raunig has argued for the importance of developing more nuanced institutional theories, which resist reverting to forms of counter-culture and contrary oppositionality towards that which has been instituted. Instituent practices are an attempt at readdressing and renewing aspects of Institutional Critique, through critique of the conditions of production in the cultural field, within the context of empirical experiences of concrete institutions and the effects of this same critique. Raunig's concept resonates with the *Floor Plan for an Institution* project, and the strategy of utilising the process of instituting as a means of speaking back to power and producing subjectivity collectively. Like Mouffe, Raunig argued for the involvement of institutions in the 'constitution of an effective social, political alternative' (2011, p.47), and the development of instituent practices that seek to find an accomplice in institutions, rather than advocate a movement away from them. Instituent practices should not be regarded as the opposite of, or oppositional to, institutions, but they do reject and seek to avoid processes of institutionalisation. Raunig argued that it is crucial that art institutions are not solely regarded as appendages to the State, the art market, or as heterotopia able to function autonomously, as other to the state and the market. By virtue of their frequent claims of autonomy, self-evident adoption of critical positions, and attention to political subjects, contemporary art institutions continue to present exceptional cases in comparison with other types of state funded institution. *Floor Plan for an Institution* was a method of self-instituting and a form of self-critique, which attempted to avoid 'narcissistically circling' (2013 p.172) around itself by focussing upon unfixed processes of instituting within the context of several artist-run spaces, whose multiple authorial voices pulled the project in different directions at different stages.

Two temporalities were explored within *Floor Plan for an Institution*; the event of instituting ideas and values through practice, and the contrasting task of working to sustain a culture of self-reflexive criticality over time, through repetition, adaptation, and persistence. *The Auditorium*, for example, can be seen as an incision and a break from *The Reception*, but both were also

moments in a continuous stream of instituent practice, and as such, pursued the possibility of always newly starting again in 'ever-new instances of instituting' (2013 p.178). Raunig proposed that the constituent power of instituent practices could resist becoming constituted within an institution and the effects of institutionalisation, through the long-term persistence of self-organised collectives, by not producing separate constitutions for its own purposes, and by making 'as few essentialist references as possible' (2013 p.178) to an origination myth.

Interviews

As described at the beginning of this chapter and in the methodology, a series of interviews were conducted with curators from each of the spaces participating in *Floor Plan for an Institution*, in addition to interviews with the curators of *Springhill Institute* and *Colony* (Appendices 6-12). The following analysis summarises this material in a series of paragraphs, which each refer to responses to a specific question. All of the interviewees were asked the same standardised questions, with some embellishment relating to the activities of individual spaces and their responses within the context of a dialogue.

The interviews identified a range of catalysts and motives for why these artists decided to set up and run their own spaces. The majority of the motivations identified in the interviews can be considered to be linked to a lack of existing provision, which acted as the impetus for these artists to take it upon themselves to set up their own support structures, rather than perceiving of this absence as 'somebody else's problem' (de Jong 2013). This absence related to a general shortage of contemporary art in their respective locations, a lack of 'stepping stones' (de Jong 2013) for graduates and early career artists, and the level of visibility afforded to contemporary art within the region. The low level of contemporary art activity was described as more keenly felt outside of Birmingham. This disparity identified across the region was aptly demonstrated by Pitt's claim that at the point of being founded in 2006, *Pitt Studio* was the only contemporary artist-run space in the entire county of Worcestershire. In addition to providing possible progression routes for recent graduates, other educational functions were highlighted, such as a connection with professional practice modules delivered on arts degrees, and an interest in increasing familiarity with contemporary art in areas outside of more established centres. All of the interviewees identified how their spaces were self-initiated and self-organised, and after this stage, the Arts Council has played a supportive role in their growth. In the case of *Grand Union*, the Arts Council and *Midwest* played a key role in initiating communication between groups of artists seeking studios and proprietors of vacant commercial properties. Casey expressed a more independent approach, whereby there was a strong impetus between two artists to establish a space regardless of 'who was going to support it or not' (2013), in order to create a platform for the kind of work that 'we were interested in seeing' (2013). Another key motivating factor for the establishment of these

spaces was the desire to have a 'meeting place' (Kihlberg and Henry 2013), and have access to contemporary art locally so as to not have to travel to different cities to 'have a conversation about art' (Pitt 2013). This highlighted the importance of being able to access art in the places where artists have committed to being, for a range of personal and professional reasons.

A spectrum of different organisational models were described within the interviews, from small-scale temporary exhibition spaces within domestic environments (*Vinyl Art Space*, *Springhill Institute*), to large architect-designed studio spaces (*Grand Union*) constructed with the support of Arts Council funding. These different models can be separated into two simple categories: those that have a more flexible ad hoc programme of events (*Pitt Studio*, *Vinyl Art Space*, *Springhill Institute*) and those that primarily deliver a more fixed Arts Council project funded programme (*Grand Union*, *Movement*). Due to the nature of how these spaces are organised, the interviews also identified how these spaces frequently fuse public and private spaces (*Pitt*, *Vinyl Art Space*, *Springhill Institute*), as well as both professional and personal relationships (*Movement*, *Springhill Institute*, *Grand Union*). The interaction of these different relations and motivations can result in pressurised spaces, which can be 'part of the reason for bringing other people in' (Coulson and Johnson 2013). With the exception of *Grand Union*, which was established by artists with prior experience of running project spaces and studios, the founding of these spaces was the first occasion in which these artists have run a space. This detail could be considered supportive of the characterisation of artist-run spaces as being an activity for emerging practitioners, although only *Vinyl Art Space* is run by an artist who is a recent BA graduate. The models employed by the seven spaces that were or are based in the West Midlands, ranged from dual purpose live/work spaces, to more radical changes of building use. Indeed, the founders of *Movement* identified the dramatic nature of their proposed re-functioning of a building on a train platform, from public toilets to a public gallery, as the primary reason as to why it was selected in a competitive tendering process for a lease, along with the additional promise of sizeable visitor figures with which to evidence public benefit.

Each of the Birmingham-based spaces, past and present (*Grand Union*, *Vinyl*, *Springhill*, *Colony*), highlighted the importance of a community of practitioners in the development of their organisations and the pivotal role played by peer-support within a 'close-knit' (Jones 2013) art scene. Outside of Birmingham, the largest centre for art within the region, the role played by a community of practitioners was identified as having less of an influence upon the formation and development of these spaces. Jones identified how *Grand Union* grew out of the connections formed through *Midwest*, which had the effect of highlighting the fact that there were a substantial number of people interested in working together to set up new studios, who were either currently without spaces or who were working with inadequate facilities. By contrast, the two Worcester-

based spaces (*Movement*, *Pitt Studio*) expressed a lack of activity and a countywide culture of conservatism, which they responded to proactively, supporting one another in the process. Despite an awareness of the significant role played by art to have grown out of smaller cities (e.g. *Art & Language* in Coventry), the lack of a prevailing culture and the low visibility of contemporary art has meant that these spaces often encounter difficulty with attracting visitors and working together to sustain a vibrant art scene. This challenge manifests not only in low visitor numbers, but also in an inability to use their space as a gateway to other cultural events within the region. Coulson and Johnson expressed how they sometimes feel as though they are representing the city, and have previously felt dismissed on the basis that they are located outside of London. More positively, they also identified the benefits of a smaller community, which creates conditions in which they feel as though their regular audience feels connected to them 'in the same way that people have a feeling of ownership for a museum or public gallery' (2013). Barnes described how when he moved to Herefordshire from London to run *Down Stairs*, he brought with him an established network and community of practitioners, as a means of combating the process of becoming 'incredibly regionalised' (2013). This trans-local approach led to the space once being referred to as a 'small piece of hackney in Herefordshire' (2013).

Each of the interviewees acknowledged that their spaces had changed in the way they operate over time, with the majority of these changes being directly linked to successful public funding bids and the influence this had upon event programming and the crystallisation of a specific identity. The degree of change directly linked to these developments ranged from switches in curatorial focus, such as the proportion of solo and group exhibitions, to more strategic decisions upon where the focus of the organisation should lie. *Grand Union* arrived at the realisation that the studios and project space should operate as separate entities, and that the initial enthusiasm for 'the kind of crossing over that would happen between the project space and the artists' (2013) within shared social spaces, became less crucial to how the studios worked, and the original motivations for founding them. Over time, members filtered into two loose categories; those who wanted to be actively involved in the programming of the project space, and those who were more interested in focussing upon their own practice within high-end studio spaces. In addition to the intentions of individual artists during the organisation's formative stages, Jones also identified how the separation of the project space and studios may have been influenced by the physical layout of the building, which happened to separate them into two distinct areas. *Vinyl* underwent a substantial contextual change, by deciding to leave their domestic setting in favour of a peripatetic model loosely based in and around Digbeth, as a means of benefitting from the established art audiences in the area. Other influential factors identified include the importance of ongoing relationships with other organisations such as academic institutions, as well as the impact that affiliation with their space can have upon participants. For example, Coulson and Johnson described how they felt that

this association has actually had a detrimental impact upon their own careers as artists, in the sense that they are now primarily known as the directors or curators of *Movement* rather than practicing artists. Their affiliation to the gallery has meant that they feel as though their status has quickly switched from the position of artists seeking opportunities, to curators dispensing advice to other artists.

The local conditions identified as being particularly influential by the interviewees included the limitations imposed upon them in regards to either the presence or absence of local audiences and support networks, or in relation to the arrangements that they have with landlords and funders. All of the interviewees expressed how their respective City or County Councils have been unsupportive of their particular needs, and how they have been faced with procedures that they consider non-conducive to supporting artist-led culture. The lack of arts development officers proportionate to the size of the region was raised as another limitation. Jones identified how *Grand Union* can be considered a product of Birmingham, in relation to how they came to the decision to create higher-end studios in order to generate increased revenue. The decision to arrange a lease with a private landlord was also informed by previous negative experiences of being tenants of the City Council. Jones criticised the lack of 'joined-up thinking' (2013) at the Council, providing the example of how the Council gives with one hand (regeneration funding), but takes with the other (business rates). The research visits organised by *Midwest* to observe artist-led culture in other UK cities, was cited by two spaces as being an influential experience and a sense at the time that there was an 'urge for artists to run spaces' (Coulson and Johnson 2013). Three interviewees (*Vinyl Art Space*, *Springhill Institute*, *Pitt Studio*) described a paradoxical situation in relation to the issue of access, as they are required to open and promote their spaces, at the same time as trying to maintain a relatively low profile that enables them to avoid problems relating to their legal status and hosting the general public.

All of the interviewees had previously been involved in public funding bids at different stages of the development of their organisation, and all had previously been successful in securing Arts Council funding at some stage. Rather than perceiving of this public funding as being accompanied by additional detrimental pressures, they voiced a prior awareness and acceptance of a level of organisational change as part of this process. This level of awareness factored in an expectation of requisite organisational changes, to the degree that the projects were developed to fit within the parameters of these requirements, rather than being unsympathetically imposed upon them. The significant role played by 'support in kind' was highlighted, particularly in relation to how the acknowledgement of non-financial support and equivalences can strengthen funding bids. Unlike the Arts Council application process, which was generally acknowledged as being fit for purpose, it was felt that a greater degree of pressure for organisational change came from the procedures

involved in applying for small arts grants through local Councils. These were characterised as involving a significant level of 'over-bureaucratisation' (Jones 2013) and the requirement to implement non-specific and often extraneous policies (e.g. whistleblowing). In addition to increased levels of bureaucracy, the implementation of boards and steering groups was identified as being representative of processes of professionalisation and institutionalisation. The members of *Grand Union*, the largest scale organisation interviewed for this research, drew from previous experience of running artist-run spaces, which led them to the decision that a board was vital to their activities. They identified its key benefit as being the ability to draw from the additional experience of supporters outside of the group, especially in terms of specialised knowledge of financial and legal matters. The organisations with experience of implementing boards recounted how these were not implemented effectively at first, and that they underwent a 'long period of not really knowing what to do' (Jones 2013), nor knowing how to best make use of it. Jones also described various attempts at trying to make administrative procedures feel less daunting or mundane, by introducing creative elements, such as hosting art social events directly after board meetings. Jones described how the studio artists at *Grand Union* were collectively approaching a stage in their individual careers whereby they wanted to be able to host studio visits with curators, and that things like broken toilets are not conducive to 'presenting a more professional perspective' (2013). Those interviewees who had decided against implementing a board cited such reasons as the preservation of creative autonomy, ensuring that the vision for the space is not overly diluted, and maintain the ability to be able to slow down or accelerate their activities at will. Coulson and Johnson described how they decided against implementing a board in order to remain as free as possible from additional 'pressure from outside parties' (2013) and to avoid cumbersome 'top heavy' (2013) structures. Conversely, they also stated how it would have been beneficial to have been able to refer to other members during the intensive process of renovating the premises. Pitt described how he developed educational workshops with local schools prior to this being a requirement of acquiring public funding, commenting that he thinks he did so simply because 'that's what other institutions did' (2013). Pitt also highlighted the educational function that artist-run spaces have within a city with a limited provision and awareness of contemporary art.

The division of labour described in the interviews was consistent with my model of *Caretaking*, as in each of these spaces it is the curator who undertakes the vast majority of duties in the upkeep of the organisation as part of their expanded custodial role. With the exception of *Grand Union*, which recently secured funding for a regularly paid member of staff, most of the labour within these spaces is self-organised and voluntary, with occasional support by additional gallery interns and student volunteers. For example, Jones identified her expansive curatorial role as including that of a 'manager, director, cleaner, administrator' (2013). Similarly, Barnes described how his curatorial role includes such tasks as 'sweeping, toilet roll changing, drilling holes' (2013), all of which are

'exhaustingly equally important' (2013) to the running of the space on a day to day basis. The labour conditions of these spaces, as described by the interviewees, can also be considered consistent with the post-Fordist flexible labour described in Chapter 1.3, consisting as they do of a combination of precarious freelance project work, and regularly unpaid or underpaid labour.

Each of the interviewees expressed their intention to practice open approaches to curating, undefined by any specific strategies, as a means of allowing their spaces to develop projects with a diversity of methods and subjects. In this sense, these spaces have purposefully applied curatorial strategies that have no particular theme or strategic direction, other than the wider aim to cultivate a sense of organic openness. In keeping with this slippery articulation of an anti-strategy strategy, Coulson and Johnson described how they try to avoid recurring curatorial concepts and programming that draws them too close to existing institutional models. Much like *Meter Room*, Jones described how the exhibition space at *Grand Union* has been framed as a project space rather than a gallery as a means of foregrounding experimental approaches, but how this objective can be neglected at times in the programming process. *Grand Union* has also implemented a curatorial associateship scheme, meaning that their focus changes depending upon the practices and preferences of those temporary associates, in keeping with a methodology that aims to move beyond a 'single person vision about what the curatorial method or mode is' (2013). Other curatorial strategies described in the interviews include *Vinyl's* aim of supporting early career artists and graduates, and the intention to develop longer-term relationships with artists outside of the industry standard of month long temporary solo or group exhibitions (*Division of Labour*). Barnes, who described the curatorial strategy of *Down Stairs* as an 'aspect of nothing in particular' (2013), also referred to an internal division within the organisation, between the exhibition programme devised by the artists running the space, and the programme as guided by the proprietor and patron. Kihlberg and Henry described a similar absence of curatorial strategies, which they didn't consider to be intentionally non-descript, but rather shaped by the need to be open enough to accommodate the diversity of projects they supported, through which 'our practice was explored' (2013). Outside of the practices of individual curators, the interviewees also identified the influence that site-specific narratives connected to their particular locations has upon their curated programme. For instance, *Movement's* location on a train station platform brings with it a strong permanent spatial narrative, which is both embraced and resisted by the curators in equal measure, as part of an ongoing dialogue.

The term 'artist-curator' prompted a range of responses, the most positive of which displayed a willingness to embrace the evolution of subject vernacular in acknowledgement of the diverse and overlapping nature of contemporary practice, in a way that recognises the advantages of being able to occupy different roles at different times for different outcomes. Pitt identified how hybridised

curatorial practices have expanded to such a degree that 'everyone's an artist-curator now' (2013), and that artist-curators, or 'artist-whatevers' (2013), are 'forging their own way' (2013). Casey identified how in the past artists and curators have been slow to acknowledge how they have been moving outside of their respective fields, as knowledge of the history of the curatorial field specifically, has not been readily available until relatively recently. Jones, who voiced the greatest resistance to the term, described a level of uneasiness because of the institutional associations and expectations of the term 'curator'. Despite having inhabited dual roles for a number of years, Jones described how she has never felt as though she is 'one or the other' (2013), and that the term 'curator' does not fittingly describe what is actually involved in her eclectic role. Jones identified the term 'director' as being equally problematic in terms of its hierarchical connotations, but offered the term 'producer' as perhaps being more flexible and appropriate to her specific circumstances. However, it was also acknowledged that the term 'curator' may be accepted as part of the professional identity of an organisation in receipt of public funding, and with 'taking on the responsibility, of the things that that title means' (2013). Coulson and Johnson voiced concerns over the 'inferred power' (2013) of the curatorial role as a representative of institutions, but crucially also pointed to a differentiation between the figure of the curator and the act of curation. Although several of the interviewees sometimes refer to themselves as curators (Coulson, Johnson, Kihlberg, Henry, Barnes), they most identify with being described as artists who curate, or artists who run a space or organise exhibitions.

With the exception of Pitt and Casey, it was felt that artist-run spaces do offer an alternative to mainstream institutions, particularly on a local level. The reasons given for objecting to the use of the term referred to the fact that artist-run spaces can often be very aesthetically or methodologically similar, and that they can often replicate one another rather than pursue experimental approaches. Outside of the material forms these spaces take, another issue was raised in relation to how the term and associated binaries, such as centre and margins, are reliant upon outmoded counter-cultural discourse and no are longer relevant to the interconnectedness of the contemporary art world. Indeed, such a claim was identified as being naive, and rather than functioning as an alternative, these initiatives were instead described as 'just what you have to do' (Pitt 2013) in order to gain exposure and disseminate work. Casey proposed that rather than providing an alternative, artist-run spaces instead offer 'another level of working' (2013). Those who felt that the term is still applicable referred to how these spaces can provide relative alternatives locally. Jones described *Grand Union* as an 'artist-led project' (2013) rather than artist-run on the basis that the organisation is co-run by curators and steered by the board. Jones also distinguished *Grand Union* from other less established spaces that may share the category of artist-run, on the basis that *Grand Union* are actively pursuing sustainability and are not 'just springing up to try out a set of things and will then going away again' (2013). De Jong described a

developmental ladder within the Birmingham art scene, whereby there is a 'constant need for newer alternatives' (2013), and that artist-run spaces can only offer this up until they reach a certain stage in their growth. This relativised definition articulates alternatives as simply being less developed versions of established institutions. Kihlberg and Henry, who discussed the alternative in terms of being definable by 'what it is not, rather than what it is' (2013), expressed how *Springhill Institute* was a counterpoint to the activities and influence of *Ikon* in the very specific context of Birmingham. Coulson and Johnson argued that a more valid alternative would be an artist-run model that contests or negates the convention of having to fight for survival against high rents and rates, without being fairly paid for the work that they do.

The interviews identified positive approaches to forming and developing ongoing relationships with established institutions, and the benefits of collaboration and inter-institutional exchange. Openness towards these relationships has led to a level of cross-pollination and the offer of new opportunities. The interviews identified how some of the participants have also worked as independent curators, administrators, or technicians for institutions in the region such as *Ikon*, *New Art Gallery*, and *Eastside Projects*. These work arrangements outlined another level of dualism, whereby some practitioners work in a paid professional role within public institutions, and pursue their own practice unpaid within a smaller artist-run space.

With the exception of *Springhill Institute*, who referred to themselves as an institution as a means of being taken seriously, a level of discomfort with the term 'institution' was expressed by the majority of the interviewees. The primary reason for this discomfort was related to how the term evokes an impression of physically imposing structures and an implied level of permanence, neither of which were felt to correlate with the temporal nature of the forms and practices of their spaces. Materialist readings of institutions were articulated in statements referring to how they tend to be 'more grounded physically' (de Jong 2013), and how the interviewees felt that their spaces do not feel 'big enough to be an institution' (Jones 2013). The negative connotations of processes of institutionalisation meant that some resistance also stemmed from an impression of systems of standardisation that are 'churning out people with a particular mindset' (Jones 2013). Jones acknowledged the institutional aspects of running a space that has an ethos 'that's quite set' (2013), but highlighted the agency of participants within this structure and the importance of pushing against 'bad boundaries' (2013). Coulson and Johnson expressed how *Movement* has always been 'greater than us as artists' (2013), and that arranging a long-term lease has made it feel more institutional. Despite a clear level of discomfort with the term, an interest in playing with institutional structures and paraphernalia was also identified, as a means of subverting these methods and deflecting from their own modest means. De Jong described *Vinyl* as 'sort of an artist-led project' (de Jong 2013), and the ambiguity of his description was not only acknowledged,

but also sought. Pitt identified how the level of flexibility he builds into his projects seems to be in opposition to his understanding of the institutional, as he feels able to make dramatic changes that can reform, pause, or cease the organisation instantly. In this sense, Pitt likened *Pitt Studio* and *Division of Labour* to being closer to the nature of an art practice itself. Any movement towards instituting either space, Pitt exclaimed, would be guided by an intention to fix a particular model in order to be able to hand over responsibility for it, free from his continued guidance. In this sense, the process of instituting is being articulated in terms of the application of measures towards securing stability, consistency, and longevity. Kihlberg and Henry acknowledged the ironic aspect of their use of the term, but also identified how it helped with generating funding and recognition, and that being 'institutionalised by the right institution can be a good thing' (2013).

Conclusion

Floor Plan for an Institution unfolded over the course of five months, proposing a new strategy for how instituting could take place through the dialogical construction of new relations and collective processes. It was not my intention to create an ironic 'mockstitution', but instead to explore the possibilities for a collaborative practice that re-approaches Institutional Critique. It was necessary for the project to adopt many of the trappings of an institution, in terms of the significant level of administration involved in enabling it to exist across several institutions and their respective agendas, such as the participating spaces, Arts Council funding, and the scholarly demands of the PhD. The critic Mark Sheerin (*Culture 24, Hyperallergic*) likened the durational cumulative nature of the project to a surrealistic game of 'exquisite corpse' (2013). Describing *Meter Room* as a 'chimera' (2013), Sheerin reflected upon the forms and functions of artist-run spaces, and how their lack of 'economic ambition' (2013) and 'easy-come-easy-go' (2013) attitude towards art and visitors alike provides them with 'near total freedom' (2013). Although I disagree with Sheerin's statement that artist-run spaces can be seen to be either largely indifferent to, or emancipated from, external concerns or ambitions, his point upon how the methods used by these spaces is often derived from the 'same creative space as the work itself' (2013) is particularly pertinent to this project. In terms of reflecting upon the original aims of the project described at the beginning of this chapter, I have drawn the following conclusions from the project outcomes:

1. *Floor Plan for an Institution* resulted in a tension between contradictory qualities, whereby properties associated with institutions, such as longevity and the articulation of shared values, sat uncomfortably alongside spatiotemporality and a sense of instability. The project advocated open-endedness, but its format also had the effect of prompting participants to respond to, and perform, forms of Institutional Critique. Although the project intended to respond critically to the concept of the institution and its associated structures, some of these responses may have been pre-formed by the concepts underpinning the project, thereby restricting their possibilities. Similarly, the

premise of artist-run culture responding critically to institutions in a way that responded to representations of their properties also had the potential to become reductive. The project was realised collectively, but this collective was temporary, and there was no intention to express the identity of a unified curated group exhibition. Within the workings of this collaboration lay issues surrounding a struggle between the self-organisation of the group, and the self-institution of individual curatorial voices. These struggles were reflective of the often unpredictable, precarious, and fragile nature of collaborative practices, and my meta-curatorial role within this project required the negotiation of sometimes conflicting agendas between curators and artists, and more specifically in this case, between curators and other curators. The tension between collectivity and individual autonomy, in terms of how participants were represented and how works were materialised within each of the construction phases, was an essential component of the project. An ethics of participation evolved organically during the project in the form of an unwritten etiquette for the treatment of work, whereby participants were watchful of the objects that were already present within the space. This etiquette set a precedent that was then indirectly passed on to those who followed, and for the most part direct alterations to works by other contributors were avoided. As I have mentioned, these terms of engagement between participants changed shortly after I openly discussed this observation during the project. This resulted in a distinct shift, from the non-direct alteration of works to their direct modification, and a dynamic that moved from a form of pluralism to a more antagonistic relation.

2. The interviews provided an overview of artist-led activity within the West Midlands region at the time of this project. The method of combining empirical research, through interviews and collaborative curatorial practice, allowed for a sustained level of engagement with a spectrum of distinct viewpoints upon approaches and challenges relating to the organisation and curation of each of these spaces. A range of different organisational models was identified: from temporary domestic exhibition spaces, to more established organisations with exhibition and studio facilities. One of the key issues identified was the importance of a community of practitioners within the context of a lack of an existing provision, which can itself function as a catalyst for these artists to establish their own proactive support structures, in the places where they are committed to being located for a number of reasons. An overarching emphasis was placed upon a sense of artistic openness and embracing forms of change, in such a way as to question but ultimately not lose sight of their respective core values. To this end, the majority of the interviewees do not pursue specific curatorial strategies, not wanting to feel limited by either curatorial approaches or the term 'artist-run space'. Terms such as 'artist-curator' and 'institution' were resisted and accepted in equal measure, in a way that is reflective of their contested meanings, and the effect of applying these terms to forms of artist-led culture.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

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Run Artist Run

There is no prescribed formula for an artist-run space; a thesis that is supported by the diversity of spaces featured as case studies within Chapter 3.3. The archetypical model of a white-walled gallery or project space located within a low cost commercial or industrial unit, which is run on a minimal budget by a small collective of artists with shared interests in showing their own work, has not been disproved, but has instead been accounted for alongside a multiplicity of alternatives to this. The five artist-run spaces that were invited to participate within *Floor Plan for an Institution* represent a cross-section of a diverse range of models that identify with the term 'artist-run space'. These included a space run by a single artist-curator (*Pitt Studio*), a hybrid model that blends an artist-led ethos with the aim of developing the art market regionally (*Division of Labour*), a well resourced institution that has secured substantial public and academic funding (*Eastside Projects*), a re-purposed building in the public realm (*Movement* gallery), a patronised gallery within a large privately-owned country house (*Down Stairs*), and an architect-designed project space and studio facilities (*Grand Union*). Each one of these individual initiatives is run by an artist or group of artists, and each identifies with the term 'artist-run space'. However, as has been indicated within the research interviews, none of these spaces wants to feel as though they are limited by that term, and have instead sought to cultivate a curatorial openness that permits them as much autonomy as possible, relative to how their particular space operates. The objective of running a space that is definable by its intention to resist being categorically defined, or to be restricted by such definitions, is indicative of another contradictory quality of these spaces. After visiting *The Cafe & Bookshop*, the artist Andrew Bracey (University of Lincoln) posted a review of the project on his blog, in which he referred to *Meter Room* as a 'typical artist-run space' (2012). In that same sentence, Bracey also asked rhetorically whether such a thing actually exists. This observation, of a space and a practice that can be considered both typical of self-organised artist-led culture in terms of its model, aesthetic, or materiality, at the same time as acknowledging the unstable nature of this very form of categorisation, exemplifies their slippery and frequently contradictory nature.

As I have argued, the fact that the only necessary defining characteristic of these spaces is that they are run by artists, means that their categorisation is too non-specific to identify conclusively

the forms and functions they may adopt. In accordance with a post-Duchampian thesis of authorship and artistic intentionality, if a space is declared to be run by artists, it is. As a category or descriptor, the artist-run space is paradoxical; both an orthodoxy of un-orthodox practices outside of established institutions, and an un-orthodox orthodoxy, in the sense that the openness of its definition can encompass any space run by any artist. The term identifies the shared importance placed upon the authorship of artists within a given organisational framework, but significantly, there are no regulating parameters regarding the requisite degree of their involvement. The term therefore has the effect of grouping together activities and practices that adopt comparable ideological positions in relation to the influence of artists within a given space, and more broadly within a particular organisation. In this sense, the term is not simply methodological or material, as these vary with the practices of each artist: it is ideological. An artist-run space is better understood as an unfolding and mutable relation through a given space, rather than a definitive category or model. As I have argued, this relation can be considered agonistic in nature, by virtue of the plurality of diverse practices and practitioners brought together via its constituent elements: artists, the activity and process of running, and the spaces selected for this purpose.

Artist-run spaces need to be understood in terms of their contradictions and inconsistencies, which as I have argued, are closely aligned to the condition of art practice itself. By virtue of placing emphasis upon the irregular verb 'to run', the artist-run space can be understood to be a process-based conception of space. The term has come to identify self-organised activity by artists who take control of the means of production and distribution of their own work, but crucially it does not specify the methods or materialities that have come to be synonymous with these spaces. Although frequently cited in the promotional material of these spaces, terms such as 'not-for-profit', 'alternative', and 'independent', all lack clarity as descriptive properties because of their relational and contingent nature. It may instead be more appropriate to reflect upon these spaces in terms of greater or lesser degrees of dependency, and the degree to which this dependency can be seen to translate to levels of relative creative autonomy. The interviews identified a distinct level of self-awareness upon the limitations of a term such as 'alternative', the application of which can at times reveal a degree of naivety in relation to claims of creative autonomy. Artist-run spaces are simultaneously marginal and central, separate but not counter to institutions and the art market (Gordon Nesbitt 2003, p.78). The contingent and relative nature of counter positions to institutional hegemony, means that the cultural capital produced through this critical position is under threat of immediate disarmament through co-option and recuperative practices are perennial. In these instances, counter positions and the dualism of institutions and non-institutions, give way to processes of cross-pollination and even homogenisation. Although not on the outside of art's institutional structures and their regulatory processes, some artist-run spaces can be looked upon as forms of negation, by virtue of a capacity to side-step existing institutions and the determining

logic of economic capital. Forms of negation and contestation can result in the creation of new spaces for the production of subjectivity, in which a community of like-minded practitioners are able to excerpt control over the means of production and distribution for their own work.

The importance of peer engagement within communities of practice, graduate destinations, and in specific relation to the West Midlands region, the intention to develop an art scene in locations outside of established cultural centres, were all identified as being central to the concerns of artist-run spaces within the interviews. These spaces provide a vital platform for early career artists, and can offer a bridge between art schools and institutions of art, between academia and industry. However, as I have argued, to perceive of these spaces as primarily functioning as incubators or springboards for future careers elsewhere, is not conducive to a deeper understanding of artist-run culture, and can even be detrimental to its growth if this transitional function not only serves to define these spaces, but also to restrict their field of possibilities. The interviews also highlighted the importance of maintaining a slippery and undefined position throughout the life of a space, in a manner that does not itself overstate this position. As discussed in Chapter 1.2, both *BANK* and *City Racing* found the transition from the periphery to more mainstream acceptance highly problematic, whereby their practices became valorised by larger institutions, and their aesthetic was reduced to a style or technique to be displayed among others. Suddenly these artists found themselves in a position whereby they were no longer the maligned outsiders peering in, which in turn led to a sense of displacement and a loss of the control they had gained by setting up their own spaces.

The presence of commercial activity is not anathema to creativity, and neither can its absence be seen to return art to a state of integrity or autonomy. Artist-run spaces cannot operate independently of the economic and socio-political conditions that combine to shape their existence. However, by virtue of not being led by the market or adopting commercial models, these spaces have a different genesis, and can evidence a degree of resistance to the logic of neoliberal capitalism. Similarly, the catalysing effect of feeling excluded from, or despondent towards, existing hegemonic structures, leading to the formation of self-organised alternatives, can be looked upon as an act of 'refusal-and-creation' (Holloway 2010, p.32). Through the support of experimental practice and esoteric production and consumption, artist-run spaces can cultivate a highly specific form of inverted economy and a sense of 'awkward authenticity' (Mulholland 2005). Awkward authenticity runs counter to the agendas of neoliberal entrepreneurial culture and its attempts at quantifying the value of artist-run spaces in terms of their capacity to produce (often deferred) economic capital. The danger of measures such as deferred value, is that they encourage emphasis to switch to future monetisation and impact, thereby failing to acknowledge the cultural value of these activities in, and of, the moment. The contentious and often slippery relationship that

exists between artists and the institutions they run or are part of, can materialise within these spaces as an antagonistic relation. This relation can be seen to be echoed in the relationship that exists between academic institutions and the practitioners who work within them, whereby the artist-lecturer is expected to simultaneously represent and uphold the core values of the institution, at the same time as encouraging students to respond in creative ways that exceed and break out of their orthodoxies.

Artist-run spaces have contributed to the development of the concept of the artist-curator by creating conditions that actually serve to produce them. They do this by displacing artists from the privacy of their isolated studios, and prompting them to produce exhibitions and become involved with a range of tasks pertaining to the running of an organisation. By virtue of this, artist-run spaces highlight how artists are not only the makers of art, and how curators are no longer simply post-production custodians of what it is that artists produce. The medium of the exhibition has grown in status to attain parity with the individual work of art, and the distance between the making of exhibitions and the production of art continues to decrease. What once were professional differences that served to define the gap and interface between the artist and the institution, the artwork and the gallery, have diversified to become a question of types of medium and method within individual practices. However, forms of resistance to the increased status and agency of curators continue to be practiced by artists, primarily because of the threat curators pose to the artist-centred creative hierarchy, and their symbolic quality as institutional gatekeepers with the potential to threaten their autonomy. *BANK*, for example, once stated that being considered to be professional curators was anathema to their self-image, and that it was 'bad enough getting called artist-curators' (2001, p.64).

I have worked between the roles of artist and curator with fluidity and simultaneity at different stages during the practice-based projects. I continue to describe myself as both an artist and a curator, and make no distinction between these roles and activities, as I conceive of my curating as an art practice primarily engaged with exhibition making, and approach the medium of the exhibition as both form and content. The term 'artist-curator' has remained relevant to my practice throughout the research projects, highlighting my involvement with discourse surrounding the slippage between the two roles, and the potentiality of negotiating a third term in-between them. However, the term 'artist-curator' remains problematic in the sense that the prefix is still indicative of the primacy of the artist subject position, despite the fact that there are many examples of the figure of the 'übercurator' replacing the artist as principle subject, particularly within the context of biennale culture since the 1990s. This is not merely a semantic dilemma that can be neutralised or equalised by using the term 'curator-artist', which appears very infrequently within subject discourse. The demarcation of roles has the effect of restricting further levels of mergence, and

their separateness is often emphasised amidst attempts to maintain clarity and professional remits. It has not been my intention to homogenise the terms, as differences persist within both categories, but to address instead how the activity of identifying similarities and differences between them has gradually decreased in relevance. Concepts such as Roberts' 'infinite ideation' (2010, p.55) and his distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic reason, stimulate discourse on the division of labour and the conditions involved in transformative processes, but they also have the effect of conserving artist-centred creative hierarchies and the continued fetishisation of the artist as emancipated subject. A broader understanding of the diversification of contemporary practices is required, which looks to move beyond the simplified dichotomies of artist/curator and institution/non-institution, and which acknowledges the range of factors and agents that contribute to the shaping of art works. To insist on a continued or restored separateness would be to deny the significance of how many different practitioners are deliberately working between these categorisations within collaborative projects, deep in their fissures and blind spots. The two roles may be distinct at times, but they are not necessarily separate, nor are they positions that can simply be switched on or off. As I have argued in this thesis, they are fluid and proximate.

The struggle for authorial and institutional power between artists and curators, and amongst curators themselves, asks questions of occupational specialisation and the division of labour in art production. For example, very few artists are singularly artists, as many are also artist-teachers, artist-critics, artist-technicians, etc. Terms such as 'producer', or simply 'practitioner', could offer alternatives for artists, curators, and artist-curators. Although far from being free from associations, such as the very particular political agency of the producer within the tradition of Post-Marxist critical theory and immaterial labour, the use of these terms would signify a critique of discourse that sustains the dualism of the roles of artist and curator. Although the struggle for creative autonomy and independence is frequently revered within the field of artist-run spaces, it is the independent activity of freelance curators, working between different platforms, which have accelerated change within the field. As I have argued in Chapter 1.3, the working methods of independent freelance curators are directly correlative with the precarious working conditions of post-Fordist neoliberalism and the knowledge economy. If the production of new subjectivities can be seen to be both a driving force and a resultant effect of the emancipation of both independent and institutional curators from their custodial past, it seems crucial to consider not only what it is that curators do, but also how they are subjectivised through doing and practice within these contexts.

When asked whether he considered his practice to be that of an artist or curator at *Afterall's Artist as Curator* conference (2012), the Dutch artist Willem de Rooij (b. 1969) responded that it was not in his interest to dissect the term, as it does not feel meaningful for him to isolate or thematise

specific portions of his practice. Although acceptance of the term 'artist-curator' is growing, its application still poses the risk of misrepresenting the intentions of practitioners. The interviews identified how several of the artists involved in running their own spaces considered curating to be a natural expansion of their practice, whereas others felt no affinity with the term and were resistant to its application. This level of discomfort was due in part to the associated gravitas and status of curating and the figure of the curator, which was deemed ill-fitting for experimental or non-formalised practices. A similar distinction was made by two collaborators within *The Auditorium* group residency project, whereby one of the participants in a two-way public discussion only identified with a curatorial role, whereas the other felt at ease with being described as either an artist or curator, or both. Both practitioners were equally involved in the collaborative creation of new work, in terms of its conception and construction, but their subject positions remained different throughout, in terms of their personal identification with the part they played in the creative process.

Although it has been my intention to analyse and critique terminology within the field, the manner in which I have focussed upon the subject has also had the unintentional effect of perpetuating the category and the associated presumptions that grant it stability. For example, by focusing upon the figure of the artist-curator, an inexorable implication has been made about the roles of both the artist and the curator, which are themselves adopted as stable definitions in order for a less stable middle ground to be imagined. Similarly, to research into artist-run spaces is to make a hypothetical leap that these spaces do in fact exist, and can be categorised as such due to their recognisably shared properties. It has not been my intention to accept, perpetuate, or further mythologise any of these categories or descriptors, but to explore instead their complexity, diversity, and limitations. As the only requisite predicate is that artists are in some way involved in the running of a given space, the category has the effect of grouping together more conventional institutions with experimental practices. The fact that these spaces can also be run by other types of practitioners who would not necessarily identify themselves as being artists, curators, or artist-curators, as evidenced by the interviews, further complicate matters. However, this openness can also be looked upon as an advantageous quality, on the basis that it can enable a spectrum of practitioners to be brought together, so that new ad hoc student-led initiatives can sit alongside more established artist-run institutions organised by seasoned practitioners. Such a diverse multitude of practices is indicative of a category and a relation that is vital for precisely the same reason that it is 'monstrous' (Beech *et al* 2010). It is this condition of being that makes it subject to continuous contestation.

Despite evidence of ongoing hybridisation and increasingly fluid movement between the roles of artist and curator within interdisciplinary and collaborative practices, a level of separateness will

continue to prevail until curators are fully emancipated from their custodial duties. The turn towards the agency of the curator and the expanded frame of the curatorial, signals a power shift that is frequently curator-led, having the effect of creating a self-fulfilling demand for discourse that further consolidates this shift. It is within this framework that this practice-based research project has been both entangled and performative.

Meter Room: A Curatorial Studio

The *Curatorial Studio* strategy was a response to a practice-led enquiry into developing a working model for what an artist-run space could be. This strategy had the aim of foregrounding the role of the artist-curator within a space of overlapping studio and gallery functions, as a means of exploring curatorial processes within a site of entwined production and display. The self-reflexive strategies devised to explore these aims allowed for the curatorial processes at work to be repeatedly re-responded to through the layering strategy. The outcomes of this strategy revealed themselves over time; more akin to moments of crystallisation than points of terminus. These were framed within the context of a space that had been devised to question the traditional segregation of artworks and their residues within an exhibition context, and between an exhibition space and its surrounding environment. The *Artist-in-Renovation*, *Occupant*, and *Input* residency projects were particularly effective in promoting the concept of the project space as a *Curatorial Studio* for both private enquiry and public address, and a testing ground for forms of paracuratorial practice. The specific conditions of the *Curatorial Studio* strategy shaped a programme of events that responded to these same conditions through methods and subjects that were necessarily diverse in nature. This diversity was also guided by my original aim of resisting the formation of a house style or signature aesthetic, which I attempted to do in a manner that simultaneously acknowledged how such attempts at developing a culture of open-endedness can inadvertently become the very thing they set out to avoid.

As described in Chapter 3.1, I developed the concept of *Caretaking* as a means of framing the fusing of curatorial practice with a specific form of self-organisation and DIY labour within the space. Within this model of curatorship, the curator takes the role of custodian in the most expanded sense. The role encompasses responsibility for multiple tasks pertaining to the upkeep of the building and the overall organisation, in addition to the curatorial activities taking place within the project space, thereby resulting in an especially haptic relationship with *Meter Room*. The acknowledgement of predecessors for the model of artist-curator practice that I have developed, such as 'gonzo curating' (O'Dwyer and Coinde 2005) and Hoffmann's 'paracuratorial' (2011, p.1), is important if the model is to be understood within the context of the evolving nature of curatorial custodianship. The figure of the *Caretaker* and the activity of *Caretaking*, combine the subject position of the artist-curator with the labour of the painter-decorator, technician, and site manager,

and can be considered to be especially relevant to the conditions and methods of artist-run spaces. With the exception of *Eastside Projects*, the model is consistent with the division of labour, or rather the non-division of labour, within all of the case studies featured in this thesis. *Caretaking* combines in equal measure the activities of curating works and the construction and maintenance of a space for art, which in the context of the *Meter Room*, has been as much a process of unearthing and embedding as it has been of assembly or installation.

The layering strategy was developed as a means of exploring how a collection could function within the context of an artist-run space, as both a method and product of that same space. The strategy aimed to explore possibilities for how this collection could be accumulated through practice, and in doing so, sought to develop an alternative to both collection-based models and the kunsthalle model of spatiotemporal solo and group exhibitions. It was not my intention to dominate the *Curatorial Studio* with this strategy, but to apply instead the concept to the space as part of an overall curatorial ecology. The layering strategy was implemented tentatively, out of a concern that its form could be pre-empted, and many of the contributors have been similarly watchful. An unwritten etiquette for the treatment of work among contributors began to take form in the early stages of the project. This was then indirectly passed on to those who followed, and for the most part, direct alterations to the work of others were avoided. These findings echoed the experiences of both Frieling and Wade, and much like their approaches the strategy was implemented with a level of in-built flexibility to enable adaptation and 'up-cycling' as and when considered pertinent.

As described in Chapter 3.2, the result of layering works alongside the residues and vestiges of others within the *Artist-run Collection* was more akin to a form of curated tableaux than a collection. Works and their traces were accumulated through a curatorial practice that placed emphasis upon discursive paracuratorial processes and stimulating dialogical exchanges between other agents within the space. The addition of pieces by artists with international profiles, such as Lawrence Weiner and Louise Lawler (Chapter 3.2), had the effect of generating additional capital. However, despite the significant cultural and economic value of these works, engagement with the art market has been negated by the fact that these are permanent additions to the fabric of a Council-owned building and cannot physically be removed or sold. Their value instead lies in the works themselves, both individually, and as integral parts of ongoing curatorial processes and exchanges between agents within the space. The works cannot enter into the market, and are only realised pieces in the context of *Meter Room*. When *Meter Room* closes, and the premises revert to the Council, the status of the works will become precarious, as their value is unlikely to be recognised by either the Council or future tenants. Once outside of the context of *Meter Room*, these valuable works will cease to be. The preciousness of the works and the unknown future of the organisation are integral to the identity of *Meter Room*.

Despite the recognised impermanence of the *Artist-run Collection*, another key concern has been to try to ensure that *Meter Room* did not slowly become a kind of pseudo-museum of works by established artists, but instead continued to function as a space where artists have been able to respond to a changing environment. The concept of smuggling was introduced as an additional framing device and subsidiary strategy within the *Artist-run Collection*, as a means of antagonising and disrupting the semiotic flow of the act of collecting works, and their subsequent harmonisation and functionalisation as integral components of an overall collection within the academic framework of the PhD.

I have underlined the importance of curating the fledgling history of an embryonic subject (Chapters 1.2, 3.2), especially within the context of artist-run spaces, which are often overlooked in favour of a focus upon institutions with an international profile. Interest in the fringe histories of artist-run culture is increasing as a result of the subject's expansion, but is frequently integrated into discourse concerning the 'glocal' (Smith and Kilian 2011) on the Biennale stage. As discussed in Chapter 1.1, the rapid growth of historical accounts of curatorial practice, coupled with the expansion of the provision of postgraduate courses in the subject, are indicative of the increasing level of interest in the field, both academically and professionally. Indeed, during the course of my research several new postgraduate courses in curatorial practice have been launched, including a PhD programme at Reading University in partnership with Zurich University for the Arts (est. 2012), and an MA in Contemporary Curatorial Practice at the University of Lincoln (est. 2012).

The *Curatorial Studio* is a curatorial framework that is conscious of its own historical lineage. The strategies behind the *Artist-run Collection* and *The Door That Does Not Fit the Frame* (2012) projects were devised to address the problem of the loss of cultural memory in relation to artist-run spaces, which become minor curatorial histories through the absence of visibility. With this in mind, these projects engaged with discourse upon the ways in which curatorial practices located within smaller cities outside of the UK's established cultural centres, might provide platforms for speaking back to hegemonic power structures. The loss of long or short-term memory has been of concern throughout my own projects, whereby strands of practice have been forgotten, mis-remembered, or left uncommitted to historical accounts. Without the scholarly framework of the PhD, sizeable amounts of material pertaining to my practice and engagement with subject discourse, would have been lost, or else consigned to memory and left to fade over time. The *Critical Commentary* of Chapter 3.1 specifically addressed the recording of incidental information relating to the strategies in their application on a micro-level. This included discursive reflections upon discursive processes, which might have otherwise passed through the net of the PhD framework, and which are valuable for the very reason that they thrive in the movement between institutional structures.

I claim that *Meter Room* is an independent self-organised initiative, however, an affiliation with Coventry University remains from *Meter Room*'s conception. One of the reasons reason as to why my PhD proposal was selected for a competitive studentship bursary was due to the perceived benefits of initiating an artist-run space as a means of enriching the local arts scene. One of my Supervisors and former Director of Studies, Professor Steve Dutton (University of Lincoln), has previously been directly involved in initiating artist-run spaces, and was a strong advocate for collaborative projects between Coventry's existing art organisations and the School of Art & Design during his Professorship at Coventry University. With this context in mind, my proposal to develop an artist-run space as a practice-based research project, sat within, and complimented, a wider proposal for developing the city's cultural ecology. At the formative stages, this project can be seen to have been supported by a separate yet related agenda to promote knowledge exchange between multiple partners in the city, and to lessen the gap between Coventry's cultural activity and the university's research community. An important aspect of the project has been the ongoing struggle to maintain *Meter Room*'s relative level of independence from external influences, including the determining force of the academic framework of the PhD, which inevitably shaped the form it took. At the point of its initiation, I made the claim that *Meter Room* was the only artist-run project space in Coventry, making a distinction between other existing organisations such as *Artspace* and the *Canal Basin Trust*, which do not have exhibition spaces and are arguably more director and trustee-led than artist-led. There is evidence to suggest that *Meter Room* has had a significant influence upon the development of two more artist-led spaces within the city: *Roots Gallery* (est. 2012) and *Pluspace* (est. 2012). The latter is currently operating independently within one of the studio spaces at *Meter Room*.

Site and context-specific narratives drawn from the re-functioning of the former Coventry City Council offices and the remnants of its past institutional function, catalysed several experimental projects, such as *Limber Gym* and *Evaporating Office*. These projects explored subjects related to utopia, set sharply against the narrative of the faded idealism of the building and the broader context of Coventry's post-war urban development and later mass deindustrialisation. As described in Chapter 3.1, the void premises were not addressed as an empty vessel waiting to be filled, but instead as a space densely packed with hanging signifiers to be reused and re-imagined. In this sense, the artist-run space has been approached as an intervention into the life of a building and a living work-construct. From the void left by the vacation of one institution, another has grown.

Coventry's close proximity to Birmingham, strong transport links to London, and abundance of vacant commercial and industrial spaces due to a recent economic recession and a more fundamental process of mass de-industrialisation since the 1980s, means that there are some

favourable conditions in place to be able to support a larger artist-led community. However, these same factors also encourage migration to more established cultural centres. Other barriers for the growth of artist-led activity within the city include the outsourcing of the Council's arts development responsibilities, minimal or no discretionary rate relief for not-for-profit voluntary organisations, and cumbersome bureaucratic procedures such as mandatory temporary licences for all arts events. From my personal experience, the lack of support from Coventry City Council throughout the development of *Meter Room* is indicative of a culture that recognises little value in non-profit cultural activity. This attitude seems closer to an institutionalised mind-set, rather than the decision-making of individual representatives holding positions of influence, many of whom have been vocally supportive, and have appeared to recognise the associated benefits of free art events and affordable studio provision in the city centre.

New Institutional Critique

A process of co-option by the New Institutions of neoliberalism (Chapter 1.3) has resulted in the harnessing of the means of production of artist-run spaces to be applied within larger institutions, distilled to a stylistic gesture, and collected for the purposes of cultural cache. Although both artist-run spaces and New Institutions appear to be disempowered by this bind, their dialectical relationship can also be looked upon as mutually sustaining. As New Institutional discourse tends to fetishise such conditions and qualities as ambiguity, instability, fluidity, provisionality, and self-referentiality, it is difficult to distinguish these from the methods used by artist-run spaces. The anti-institutional language frequently adopted by New Institutions and the auto-cannibalism of their own critique, ensures that there is no outside, and no safe ground upon which to settle. Artist-run spaces do not occupy an outside, and so their practices need to be seen in relation to their position on the inside, as encompassed but frequently non-compliant agents. Despite the blending that occurs between them, a degree of protectionism on both sides also ensures that their dialectical relationship has not been fully collapsed or homogenised, and the discourse between artist-led activity and their institutional or market-led counterparts continues to shape forms of resistance and conceptions of autonomy.

The institutionalisation of Institutional Critique led to its disempowerment as a critical tool, and in a similar vein, a third phase of critique that is self-performed by the curators of New Institutions, has failed to catalyse the reform of many of the prevailing power relations. Although Institutional Critique, as a genre and a practice led by an evolving engagement with both the act of critique and institutional structures, has itself become an institution, critique continues to be the principle means by which artist-run spaces are able to maintain a contested relationship with institutions and hegemonic power structures. As Fraser argued, institutional practices have become internalised, and their trappings can be replicated through artist-run spaces, either on a small scale, or as part

of more fundamental processes of institutionalisation. A form of expectation shortfall is created when artist-run spaces attempt to replicate the activities and aesthetic of established and well-resourced institutions. However, even when institutional and non-institutional models share structural similarities, it does not necessarily follow that they will produce the same kinds of effects and relations, as these will be influenced by the contrasting intentions that bring these agents together. A state of criticality, similar to the one described by Rogoff, is required if artist-run spaces are to strive towards independent positions and sustained critically engaged practice. I have developed self-reflexive curatorial strategies as a means of exploring what a model for an artist-run space could be, and how the conventions of prevailing hegemonic structures can be used as material for a curatorial practice within this framework. Forms of critique have been employed within curatorial strategies, not with the intention of asserting the institutional power of critique and forms of critical dissent, but as part of an attempt at opening up the visibility of the structures involved to gain insight into the ways in which they shape practice and produce knowledge within the field.

Floor Plan for an Institution achieved the aim of collaborating with a selection of other artist-run spaces in the West Midlands region, with whom a strategy for developing a new artist-run institution through processes of instituting was explored. The project approached the institution as a speculative process rather than an inherited model for the presentation of preformed cultural objects. Central to the project was the intention to occupy institutional structures through practice, and to transgress the dichotomy between artist-run spaces and institutions. The practice of critiquing institutions was here addressed as both an active agent in the production of a new institution, and a form of institution in itself, rather than simply a method of post-production analysis. Conscious of its own entangled position, the project explored the purposefully contradictory nature of a spatiotemporal project framed as an institutional structure, and the spaces that are, and are not, occupied by institutions. Raunig's concept of 'instituent practices' (2006) informed how the process of instituting could be understood through practice, prior to, or outside of, the stabilisation of institutional structures and the effects of institutionalism. No claims can be made about the impact of this project upon the hegemonic structures that were responded to in the project, but the aim here was not to try to affect direct change, but to create instead a new platform upon which these structures could be performed, debated, and re-imagined.

At some stage in their respective lifecycles, artist-run spaces are required to measure the goal of sustainability against processes of institutionalisation, professionalisation, and instrumentalisation. By virtue of these processes and their related pressures, what once started life as forms of self-organised acts of 'refusal-and-creation' (Holloway 2010, p.32), can themselves transform into hegemonic structures, becoming comparable in form to the institutions they were originally

designed to offer an alternative to. Another related dialectic exists between much coveted levels of autonomy within the field, and the acceptance of public funds that enable participants to be paid for the work they do, but which also bring with them additional responsibilities such as the negotiation of instrumentalised agendas and the requirements of evidencing public benefit. Many of the practice-based projects described in this thesis could not have been realised without public funding, but this has also made my position problematically entangled with much of the criticism outlined in Chapters 1.2-1.3. The voluntary labour that has been central to how *Meter Room* operates, and which can be considered reflective of the workings of many other artist-run spaces, has been integral to the (inverted) economy of the space. However, it would be inaccurate to perceive of these labour conditions as a negation of the logic of economic capital, as they can also be considered reflective of the precariousness of neoliberalism and the widespread problem of self-exploitative labour within the arts.

Curatorial Knowledge

The claims I make to original contributions to knowledge can be divided into two interrelated areas: my methodology, and the outcomes of the strategies I have explored through curatorial practice. I claim that my approach to the field of artist-run spaces has been unique in two specific ways:

- Firstly, as existing discourse primarily focuses upon the authorial power shift brought about by the activities of independent and institutional 'übercurators' on international platforms, the way in which I have placed a focus upon the concept of the artist-curator specifically within the field of artist-run spaces, offers a different lens through which to view the curatorial practices of these spaces.
- Secondly, although regional initiatives such as *Midwest* and *Turning Point* have previously produced overviews of artist-led activity as part of wider surveys of the region's cultural landscape, I have explored the field through a unique combination of empirical research upon selected case studies, and collaborative practice-based curatorial projects. This methodology resulted in an outline and a cross-section of the artist-run spaces within a shared geographic region at the time of conducting this research.

The outcomes of the practice-based curatorial projects explored during my research resulted in five interrelated contributions to knowledge within the field:

- Firstly, I claim that *Meter Room*, which is the first example of an independent artist-run space in the UK to be framed as a practice-based PhD research project, is itself a contribution to knowledge in the field, which is best understood as an ongoing response to a line of inquiry rather than a fixed finalised outcome.

- The *Curatorial Studio* offered a new lens through which to view the concept of the studio-gallery, and more broadly the mergence of production, distribution, and consumption of work within contemporary practice. Within this context, I have developed a new model of curatorial practice, which I have referred to as *Caretaking*. A direct outcome of the *Curatorial Studio* strategy, this model of artist-curatorship is reflective of the expanded custodial role involved in running an artist-run space.
- Commencing on the first day of occupancy, the *Artist-in-Renovation* project is the only one that I am aware of that has used the renovation of a building for the purposes of creating a new exhibition space, as the material and conceptual context for an artist's residency to create new work on-site.
- Drawing from the precursors identified in Chapter 3.2, the *Artist-run Collection* took the form of a curatorial strategy that inhabited the concept of the collection-based institution through a paracuratorial practice that explored the layering of works and their residual evidences.
- Finally, *Floor Plan for an Institution* explored a collaborative strategy for developing a new speculative artist-run institution through forms of instituent practice and processes of instituting. This strategy, which aimed to move beyond the binary between the artist-run and the institutional, could be further developed by other practitioners aiming to explore forms of critical curatorial practice through the occupation of institutional structures.

Self-Institution

Each artist-run space is shaped by the practices of the artists at their helm, making them individualistic and singular, but none can be comprehensively accounted for by a single authorial voice. *Meter Room* is a multitude of different subjective voices and histories, and provides a support network and facilities for artists whose practices are connected yet separate of this research project. As I have argued, artist-run spaces are also a form of institution, in the sense that certain principles have been instituted within them, not least the fundamental principle that the space is run by artists. Throughout this thesis, I have attempted to resist permitting the line of enquiry to waver into a binary opposition, which positions artist-run spaces as independent producers of authentic experimental culture on the one hand, and cumbersome or market-friendly institutions on the other. As a means of gaining a more nuanced understanding, I have looked at forms of exchange between artists and curators, individuals and institutions, and the power relations involved in forms of inter-institutional collaboration. In the case of artist-run spaces, it is artists that are instituting these principles, drawing together institutions and non-institutions in a shared discourse, and in some cases, paradoxically instituting the non-institutional. If an artist-run space can be considered to be a space in which principles such as an emphasis placed upon experimentation, the agency of artists within an organisation, and the importance of self-determinism, have all been instituted, how the process of instituting these values is conducted is

key.

In terms of the challenges that the research has faced, there has been an ongoing struggle to resist illustrating the concepts described within this thesis through the selection and positioning of work. As part of an ethics of custodianship, I have been wary of instrumentalising the practices of participants within *Meter Room* projects, whereby their works could be subsumed by the conceptual preconditions I have established. There has also been the need to be watchful of the aestheticisation of *Meter Room* as an artist-run space, as it was not my intention to create a space representative of the forms and functions of existing models. The challenge of reconciling open-ended curatorial possibilities with the exploration of a model for practice-based research, has felt conflictual at different stages of the project. At the same time as actively engaging with the contestation of hegemonic structures, the manner in which *Meter Room* was framed felt increasingly paradigmatic as the project progressed, and ever more fixed by the rationale of the scholarly requirements of the PhD. Although the exploratory projects at *Grey Area* were separated from *Meter Room* as a means of being able to develop experimental projects within different contexts, as my research progressed their separateness led to a less desirable sense of disconnectedness, which I responded to by increasingly focussing my practice upon the specific spatial context of the *Curatorial Studio*. There were several occasions when the conceptual backdrop of the *Curatorial Studio* posed challenges for participants. On one such occasion, an artist participating in *The Auditorium* group residency responded in a disappointed manner, when I referred to the project space as a *Curatorial Studio*. The reason being that the specific work they had planned to install was conceived of as a means of questioning the conventions of viewing works within a gallery setting. In order for the work to function effectively, the artist required the exhibition space to have the identity of a normative gallery, within which their piece could then sit uncomfortably as an object of Institutional Critique. The absence of a clearly demarcated superstructure meant that the work had nothing to generate friction against, leaving it incomplete as an object of critique in its preconceived form.

A recurring response to *Floor Plan for an Institution* was observed, whereby participants developed a variety of methods for trying to 'break out' from the existing work in the space, and the wider framework of the *Curatorial Studio*. Such methods included the negation of existing works, installing outside of the *Curatorial Studio* in the stairwell, corridors, and WC, and more explicitly in the works themselves, such as Barnes' furniture sculptures (Figure 31), and a text intervention as part of *The Auditorium* entitled *Escape* (Figure 33). These responses were reflective of the complex relationship between artists and institutions, whereby a collaborative project that responds to these structures itself quickly becomes a symbolic structure, which artists then seek to transgress. In the context of the *Floor Plan for an Institution* project and the aim of exploring

collaborative processes for instituting values, these responses pointed towards the creation of an emancipatory institution, which is bound by the paradoxical quality of instituting values that aim to transgress institutional structures. Reflective of Fraser's theories on the internalisation of institutions and the institutionalisation of critique, this paradox denies the possibility of an outside, as once transgressed, this outside is then drawn in. The project adopted an agonistic approach, which advocated pluralism and institutions for all, in the self-knowledge of the impossibility of an institutional consensus and the necessity of forms of internal antagonism and contestation.

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Figure 33: de Jong, A. (2012), *Escape, The Auditorium*

In much the same way as artists can come together to self-initiate and self-organise, these spaces can also self-terminate. During the course of the research, I made the difficult decision to close *Grey Area* after 6.5 years of activity, due to the increasing difficulty of raising funds with which to pay the rent and additional logistical issues related to my relocation to Coventry. *Meter Room* is also now fast approaching a crossroads in its existence, as I am required to apply for charity status in order to receive sufficient business rate relief and avoid incurring debts that the organisation cannot possibly pay. *Meter Room* was registered as a limited company for the purposes of obtaining the lease and strengthening funding bids, but as the threat of insolvency has become a very real one, in retrospect it may have been prudent to have operated as a more informal association, outside of the administrative requirements of a company framework. If successful, the transition to a charity model is likely to change the organisation's way of working irrevocably, posing further questions upon how the practices described within this thesis are required to adapt in order to be sustained past a certain point. How might the requirement to become both artist and

trustee-led impact upon the autonomy of the space and the practices it supports?

Rather than seeing the frequently short lifespan of these spaces as a flaw, their precarious temporality should instead be considered as an integral part of their condition of being. TCA's *Fast and loose (my dead gallery)* (2006) project, cited in Chapter 1.3, acknowledged this ontology, and offered a rallying call to future artist-run spaces to 'FAIL AGAIN. FAIL BETTER' (2006). Upon their closure in 2007, *Copenhagen Free University* issued a farewell statement upon the nature of their self-institutionalisation, which they described as a means of being able to collectively 'take power and play with power' (2008), but crucially also a way of being able to 'abolish power' (2008). Resisting the instrumental imperative to grow in size and develop new audiences, *Copenhagen Free University* instead responded critically to the power of the institutional structures they had created by discarding them, exclaiming in the process: 'We have won!' (Hlavajova *et al* 2008, p.39).

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