The Post-Political Curator:

Critical Curatorial Practice in De-Politicised Enclosures

Claire Louise Staunton

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For Avery and Malin

Abstract

The Post-political Curator: Critical Curatorial Practice in De-Politicised Enclosures is a practice-led investigation into the problems and possibilities for critical curating in twenty-first century new towns. I propose that the newest settlements are apparatuses through which a post-political consensus is constructed and reproduced. I question whether the construction of an agonistic public sphere is possible through curating and consider whether the public sphere is foreclosed by the socio-political arrangements of a de-politicised enclosure. This project sets up an enquiry using the post-political as a critical framework to reconceive the relation between the politics of new housing developments and curating.

A form of critical curating which presumes that criticality is a transformative mode of practice with the capacity to intervene effectively in hegemonic regimes is problematic. What if we curators can no longer practise with these assumptions? This thesis analyses the claims made for critical and socially engaged curatorial practices and asks, *what is at stake when we practise 'politically' in a context that has been de-politicised, like the twenty-first-century new town?* This investigation is led by my practice in the newest new towns of Cranbrook, Devon and Ebbsfleet, Kent and in my role as Research Curator at MK Gallery, Milton Keynes. With an orientation towards the horizon of the political, this project re-examines the very function of curating and art in the context of a new town and proposes the figure of a 'post-political curator'.

The research invokes the methods of a community organiser and the activist's instruction manual as a genre of writing; the final practical project which has resulted from this is a *Handbook for the Post-Political Curator*. I claim that producing the handbook, and the intention for it to be collectively edited, constitutes a post-political curatorial practice. The handbook is designed to function independently as a resource for curators who want to push

back against the foreclosure of political agency. Alongside the thesis, the handbook also

serves as documentation for my discursive and administrative curatorial practice undertaken

as part of the PhD research. The handbook and the notion of the Post-Political Curator do

not seek to re-politicise the new town or solve the disenfranchisement that such conditions

produce but rather to propose a new conception of curating's relation to politics and the

means to realise an alternative function for critical curatorial practices.

Declaration

This thesis represents partial submission for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the Royal College of Art. I confirm that the work presented here is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

During the period of registered study in which this thesis was prepared, the author has not been registered for any other academic award or qualification. The material included in this thesis has not been submitted wholly or in part for any academic award or qualification other than that for which it is now submitted.

Claire Louise Staunton

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Contents

0 Introduction

0.1 New Towns?

I have been preoccupied with new towns and intentional communities since 2008, when I was invited to be the first curator-in-residence at the OCT Contemporary Art Terminal Shenzhen on the border between PRC China and Hong Kong. Shenzhen is a new city, designated in 1982 by Deng Xiaopeng, that has gone from being a small Cantonese fishing village into an international mega-city of nearly 13 million people in the same amount of time that I have been alive. Since that residency, where I spent my time interviewing artists who had started their practice after being sent by the government to live and work in the new city, I have curated public programmes and written about the visual culture of planned cities, both real and fictional, including Milton Keynes, Welwyn Garden City, Chandigarh, Almere, Oceanation, Fordlandia, Ebbsfleet Garden City, Gurgaon and Peterlee. Two years into my PhD research, when I was working as Research Curator at MK Gallery, Milton Keynes, I realised the residency in Shenzhen did not ignite but in fact re-ignited a deep connection to new towns. One of my earliest memories is from a trip my family made from suburban Toronto to Runcorn, Cheshire where my grandparents lived. My grandparents had moved from County Mayo on the west coast of Ireland to Merseyside, and after a few years in Liverpool, they chose to buy a house in the new town of Runcorn because, they said, it reminded them of home. Runcorn was designated as new town in 1963 by the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, as was Warrington in 1968, where my uncle lived. My only real knowledge of the UK before moving from Canada as a teenager in 1996 was the concrete experiments of new towns that had once been utopian visions for a post-war Britain. I have grown to love the post-war new towns in the UK, not nostalgically, but because they are evidence of an energy or a radical spirit to make the places we live in

better so that people can live happier and healthier lives. Most of the utopian visions were unrealised, but there is something brave, optimistic, if maybe misguided, about trying to create a new city from nothing.

My PhD research was motivated by the idea that the master-planners of the new towns of the twenty-first century could learn a lot from the experiments in public art of the twentieth century post-war new town. There is something unusual about the planned town or city, its artists and the art produced in them. This is because the art and its institutions of new towns are burdened by the planners', the politicians' and the potential residents' expectation that they will perform multiple functions: art will make up for the perceived lack of cultural history; art will make the new city more attractive to (the right kind of) new residents; art will bring tourists; art will forge bonds between residents; art will give the new city an identity; art will express the planners' vision; art will inspire children to make art; art will democratise culture for the working classes; art will provide employment, etc. I still think that the newest towns can learn from the older new towns but just not in the way that I had anticipated.[1]

0.2 Early Research Questions

My earliest research question was, how can the radical art experiments in the British New Towns inform critically engaged cultural producers in twenty-first century new housing developments? My initial aims were to critically analyse the work of Victor Pasmore (1955) and Stuart Brisley (1976) in Peterlee, David Harding (1968) in Glenrothes, Artist Placement Group with Lois Pryce (1970) and Inter-Action (1975) in Milton Keynes and the Community Arts Movement in several new towns. I aimed to evaluate, from the historical context of 'socially engaged art', their impact on the urban form and infrastructure. I planned to develop

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[1] See Chapter 4 in the thesis and Section 4 in the handbook.

a curatorial methodology, directly informed by a history of radical art practices in post-war new towns, to support a collaborative project with master-planners and residents in the developer-led twenty-first century new towns of Cranbrook, Devon and Ebbsfleet, Kent. I would then scrutinise the critical art and curatorial interventions into the twenty-first century new town master-planning and evaluate the extent to which they influenced a change in the distribution of resources in favour of the disenfranchised and frustrated residents.

A few months into my research, I became increasingly aware of my assumptions about contemporary critical practices: I had considered, uncritically, the function of critique in art as ameliorative; I also assumed that it was an important contribution to a collaborative process of emancipation with participants as political subjects. This is a problem because it collapses critical theory into critical curating practice and expects the outcome to be a process that produces emancipated subjects who can act out their political agency.

New towns and major housing developments are autocratic behemoths with top-down governance structures that cannot relinquish any power to their populations both because those populations do not even exist yet and because they are not designed to. Placemakers are drafted in to attract potential residents. When the residents do arrive, and because it is by design autocratic, the corporate master-planning machine cannot simply shift its shape into a democratically formed political framework wherein the political agency of its citizens can be exercised. I had previously assumed that curators, as part of the placemaking enterprise, could leverage their privileged position to re-distribute resources from the powerful to the powerless – I just needed to figure out the right curatorial method. This assumption puts forward a curatorial 'solution' to the political 'problems' of a new town.

Informed by a self-critical analysis of my curatorial projects in new towns, I suspended both the history writing and the positioning of my 'critical' curating and 'politically engaged' curatorial practice. My PhD project focuses instead on the specific political conditions of the privatised new developments and the entanglement with capital and power that cultural producers find themselves in when their practices are contingent upon the neoliberal policy platform of 'creative placemaking'.

0.3 Use of Key Terms

It is important to address the key terms 'new town', 'post-political' and 'enclosure' and how they function in my thesis. I identify the category of the 'new town' as an expansive one that covers a diverse variety of planned urban spaces created under disparate historical conditions. As I explain in closer detail in the literature review and in subsequent chapters, I consider a new town to be a large-scale state-sanctioned infrastructural and housing development of the kind introduced by the UK Government through the New Towns Act (1946) until the present. Each new town in the UK is different because of changes in technologies, shifts in ideology and patterns of accumulation throughout time. They also diverge significantly in their geneses, their demographics and their geography, but despite their differences, they all share a narrative of newness resulting in some common political, social and cultural conditions. This thesis asks what is at stake when a curator re-frames the common experiences of 'newness', linking the problems inherent to new community formation to the autocratic governance structures in new towns, across time and geography. I propose that the specific temporal dimension of the new town is precisely where curators can intervene and even open a space for civic power to grow in resistance to de-politicisation. It is precisely because a curator can mobilise multiple temporal and

geographical conditions through their practice that there is the opportunity for curatorial work to engage politically in the civic life of new towns.

Central to the reconfiguration of my research was the application of the 'post-political' as a critical framework through which I re-cast the new town as a de-politicised enclosure. As detailed in Chapter 2 in the thesis and Section 1 of the handbook, I use the term post-political as a critical lens through which the processes of de-politicisation (and indeed politicisation) can be discerned. The use of 'post-political' in the figure of the *post-political curator* is an intentionally provocative one. At first reading, it may seem to suggest that I am proposing a form of curating that is beyond the political or does not need to concern itself with the political. With an understanding of the term 'post-political' as a critical lens, however, it becomes clear that what I am proposing is not that. Instead, I am articulating a curatorial practice which recognises the processes of de-politicisation and spaces where the political is foreclosed.

While I do not use the term 'post-political' to indicate that we are living in times that have come after what was once political, I do appreciate the temporal shift that the prefix post- implies. This is because I insist in my thesis that the curatorial interventions into the de-politicising space of the new town are temporal interventions. In the final chapters, I reconceive the function of critique appropriate for the practice of a twenty-first century new town curator, and I put forward a speculative mode of practice that evades and troubles the political arrangements of privatised new towns or large-scale developments. This post-political curatorial practice is a proposal to harness what I argue to be the intrinsic properties of contemporary curating: the exhibitionary and multi-temporal. It is not possible to simply transpose progressive art practices from the mid-twentieth century onto the socially engaged practices of creative placemaking in new developments. Politically, socially, financially and

aesthetically, the contexts could not be more different. However, I continue to consider the value of these earlier experiments in relation to the contemporary moment, and it is through my practice of public event curating and my instructive handbook that I question their relevance and efficacy as a form of 'belated' political imaginary.[2]

I use the term 'enclosure' in the title of the thesis provocatively to signal the hyper-privatised nature of the new towns and estates that are the site of my practice and focus of my research. Enclosure is, historically, the subdivision and fencing of what had been commonly utilised land into individual plots which were then allocated to people who claimed to hold the rights to the land enclosed.[3] The acts of enclosure in England between the 16th and 18th centuries were led by the landed nobility and resulted in the separation of the people from their means of production. In *Capital*, Karl Marx defined the enclosure as a "theory of primitive accumulation" and he claimed that such expropriation and dispossession of land from the commoners was a pre-condition for capitalist development.[4] Contemporary critics claim that Marx's 'theory of primitive accumulation' is not only a pre-condition but is, in fact, a continuous process of capitalist development,[5] and my thesis proceeds with this understanding. The sites of development that I refer to in my practice were already enclosed in the historic sense, as most of them had long been in the ownership of private individuals, corporations and the state.[6] Through the process of development, however, the ownership of these 'enclosures' has changed hands multiple times, each time capturing more and more value. My project asks whether it is possible for the temporal interventions of the curator to

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[2] John Roberts, *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde* (London: New York, N.Y.: Verso, 2015), p. 215.
[3] Stavros Stavrides, *Common Space: The City as Commons, In Common* (London: Zed Books, 2016), p. 13.
[4] David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 149.
[5] An Architektur, 'On the Commons: A Public Interview with Massimo De Angelis and Stavros Stavrides', *E-Flux Journal*, 17, 2010 <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/17/67351/on-the-commons-a-public-interview-with-massimo-de-angelis-and-stavros-stavrides/>.
[6] Simon Gardner, *An Introduction to Land Law* (Oxford: Portland, Oregon: Hart Publ, 2007), pp. 86-87.

interfere with the spatialisation of de-politicisation that, I argue, the (re)enclosure of space in the newest towns institutes.

0.4 How Does the Practice Relate to the Thesis?

This thesis brings together several different methods of research, including a literature and practice review, argumentation and insights from practical engagement. The relation of the practice to the thesis shifts throughout, from an object of study to a driving force for the research. The final curatorial project is the handbook attached to this thesis. It is both a central component of my practice-led research and a repository for the documentation of the curated projects that I list below. One of the original contributions that this PhD project makes is a productive relationship between the critical literature and the practice. I consider the limits and the potentials of theory when it is embedded in a curatorial project and then reflect on its function in the thesis. This research process enables me to understand the existing conditions (in a new town or art institution) that push up against the theoretical propositions and to reflect on them before returning them to practice once again. The topic of the thesis had to be approached through practice because it is concerned with the tensions between critical theory, critical practice and critical curating. Ideas and theories had to be tested, not for their efficacy but to understand what is lost or gained when they are enacted in the 'real world' and in the post-political enclosure of the new town.

This practice-led research project took place between 2016 and 2021. During this time, I collaboratively produced through my curatorial practice:

Little Kunst, childcare and advocacy, London, ongoing from 2014

Growth Point, research residency, Spacex, Exeter, 2016

The Right to the (New) City, MK Gallery conference, Old Bus Station, Milton Keynes, 2016

Lie of the Land, exhibition and catalogue, MK Gallery, Milton Keynes, 2019

The Coming Community: Art, New Towns and Place, conference, MK Gallery, Milton Keynes, 2019

The Post-Political Curator's Handbook, publication, 2021

The research is concerned with the process of the project as much as the project presented as a whole, which, as I will articulate more thoroughly below in relation to the handbook, is different from the dominant mode of presentation in contemporary curatorial discourse.

The first chapter scrutinises in detail a curatorial project, *Growth Point*, a 6-month research residency in the nearby new town of Cranbrook for which I invited two artists, Margareta Kern and Jonathan Hoskins, to collaborate with me. I analyse *Growth Point* to clearly locate the function of critique in the curatorial, artistic and public manifestations of the project. My disappointment with the outcome of my curatorial critique to function as politically emancipatory led me to look more broadly at systemic issues that frustrate the political dimension of critical practice. Both Chapters 1 and 3 of the thesis work through the frustrations with dominant modes of curating practice (the critical and the discursive) to reveal insights that are taken up in the handbook as practical guidance.

The close interrogation of *Growth Point* in the thesis leads me to question whether the interventionist form of critical curating is predicated on the assumption that there is a political sphere in which to intervene. At this point, the thesis' relation to the *Growth Point* project shifts from being a subject to analyse and critique to serving in Chapter 2 as a diagnostic

tool for identifying the forces of de-politicisation in the new town. This is again taken up in the handbook as an instruction for how critical practice ought (or ought not) to operate.

In Chapter 3, with a reconfigured post-political perspective, I consider two elements of a discursive practice taking place inside the institution that seek to orchestrate conflict: firstly, *Right to the (New) City,* a conference and workshop about new towns and practices of 'commoning' and, secondly, *The Coming Community*, a conference and workshop about new towns and placemaking, which I curated in 2016 and 2019, respectively. It is through a reflection on particular moments at these conferences that I question the extent to which a curator can produce a political sphere in a de-politicising context and to what ends.

Chapter 4 speculates on a post-political practice. Curatorial strategies emerge out of the frustrations with practice in Chapters 1-3 and inform the 'figure' of the post-political curator (they/them) who practises with a post-political lens through which to discern already existing but obscured political agency. I firstly consider the post-political curator's agency over the visibility and exposition of a project and propose that they determine what, when and to whom cultural production is made public. I propose that the post-political curator practises as a 'time rebel' by manipulating the temporality of their projects to defend fragile political movements and constitute a public in line with the ambitions of their constituents. The handbook proposes how.

0.5 The Handbook as Practice

The thesis must be read alongside the handbook for the reader to familiarise themselves with the practice that I refer to and better understand how the speculative proposals may function. *The Post-Political Curator's Handbook* operates as both the comprehensive

documentation of my practice through the PhD and as the final part of my curatorial practice for the PhD, as I will now outline.

It is an instructive manual for curators, artists and cultural producers who have theoretically driven practices and want to work 'politically', or those who want to be 'politically engaged'. The Handbook gives practical and theoretical information and demonstrates how to practise politically in places where the possibilities for political engagement have been suppressed or foreclosed as well as contextual essays from artists and writers who contributed to the conferences I curated in 2016 and 2019 and that are analysed in Chapter 4 of the thesis.

The thesis and the handbook intersect throughout, and their relation shifts in each section. For example, where the handbook suggests that critical practice is a method for discerning de-politicising forces (Section 2), the thesis analyses the location and function of critique within critical practices as well as articulating my disappointment with a failed critical project (Chapter 1). Where the handbook defines the *post-political* (Section 1), the thesis considers the usefulness of this term from the position of artists and curators working in new towns both now and in the past (Chapter 2). Where the handbook instructs the reader how to employ methods of community organising in curatorial practices (Section 7), the thesis worries over what is at stake when appropriating the tools from another field of practice (Chapter 5). The handbook holds a glossary of key terms and a directory for the reader to access further information to make it as informative to the reader-practitioner as possible.

The Post-Political Curator's Handbook draws from a tradition of the handbook and pamphlets of radical political movements, in particular, the *Squatter's Handbook*[7] and the

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[7] Advisory Service for Squatters (Great Britain), *Squatters Handbook.* (London: Advisory Service for Squatters, 2009).

New Woman's Survival Catalogue,[8] both first published in the 1970s. The handbook for

squatters was a frequently updated manual for the practical and legal processes involved in

breaking into vacant properties in England. The *Woman's Survival Catalogue* was an

attempt to reshape the oppression of misogynistic culture through self-education and

included physiological diagrams of women's anatomy, legal and practical instruction for

abortion and financial direction for the fiscal liberation of women. Both volumes were cheaply

produced and easily distributed and included directories for the readers listing services and

networks that would support them on their mission. *The Post-Political Curator's Handbook* is

a sincere attempt to equip the reader with the knowledge and references required to operate

in de-politicised spaces. It is not an ironic riff on political pamphlets or zines, but rather it is a

continuation of the ethos and practice of these ephemeral publications. Such forms of

knowledge-sharing and instruction are also a crucial part of the political responsibilities of a

political organiser,[9] and in Chapter 4, I make the claim that the post-political curator should

also take up this responsibility within their field.

There is a recent tradition of handbooks in the contemporary curatorial field. Arguably due to

its relative immaturity, curating has developed as a discourse and practice that draws from

professional instruction which has been communicated through manuals, themselves

representing as a kind of sharing amongst practitioners.[10] I would position my handbook

between the political pamphlet tradition and the curatorial vade mecum, since it borrows

from both the instructive form and the theoretical grounding for practice. I align my handbook

with projects like *Grand Domestic Revolution Handbook*, an ambitious compendium of living

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[8] Kirsten Grimstad and Susan Rennie, *The New Woman's Survival Catalog: A Woman-Made Book* (New York, N.Y.: Simon & Schuster, 2019).

[9] Nicholas Thoburn, *Anti-Book: On the Art and Politics of Radical Publishing*, A Cultural Critique Book (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), p. 99.

[10] See *Words of Wisdom: A Curator's Vade Mecum on Contemporary Art ; [on the Occasion of the 25th Anniversary of Independent Curators International (ICI), New York]*, ed. by Carin Kuoni and Independent Curators International (New York, NY: Independent Curators Internationale, 2001).

research developed by artist, designers, theorists, neighbours and activists who investigate and expand the status of the home outside the narrow lens of private concerns.[11] One of the projects within the *GDR Handbook* produced a handbook of its own, *Spaces of Invisible Parenthood.*[12] Both include contextual information outlining the terms of engagement, key theories, guest essays and interviews alongside comprehensive documentation of the (research) projects and instructions.

The Post-Political Curator's Handbook is an implicit critique of the contemporary curator's handbooks, like Hans-Ulrich Obrist's *Ways of Curating*[13] or Maura Reilly's *Curatorial Activism*.[14] They tend to centre the curator and fail to consider the political responsibilities that they have to their constituents. Such books lack an awareness of their own form (expensive hardback books) and neglect to address the uncomfortable problematics and politics of curating. Obrist instructs young curators on how to make exhibitions and build collections but fail to inform the reader of the networks that one must have access to and the wealth of resources to even make it possible. Reilly's *Curatorial Activism* advocates for a more inclusive art institution and art world rather than calling for a total restructuring of a broken system.[15] Adrian George's *Curator's Handbook*[16] is exactly what the title suggests and is practical and valuable for an emerging curator, but *The Post-Political Curator's Handbook* assumes that the reader is already working in the field and has become frustrated by obstructions or failures in their attempts to practise in a politically engaged way.

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[11] *Grand Domestic Revolution: Handbook*, ed. by Binna Choi and Maiko Tanaka (Amsterdam: Casco [u.a.], 2014).

[12] Andrea Francke, *Invisible Spaces of Parenthood: A Collection of Pragmatic Prepositions for a Better Future*, (London: The Showroom, 2012).

[13] Hans Ulrich Obrist and Asad Raza, *Ways of Curating* (London: Faber & Faber, 2016), p. 91.

[14] Maura Reilly and Lucy R. Lippard, *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating* (New York, N.Y.: Thames & Hudson, 2018).

[15] Thoburn, *Anti-Book*, p. 99.

[16] Adrian George, *The Curator's Handbook* (New York, N.Y.: Thames & Hudson, 2015).

The Post-political Curator's Handbook is an enactment of how knowledge operates in the

kind of curating that I am involved in. It attempts to capture and relay things that are not yet

fully present or visible rather than offering a series of instructions. This sits apart from the

dominant mode in curatorial discourse which deploys critical case studies to illustrate how a

project addresses a particular concern and offers itself up as a model for practice. For

instance, I invited curator Maria Lind to speak at the conference *Right to the (New) City* I

organised for MK Gallery, Milton Keynes in 2016. I asked her to speak to about the role of

an art gallery in the newest towns and how her practice in Tensta, Stockholm invoked

notions of 'commoning'. Much like her writing, Lind's presentation put forward examples of

practice as if they were discrete objects of study, like art objects.[17] She introduced a certain

idea or theory (such as 'the curatorial' or 'museum') and demonstrated how an exhibition or

public programme problematises the concept and/or functions as a critical interrogation and

its significance. Through the handbook, I am proposing a different way of thinking about the

value of knowledge. Rather than instructing the reader on how a curatorial project does a

very specific operation, the handbook gives up accounts of complicated and contingent

situations and what I have learned from them, with the hope that they be taken up as a way

to test and to practise. The type of knowledge that is being produced through the projects

that I have curated and the way it is being enacted through the handbook contribute to an

expanded notion of the *curator*, one who does not work with conventional exhibition forms or

collections. They instead are concerned with prefiguring practices and thinking about what

might be useful in five years' time, not as a model but as a tentative proposal for a practice

that is always contingent and at risk of being instrumentalised by institutions, state and

capital.

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[17] Maria Lind, 'Situating the Curatorial', *E-Flux*, 116 (2021) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/116/378689/situating-the-curatorial/>.

The Post-Political Curator's Handbook is designed as a pdf that is easily producible and distributable. It speaks from and to practice through the sharing of learning and unlearning that has occurred through my practice-as-research. In the handbook, I propose that the curator uses their practice to discern latent political murmurings and re-cast themself as a protector who fosters their emergence into the de-politicised space of the new town. The handbook proposes protective tactics of 'time rebellion' to protect, foster and galvanise the political in a de-politicised enclosure; it uses examples of my practice alongside other examples of practice, exercises for power-mapping and proposals for future practices.

0.6 The 'Problem' of Twenty-First Century New Towns

The New Town Movement following World War Two was a campaign to address the squalor of Britain's cities. New settlements, such as Stevenage, Harlow, Peterlee and Milton Keynes, were master-planned under the centralised welfare state. They were inscribed with the ideology of their genesis and they bear the evidence of the slow decline of both modernism and the welfare state. The master-plans and nascent communities of twenty-first century new towns are also inscribed with a contemporary ideology. The developer-led new settlements of Cranbrook, Ebbsfleet, Otterpool and Bicester are the materialisation of neoliberal ideology as spatial policy. Indeed, some even brand themselves as 'garden towns', recalling the planned settlements of the early twentieth century. Art in some of these new towns does not exist because it is not deemed financially viable (e.g., Cranbrook). In other new towns, where art does exist, it is used as a marketing tool to attract creative businesses and trendsetters, and it takes a central role in the placemaking agenda as a brand identity (e.g., Otterpool has a 'creative soul').[18]

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[18] 'Countryside, Connected, Creative', *Otterpool Park* <https://www.otterpoolpark.org/about/countryside-connected-creative/> [accessed 27 November 2021].

Between 2015 and 2016, I spent time in Cranbrook, East Devon, as detailed in Section 2 of the Handbook. The delivery model through which Cranbrook is being built is a complex public-private partnership initiated by the District Council with a developer consortium labelled New Community Partners – NCP (Hallam Land Management, Taylor Wimpey, Bovis Homes and Persimmon Homes), Devon County Council, the Exeter and East Devon Growth Point Team and the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA). Buried in the Section 106 commitments drawn up between the NCP and the East Devon District Council is a contribution to public art of sixty thousand pounds, which was to be paid prior to the first occupation of the first dwelling.[19] This money was never paid due to a re-drafting of the Section 106 Agreement, following a viability assessment, which removed Part 15 from the agreement.[20]

Art and culture appear to be considered peripheral, decorative enhancements to the public realm unless they can demonstrate a positive impact on land value, and they are often the first thing to be renegotiated if the developer's profit is lower than forecasted.[21] Rather than seeking out new technologies for experimental planning, or architecture and art that might improve people's lives, developers are accused of having a narrow ambition to meet the market demand for housing and reward their shareholders.[22] If there is a 'vision' that considers art and culture as integral to our lived experience, there has to be a demonstrable

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[19] East Devon District Council, *Agreement Relating to Land North of Rockbeare-Cranbrook*, 2010 <https://eastdevon.gov.uk/media/1649147/s106a014brcl-land-north-of-rockbeare-cranbrook.pdf> [accessed 27 November 2021].
[20] Viability assessment is a process of assessing whether a site is financially viable, by looking at whether the value generated by a development is more than the cost of developing it. See: Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, *Viability*, 6 March 2014 <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/viability> [accessed 27 November 2021].
[21] *The Incidence, Value and Delivery of Planning Obligations and Community Infrastructure Levy in England in 2018-19* (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, August 2020) p<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/907203/The _Value_and_Incidence_of_Developer_Contributions_in_England_201819.pdf> [accessed 27 November 2021].
[22] Ibid.

financial reward for doing so. This is because developers are legally answerable to their

shareholders and must balance their interests with those of the communities they are

creating homes for. Art is not considered imperative or integral to the planning and

development of contemporary new towns unless it is reducible to capital.[23]

There is a new vision for making happier, healthier new towns and cities (which one could

argue is eventually reducible to capital) with implications for art and culture. The new vision

is led by the Department of Health to support the new developments (26,000 homes)

planned on NHS land. The Healthy New Towns Programme is an experiment to test how

master-planning can contribute to making new communities happier and healthier.[24] There is

growing evidence that art has a positive impact on health and well-being and, thanks to

social prescribing, art is once again considered a public good, integral to planning new

settlements and regenerating existing ones.[25] Within the context of a developer-led new

town like Cranbrook, which recently became a site for the Healthy New Towns Programme,

there is now the will and some funds for art as part of their post-hoc placemaking strategy.

Otterpool Park, Kent now sells itself as 'creative' since the appointment of Creative

Folkstone as cultural consultants. Their motto is 'Countryside – Connected – Creative'.[26] It

remains to be seen how they are creative and how art features in their master-plan, but, like

Ebbsfleet, there is a concerted effort to develop an art and cultural strategy to be delivered

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[23] Indicated by the arguments for the returns on investment in art made by Future City and the Arts Council. 'How Can New Developments in Cultural Infrastructure and Placemaking Shape the Future of UK Cities?', 2019 <https://futurecity.co.uk/mipim-uk-askedhow-can-new-developments-in-cultural-infrastructure-and-placemaking-shape-the-future-of-uk-cities/>. Wavehill Ltd., *The Value of Arts and Culture in Place-Shaping* (Arts Council England, 22 August 2019) <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Value%20of%20Arts%20and%20Culture%20in%20Place-Shaping.pdf> [accessed 4 January 2022].
[24] *Putting Health into Place* (NHS England, 2018) <https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/putting-health-into-place-v4.pdf> [accessed 4 January 2022].
[25] Social prescribing enables GPs, nurses and other primary care professionals to refer people to a range of local, non-clinical (volunteer and community sector) services. See: David Buck and Leo Ewbank *The King's Fund* (2022) <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/publications/social-prescribing> [accessed 10 March 2022].
[26] *Otterpool Park* https://www.otterpoolpark.org [accessed 10 March 2022].

through the placemaking teams. If art and culture are instrumentalised in placemaking strategies, its value must be measured by its ability to best 'make a place'; what is at stake when a curator practices politically in that space?

0.7 Literature and Practice Review

State funding for art is being cut, and the prevalence of developer-led commissions and creative-led placemaking in new housing projects is growing.[27] This research is an important investigation into what is at stake politically, practically, historically and theoretically for curators and cultural producers in this shifting commissioning context. I see the specific variables and characteristics of new town developments as a microcosm in which to extrapolate new understandings of how curating intersects with politics. My research project sits at the convergence of a number of overlapping fields: contemporary curating, critical urban theory and socially engaged art. My body of research will speak to those who write about and practise at the intersection of these three fields. However, it also offers a new perspective for curatorial practice and theory, as few[28] have closely considered the political implications of curating practice in the specific context of planned new towns, major housing developments and infrastructural projects.

My research project seeks to address the conditions of the contemporary new towns and large-scale master-planned settlements, their incorporation of art and culture into the placemaking agenda and acritical forms of corporate governance. I will firstly outline the particularities of new developments and towns in the UK and the paradigm of *placemaking* – the principal approach to managing and improving the public space in a neighbourhood or

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[27] 'Theresa May Joins Thousands Urging Windsor and Maidenhead Council to "Reconsider" Abolition of Arts Funding', (2020) <https://www.campaignforthearts.org/theresa-may-joins-thousands-urging-windsor-and-maidenhead-council-to-reconsider-abolition-of-arts-funding/> [accessed 10 March 2022].
[28] At the International New Towns Institute, and Maria Lind at Tensta konsthall.

city. I will then move on to consider creative placemaking and articulate how 'creativity' within placemaking has an economic imperative and trades on speculative social capital. Creative placemaking is often participatory, involving residents of the new towns, as is much 'politically engaged' art and curating. I will then investigate the category of socially engaged art and its political dimension alongside newer concepts of social practice placemaking. This literature and practice review will establish the terms of engagement, consider how writers and curators have addressed the problems that creative placemaking presents as well as where they fall short. This will set up my argument for a mode of curatorial practice that can operate critically in the context of a twenty-first century new town and/or housing development.

0.7.1 Creative Placemaking

'Creative placemaking', also known as 'arts-based placemaking', is the only case made for arts and cultural planning in the newest towns and regeneration schemes because it is the standard policy paradigm through which it is funded or procured.[29] Its ubiquity is due to its myriad meanings[30] and convenient adaptability. Too often, it serves as a symbolic solution to urban decline.[31] Using examples in new developments, I will detail how creative placemaking operates as a policy platform with an economic imperative that uses 'creativity' as a generator of social capital in order to sustain economic growth. This presents the critical curator with a number of problems; namely the instrumentalisation of culture and the debatable concept of social capital.

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[29] See The Office for Place and Advisory Board within the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

[30] Project for Public Spaces, "What Is Placemaking?" (2018) <www.pps.org/article/what-is... > [accessed 10 March 2022].

[31] Max Rousseau, 'Re-Imaging the City Centre for the Middle Classes: Regeneration, Gentrification and Symbolic Policies in "Loser Cities"', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 33.3 (2009), 770–88 <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2427.2009.00889.x> [accessed 10 March 2022].

The term 'creative placemaking' was defined by American economist Ann Markusen and arts administrator/urban planner Anne Gadwa Nicodemus in the following way:

> In creative placemaking, partners from public, private, non-profit, and community sectors strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighbourhood, town, city, or region around arts and cultural activities. Creative placemaking animates public and private spaces, rejuvenates structures and streetscapes, improves local business viability and public safety, and brings diverse people together to celebrate, inspire, and be inspired.[32]

Advocates of the practice consider the artist as an 'entrepreneur asset ripe for development' who can use their unique set of tools to revitalise the city by 'encouraging its citizens to undertake their own making of place'.[33] Making of place through art and culture has an economic imperative to usher in job creation and cultural industries, attracting businesses and a growth in land value. Creative placemaking constitutes the means for attracting and retaining Richard Florida's 'creative class'[34] and is the policy platform to engineer a city's 'culturisation', as observed by Sharon Zukin in *Loft Living* all the way back in 1982.[35]

As well as the economic case for creative places, there has been a consistent recourse to developing place-based social capital in creative placemaking. *Social capital*, another ubiquitous term with an unfixed definition that shifts according to the argument, was first

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[32] Anne Markusen and Anne Gadwa, *Creative Placemaking* (National Endowment for the Arts, 2010) <http://arts.gov/pub/pubdesign.php> [accessed 10 March 2022].
[33] Ibid. p. 3.
[34] Richard L. Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*, Nachdr. (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2006).
[35] Sharon Zukin, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change*, Johns Hopkins Studies in Urban Affairs (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

considered in relation to urban planning by Jane Jacobs in 1961. Social capital for Jacobs

was derived from the continuous and irreplaceable networks between people in a

neighbourhood.[36] Bodies and research projects, such as The Social Impact of the Arts

(SIAS), the Creative City Network and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS),

have collected data to demonstrate that art and culture do not just help shape an attractive

and prosperous community but, when facilitated through community engagement, can also

develop the social capital of participants from diverse backgrounds.[37]

Between 2015 and 2020, Arts Council England contributed £83 million to the Creative

People and Places (CPP) fund.[38] The CPP is premised on the policy platform of creative

placemaking with the ambition to develop and grow individual and community social

capital.[39] The focus on social capital within cultural policy and strategy has meant that

creative placemaking is an instrument for creating new public domains[40] where culture is

uncritically assumed to make better people and places.[41]

Creative placemaking is predicated on a notion of 'cultural value' that is also highly disputed.

Eleanora Belfiore claims that the celebratory rhetoric of adding value through art avoids

declaring or questioning whose ideas of 'cultural value' drive decisions over investment and

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[36] Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Modern Library ed. (New York, N.Y.: Modern Library, 1993), p. 138.

[37] Anne Markusen and Anne Gadwa, 'Arts and Culture in Urban or Regional Planning.' *Institutions and Planning*, ed. by Niraj Verma, Current Research in Urban and Regional Studies (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2007).
Stefan Seifert, 'Cultural Cluster: The Implications of Cultural Assets Agglomeration for Neighborhood Revitalization.' *Journal of Planning, Education and Research* 29.3 (2010), 262–79.

[38] See: Creative People and Places <www.creativepeopleandplaces.org.uk> [accessed 10 March 2022].

[39] Karen Smith, *Persistent Encounters: What Is the Relationship between Social Capital and Creative People and Places?* (London: Arts Council England, February 2018) <https://www.creativepeopleplaces.org.uk/sites/default/files/Persistent_Encounter_Karen_Smith.pdf>. p.9.

[40] Hjørdis Brandrup Kortbek, 'Contradictions in Participatory Public Art: *Placemaking* as an Instrument of Urban Cultural Policy', *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society*, 49.1 (2019), 30–44 <https://doi.org/10.1080/10632921.2018.1473310> [accessed 10 March 2022].

[41] See artist Scott Farlow's project with Linden Homes development and Bristol City Council (2011) <http://aprb.co.uk/projects/all-projects/2014/welcome-home--scott-farlow> [accessed 10 March 2022].

funding. Creative placemaking claims public benefits through adding cultural value, but the

distribution of cultural authority is deeply unequal.[42]

Creative placemaking, particularly in new towns in the UK, is by default a short-term

undertaking. With Section 106 and the Community Infrastructure Levy, rather than a

sustained sponsorship or contribution to revenue costs, sums of money are given and spent

within a specific time-frame. The developer is only responsible for the houses built and even

then, only legally guaranteed for ten years.[43] Long-term art programming depends on

regular funding and institutionalisation. Commissioned public sculpture requires a

maintenance plan, either offloaded to the local community or abandoned. Short-termism is

not the only outcome,[44] but there is always a risk in any new development that the

placemaking scheme will only support activity for a few years at most.

As a way of addressing this short-termism, writer and placemaking professional Cara

Courage proposes *social practice placemaking*, which she defines as 'comprising a cluster

of coproduced, relational creative practices that employ a social practice arts approach to

social, cultural and material urban issues'.[45] Courage argues that place attachment and civic

participation are made possible through an intersection between socially engaged art and

placemaking practices. Social practice creative placemaking often supports initiatives by

socially engaged artists in the public realm as a co-produced practice and, like the practices

outlined above, one that is also concerned with process as much as any material outcome.

In the most exemplary projects, Courage claims that the artist is an instigator and a catalyst

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[42] Eleonora Belfiore, 'Whose Cultural Value? Representation, Power and Creative Industries', *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 26.3 (2020), 384 <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2018.1495713>.

[43] *The Consumer Code Scheme,* The Consumer Code for Home Builders, August 2019.

[44] Marc Jaffrey, *Ebbsfleet Garden City Culture Vision* (Kent: Ebbsfleet Development Corporation, 2019).

[45] Cara Courage, *Arts in Place: The Arts, the Urban and Social Practice* (2019), p. 6. <http://www.vlebooks.com/vleweb/product/openreader?id=none&isbn=9781317333616> [accessed 22 March 2022].

of activity, but they will work with the community to create shared outcomes and outputs, and their aim will be to 'hand over' the life and legacy of the project to the community.[46]

0.7.2 Socially Engaged Art Instrumentalising Creative Placemaking

Much creative placemaking is carried out through socially engaged art, since it literally enacts the social connections required for widening inclusion and raising social capital. For the critically engaged curator, social practice has its own problems, from the ease to which it can be instrumentalised to the ways in which it is assumed to be political. Socially engaged art or social practice is not an art movement; rather, it is 'simultaneously a medium, a method, and a genre'[47] and even 'a new social order'.[48] Creative placemaking and socially engaged art intersect in practice as urban developers and local councils offer artists opportunities through collaborations and commissions. They meet in discourse across urban studies, sociology and art theory.

Artist and writer Suzanne Lacy named this major shift within public art practice and discourse 'New Genre Public Art' in the early 1990s.[49] She defines it as a visual art practice that communicates and interacts 'with a broad and diversified audience about issues directly relevant to their lives' and crucially 'is based on engagement'.[50] Lacy is confident about 'art's potential role in maintaining, enhancing, creating and challenging privilege' and believed that artists ought to be concerned with the ethics of representation. Lacy's convictions were

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[46] Cara Courage, 'Making Places: Performative Arts Practices in the City' (University of Brighton: Brighton, 2016), p. 256.
[47] Maria Lind 'Notes on the Curatorial' in *Cultures of the Curatorial*, ed. by Beatrice von Bismarck, Jörn Schafaff, and Thomas Weski (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), p. 49.
[48] *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*, ed. by Nato Thompson, 1st ed. (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge, Mass.; London: Creative Time; MIT Press, 2012), p. 19.
[49] *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, ed. by Suzanne Lacy (Seattle, Wash: Bay Press, 1995).
[50] Ibid. p.19.

problematised later by Miwon Kwon,[51] Claire Bishop[52] and Grant Kester[53]. Lacy's term

found its way into curatorial practice almost immediately with Mary Jane Jacob's exhibition in

Chicago, *Culture in Action* in 1993, which saw a series of artists' commissions located in

working-class communities around New York City. Pertinent to my research is Lacy's

concern that, as quickly as the term 'new genre public art' was recognised by the official art

establishment, the artwork became dismembered from 'the history of the artists' concerns

and influences' and its radical heritage.[54] Lacy fears that if the category of new genre public

art were to be deracinated from its original radicality, which she believes holds such potential

to challenge the status quo, artists would instead follow a 'blind path' without coherent

theories or goals.[55] My research considers this point and extends it further to consider how

the disassociation of socially engaged art in new towns exploits its radical heritage and

profits the developers and landowners. What might result from recovering the radical history

of community and interventionist art in post-war new towns for the contemporary moment?

In his early writing, Grant Kester considers the artist that works collaboratively with a

community as a kind of Bourdieuian 'delegate' who chooses, or is chosen, to speak on the

community's behalf. The 'delegate' derives their identity and legitimacy from the community.

The community comes into existence politically and symbolically through the expressive

medium of the delegate.[56] Kester is, however, deeply concerned by some artists who

embezzle the social capital – in other words, artists who use their authority to speak for the

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[51] Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, 1. MIT Press paperback ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004).
[52] Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London; New York, N.Y.: Verso Books, 2012).
[53] *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, ed. by Grant H. Kester, An Ahmanson-Murphy Fine Arts Book, updated ed. (Berkeley, C.A.: University of California Press, 2013).
[54] Lacy, p.21.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Kwon.

community in order to empower themselves politically, professionally and morally.[57] What became quite clear to Kester in 1995 was that, firstly, the definition of 'community' itself is unresolved and problematic. He also feared that artists engaging with undefined 'communities' are at risk of serving a conservative project to reform what are considered to be low-value subjects. This is of principal concern to me when working with residents in new towns who are often strangers and not yet a community.

Responding to Kester, Miwon Kwon's *One Place After Another* considers social practice art on the same trajectory as site-specific public art, specifically that which has evolved to be co-produced for, with and by communities.[58] This is interesting because Kwon's perspective underlines the spatio-political dimension of socially engaged practices and the importance of site to the practices. She writes about a debate amongst artists and critics over the use value and aesthetic value attributed to the collaborations between urban planners and artists that took place in the United States in the 1980s and the interventionist and critical strategies that emerged as a rejection of them.[59] Crucially, this introduces a concern with how public space is constituted, the role of public art in the mediation of state/corporate processes and how 'new' discursive practices in the increasingly site-less public sphere can construct and commodify urban identities.[60] Kwon's exclusively American perspective considers the dissolution of site in site-specificity and links this to an emergence of social relations as a medium. Most importantly, she highlights that what is at stake in socially engaged practice is the notion of community. Employing Jean-Luc Nancy's theories on 'the inoperable community', she maintains that, as a category, the community is mutable, forever making and un-making itself. When conceived of otherwise, Kwon warns the reader of the dangers

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[57] *Art, Activism, and Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage*, ed. by Grant H. Kester (Durham [NC]: Duke University Press, 1998).
[58] Kwon.
[59] Ibid. p. 69.
[60] Ibid. p. 4.

of the reification and colonisation of marginal communities and the disciplinary function that

socially engaged artwork might inadvertently perform.[61] How might the curator in a new town

take up Kwon's proposal to work beyond the impossibility of community and community-

based art and instead towards a form of self-reflexive 'collective artistic praxis' that

continuously questions the exclusions that fortify, and yet threaten, the group's own

identity?[62]

Returning to Kester, he offers up dialogue within social art practices as a space of political

promise. He understands the rise of community-based art or practices of civic engagement

as a direct response to the political problems of inequality and has confidence in a discursive

mode of art to disrupt traditional notions of autonomy and the aesthetic, as well as

overcoming difference. Rather than the genealogy of site-specific art in Kwon's account,

Kester locates 'dialogic art' in relation to critical theory and activism. He argues that

collaborative, socially engaged artworks are structured through processes of exchange and

dialogue that unfold over time 'through a process of performative interaction'.[63] Kester

expects that the dialogic artist is immersed in the interactions with non-art groups at the sites

of social production.[64] This is an attractive dynamic for the critical curator who wants to

encourage the public to reflect on the conditions within which they live, in order to try and

change them.

However, Kester does warn the reader of its institutionalisation and subsequent uncoupling

of the work from activism, citing examples of the cultural policies of New Labour used to

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[61] Ibid. p. 153.
[62] Kwon. p. 154.
[63] Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley, C.A.: University of California Press, 2004), p. 227.
[64] Grant H. Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 13.

control the working classes in the UK and arts-led regeneration.[65] As detailed in the outline

of creative placemaking above, this seems too much of a risk for a curator in a new town.

Kester's prioritises strategies of dialogic exchange at the expense of the aesthetic and

criticises the use of spectacle and avant-gardist shock tactics deployed by some activist-

artists for being unethical.[66] To abandon the aesthetic merit of socially engaged practice,

while advocating for a practice that is dangerously easy to instrumentalise by conservative

forces is a problem for me as a curator.

Claire Bishop does this, in a way by presenting a different genealogy of socially engaged

practices in her book, *Artificial Hells*, wherein 'participation' becomes valorised over the fixed

art object as observed in several iterations of the twentieth century avant-garde. It is the

participatory artists' responsibility to create 'unease, discomfort...frustration...fear,

contradiction, exhilaration and absurdity'[67] and, through this, challenge social conventions.

There is much common ground between Bishop and Kester despite their very public row in

Artforum 2006. They both maintain that an uncritical approach to participatory art supports

the status quo and they deride the ameliorative approach to social ills observed in many

socially engaged artistic practices as part of an agenda of 'social inclusion' rather than a

transformative approach to fundamental social change.[68] They both attack Francois

Matarasso and the influence of his theories of 'creativity' on UK policy to 'create...submissive

citizens who respect authority and accept the risk and responsibility of looking after

themselves in the face of diminished public services';[69] they are also critical of the ways

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[65] Ibid. p. 16.
[66] Ibid. pp. 9-10.
[67] Bishop, *Artificial Hells* p. 26.
[68] Bishop, *Artificial Hells,* p. 13, Kester, *The One and the Many*, p. 198.
[69] Bishop, *Artificial Hells,* p.14.

such policies seek 'to acclimate the working class to the forms of subjectivity demanded by capital, but not to question the demands themselves'.[70]

However, Bishop claims that because Kester's dialogic framework eschews aesthetics in favour of 'Christian' ethics and principles of reciprocity and compassion, it cannot possibly result in interesting art or effective political action.[71] Kester argues that political art is multi-layered and often contradictory.[72] Where Kester calls for an affirmative approach that sees artists and their collaborators as pre-figurative of collective creating utopian forms,[73] Bishop states that the value of critical art is to make visible the alienation and illogicality of the status quo, leading to its disruption.[74] She goes on to claim that the art work, even in its participatory form, must remain 'pure' to the sphere of art to be of any critical or radical use. Bishop's reliance on the binary between the democratised and thus instrumentalised 'creativity' and the radical antagonism of autonomous 'art', she argues, can resist assimilation into the neoliberal status.

For my project, it is important to consider the ways to avoid total co-option or instrumentalisation by developers who have different and competing motives, and to do so through a re-focus on the aesthetic or visual dimension of art. However, Bishop's solution to 'purify' art is blind to the neoliberalisation of the 'so called' autonomous field of art, and I have serious doubts about any possibility for change through simply 'making visible the alienation of the status quo'.[75]

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[70] Kester, *The One and the Many*, p. 198.
[71] Claire Bishop, 'The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents', *Artforum International*, 6.44 (2006), 178–83.
[72] Kester, *The One and the Many*, pp. 10–11.
[73] Kester, *Conversation Pieces*.
[74] Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, p. 275.
[75] Ibid.

The tension that emerges between the autonomy of art and the political potential of the

dialogic is precisely where I find myself, theoretically. In terms of how one practises, the

distance between the two positions is less clear. Oliver Marchart in *Conflictual Aesthetics*

claims that critics who are dissatisfied with the aesthetic dimension of politically engaged art

(i.e. Bishop, John Roberts, et al.) are making a complicated excuse for not recognising

political art for what it is: political.[76] Part of his argument is that addressing political struggle

in art can motivate a movement and that to suggest otherwise is anti-political.[77] I explore this

position even further in Chapter 4 in relation to curating conflict, but his embrace and

reconfiguration of the political as aesthetic is useful to think about for my projects in new

towns because it makes demands of the curator to organise the public sphere.[78] This call to

action is a central motivator in my practice.

0.7.3 Creative Placemaking as Art-Washing

It is quite straightforward to argue that arts-led placemaking is a neoliberal policy platform

that is delivered through top-down management and fundamentally undemocratic. Arts-led

placemaking sees art, from public sculpture to long-term socially engaged projects, play a

more direct role as a channel of capitalist accumulation, and its promoters are quite clear

about this.[79] Jen Harvie argues that planning for a 'creative city' is focused on investment

and financial growth over social prosperity.[80] Evidence suggests even that culture-led

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[76] Oliver Marchart, *Conflictual Aesthetics: Artistic Activism and the Public Sphere* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2019), p. 13.
[77] Ibid. p.14.
[78] Marchart, *Conflictual Aesthetics*, p. 144.
[79] Creative Land Trust et al., *Creative Places Create Value* (2021) <https://creativelandtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/210047_210915_CreativeWorkspace_FinalReport_LowRes_Spreads-1.pdf>.
[80] Jen Harvie, *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York, N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 118.

regeneration and the attendant creative placemaking exacerbates socioeconomic inequality.[81]

Participatory and community arts practices are already employed in twenty-first century planned communities and curated and managed by external organisations, like North West Cambridge Development by Contemporary Art Society[82] and Ebbsfleet with the Whitstable Biennial.[83] These projects do not make calls for 'radical struggle'; rather, they are largely empty of critical analysis and usually re-framed as placemaking with the aim of 'giving communities a voice'. Such projects are not critically or politically motivated, nor do they intend to be. Rather, they serve to placate growing communities by offering what Doina Petrescu calls 'pseudo-participation'[84] in decision-making while obscuring the fundamental imbalances of power in private master-planned developments and society at large. Projects that aim to 'give a voice' to communities are a problem because they lay bare societal inequities but are unable to offer any substantial change. This is a tension I explore specifically in Chapter 1.

The role of artists and creative placemakers is to embed themselves within local communities and to then carefully and creatively harvest their social capital; their presence then acts as an indicator of the area's creativity. Artists engaged in community contexts are suited to harnessing social capital because they are frequently able to earn the trust of local people and community groups, and trust is perhaps the single most important element of

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[81] Ibid, p.119.
[82] See: Contemporary Art Society (2022) <https://casconsultancy.org/northwestcambridge>.
[83] See: Cement Fields, *This Must Be the Place* (2020-2023) <https://cementfields.org/projects/this-must-be-the-place/>.
[84] *Altering Practices: Feminist Politics and Poetics of Space*, ed. by Doina Petrescu (London; New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2007), p. 86.

social capital.[85] Stephen Pritchard calls this 'art-washing'.[86] He maintains that, in a post-welfare context, the state seeks to supplement or hopefully replace financial capital with social capital in order to meet society's basic needs.

The Bourdieu-Marxist perspective critiques 'social capital' for compelling citizens to reproduce societal norms in order to access resources or power:

> the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition.[87]

Bourdieu argues that accumulating social capital does nothing to address the inequitable system and, as such, I argue that if artists are contributing to that accumulation, they are reproducing and even strengthening social stratification.

With regard to social capital in particular, Ben Fine argues that rather than offering tools for interrogating, critiquing or challenging the status quo of neoliberalism, the widespread use of the concept of social capital in public and social policy serves as a panacea for maintaining this status quo and assisting capital in finding ways to measure the utility of social wealth, both for the purposes of producing social cohesion conducive to accumulation and as a force of accumulation in and of itself.[88] Most critiques are of what Josie Berry calls 'the

85 Stephen Pritchard, 'Artwashing: Social Capital & Anti-Gentrification Activism' [Online]. 2017 <http://colouringinculture.org/blog/artwashingsocialcapitalantigentrification (accessed 6 June 2019)>.
86 Ibid.
87 Pierre Bourdieu, *Forms of Capital*, General Sociology, Volume 3 (Cambridge, UK; Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2021), p. 249.
88 Ben Fine, *Theories of Social Capital: Researchers Behaving Badly*, Political Economy and Development, 1. publ (London: Pluto Press, 2010).

suitability of contemporary culture for providing the pliant means of social pacification'.[89] Berry takes it a step further and considers socially engaged art in the neoliberal city as a gateway to Foucauldian biopower.[90]

In *No Room to Move*, Berry and Iles are concerned with an aesthetic analysis (beyond the economic and political) of the art that is produced at the intersection of art and regeneration.[91] The key point they make in their 2009 article and book of the same name, both published by Mute Magazine, is firstly that the role of public art (socially engaged and otherwise) is to 'cover over the brutalities of society, to remind us of our civility, to insist on our connection to a human community, to instil good liberal democratic values into us'.[92] Furthermore, invoking a Foucauldian biopolitical analysis, they suggest that participating artists become 'soft cops' who mobilise communities to create a veneer of health and happiness while coercing the subject into 'self-government':

> Community is killed off only to be 'regenerated' in zombie-like form, a living dead state of social (non)reproduction and officially orchestrated sham spectacles of being together.[93]

The sham spectacle that Berry and Iles speak of is a form of art that is radically open and interchangeable with inclusive social participation. Such is the inclusiveness that it is in fact *exclusive*. Here, they quote Agamben's definition of 'exclusive-inclusiveness', where

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[89] Josie Berry, 'Everyone Is Not an Artist: Autonomous Art Meets the Neoliberal City', *New Formations*, 84/85 (2015), 20–40 (p. 32).
[90] Ibid.
[91] Josephine Berry Slater and Anthony Iles, *No Room to Move: Radical Art and the Regenerate City* (London, UK: Mute Books, 2010).
[92] Josie Berry and Anthony Iles, 'No Room to Move: Radical Art and the Regenerate City', *Mute Magazine* (2009) <https://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/no-room-to-move-radical-art-and-regenerate-city> [accessed 30 March 2021].
[93] Ibid.

everyone is counted, accounted for, in the data but no one is represented. As a means of control, with such openness, 'intensities and antagonisms are diffused'.[94]

No Room to Move includes interviews with the few artists that are challenging this instrumentalisation of art by developers and the state (Freee, Nils Norman, General Public Agency, Roman Vasseur) through intervention and critique. Vasseur and Norman, like the Artist Placement Group before them, seek to over-identify with the planners and developers and involve themselves in the decision-making processes of (re)building neighbourhoods with the express purpose of opening them up to scrutiny and perhaps even to have direct influence over the development process. However, what was once considered avant-garde or interventionist – openness, discursivity over commodity, critical engagement and democratisation of art – have been adopted as tools by the cultural managers, curators and landowners in property developments. My research project picks up where Berry and Iles rightly, and exasperatedly, ask: Is it even possible to make critical art publicly anymore?

There definitely are some critically engaged projects today that do seek to engage with communities and neighbourhoods in a considered way, conscious of the problematics of placemaking. In Certain Places is a University of Central Lancashire sponsored curatorial partnership who work in Preston using socially engaged art projects as research methods to better understand the meanings and production of the city.[95] They are not compromised by developer sponsorship, and their work in Preston has continuously evolved since 2003. Their work is research-led and not motivated primarily by improving the city or social cohesion, whatever that may mean (although they do interrogate these issues), and they are

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[94] Ibid.
[95] See: In Certain Places, University of Central Lancashire (2019) <https://incertainplaces.org>.

able to reflect on the impact of their work on various stakeholders.[96] There is much to take from in terms of their commitment to criticality and research-driven practice. In Certain Places is, however, intervening into a long-established community with a changing but tangible identity, not a new town of strangers.

0.7.4 Critical Spatial Practice

'Critical Spatial Practice' is a term, composed by Jane Rendell, informed by Lefebvre and DeCerteau, as a self-reflective artistic and architectural practice that seeks to question and to transform the social conditions of the sites into which they intervene,[97] but has been expanded by other writers and architects such as Markus Miessen and Nikolaus Hirsch.[98] Rendell started using the term in 2003 to describe something that was 'between theory and practice, between public and private, and between art and architecture'.[99]

Rendell and others insist that this form of praxis questions the terms of engagement of disciplinary procedures (art and architecture). In doing so, practitioners draw public attention to wider societal and political problems. Borrowing 'critical' from the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, Rendell is ardently concerned with practices that resist the 'dominant social order of global corporate capitalism'.[100] Meissen and Hirsch, who now edit and publish a book and lecture series titled *Critical Spatial Practice*, like many other practitioners, take up the general aim to create 'self-reflective modes of thought that seek to change the

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[96] In Certain Places, *Test Bed Report*, University of Central Lancashire (2019) <https://incertainplaces.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Test-Bed-Report.pdf>.
[97] Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006). pp. 1–2, 4, 6, 9, 12, 66, 191.
[98] *What Is Critical Spatial Practice?* ed. by Nikolaus Hirsch, Markus Miessen, and Armin Linke, Critical Spatial Practice, 1 (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012).
[99] Rendell, *Art and Architecture*, p. 221.
[100] Jane Rendell, 'Critical Spatial Practice' (2009) <http://www.janerendell.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/critical-spatial-practice.pdf> [accessed 1 November 2021].

world'.[101] They develop various and often divergent methodologies, or 'tactics', as De Certeau would say, to do this. In his writings, Meissen considers that critical spatial practice requires outlining a problematic 'and consequently devising a framework for crucial and productive decision-making'.[102]

'Critical spatial practice' remains a relatively vague term that may be insufficient for my concerns. The relative vagueness is one reason that it has been taken up by countless practitioners. It acts as a springboard for experimentation for practitioners to create spaces of representation that allow for intervention and imaginative resistance.[103] Used more as a diagnosis rather than an instructive proposal, critical spatial practices articulate the ambition for social change and its associated artistic and architectural experiments. When read alongside Kwon's *One Place After Another* or Kester's works, which are written from an art historical perspective, Rendell's conception of critical spatial practice seems somewhat misaligned. Kwon writes about the breakdown of the relationship between location and identity due to global capital and how, as a result, the notion of 'the site' within art and art theory has been transformed from a physical location into a discursive vector.[104] Rendell, on the other hand, maintains that the spatial dimension of the practice is of central concern and the artist or architect 'practises' specific places, thus producing critical spaces.[105] The two fields are not at odds, but the emphasis in art history and the trajectory of criticism around public art moves us towards the relations between people, communities, power and history as artistic practice and content, while site/place/space is taken for granted. Rendell

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[101] Ibid.
[102] *Crossbenching: Toward Participation as Critical Spatial Practice: Markus Miessen*, ed. by Markus Miessen (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), p. 10.
[103] Henri Lefebvre, Donald Nicholson-Smith, and Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 33. (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2013).
[104] Kwon, pp. 29–30.
[105] Jane Rendell, 'Space, Place, Site: Critical Spatial Practice', in *The Practice of Public Art*, ed. by Cameron Cartiere and Shelly Willis (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 27–59.

considers artistic practice as an architectural historian and theorist who works with ideas from urban studies and human geography that are ontologically dependent on concepts of space. Questioning its indissolubility or relegating its importance might be considered a challenge to her field of practice, or an insufficient analysis.

0.7.5 Critical Curating

I position my research and practice in relation to the pre-cursors of critically and socially engaged curatorial practices that can be found in the rich histories of progressive artist-run projects outside the institution: the dematerialised and critical 'compiling' of Lucy Lippard in her 'numbers' exhibitions in the late 1960s; the interventionist, critically complicit and administrative work of the Artist Placement Group from the 1960s to 1980s; the politically motivated, anti-statist, anti-elitist Community Art Practices of the 1970s; and the interdisciplinary, institutional critique and non-art public engagement on issues of housing, gentrification and homelessness in *If you Lived Here* (1989) by artist Martha Rosler. I will not present here a genealogy of curatorial history but, rather, put forward a constellation of practices to better define the field in which I practise and the position from which I research.

The projects I curate follow a feminist tradition of long-term, performative, non-object-based and discursive events. While I do not reject the form of the exhibition, I do not centre it or elevate it above any of the less conservative and time-based programmes that I manage. I could crudely frame the curatorial field as split in two between those who privilege the exhibition above all and maintain that the events and programming ought to relate to and mediate the exhibition's thesis (Jen Hoffman, Beatrice von Bismarck, Carolyn Christov-Barkiev, Marion von Osten, etc.) and those who think that the exhibition is often a hegemonic and top-down form that has few means by which it can function politically beyond

its four walls (Emily Pethick, Anton Vidokle, If I can't dance, WHAT, HOW & FOR WHOM ,etc.).

In parallel with discursive practices in art which saw a shift away from object-based work towards the performative and propositional, curatorial discursivity claims that the dematerialisation of curated presentations into lectures, symposia and workshops forces the institution of art to reconsider its social function.[106] If *discourse* is the communication of thought using language as a system of representation, then discursive practices are those that seek to engage the audience in listening, speaking and participation. As Liam Gillick states of the discursive, it is a 'model of production in its own right, alongside the production of objects for consideration or exchange… the basis of art that involves the dissemination of information'.[107]

Discursive curating, then, involves establishing the terms of engagement and the grounds on which to exchange views that are able to shape ideas and arguments. Paul O'Neill, a sceptical practitioner of discursivity, writes that 'curating wants to be transparent, visible, and self-critical,'[108] and it is through the transformation of the exhibitionary into the 'communality' and 'connectivity' of public discourse that this becomes possible. Driving this desire for public discourse is a common desire to develop counter-hegemonic modes of practice.

By giving radical thinkers a platform to speak and engage with audiences, critical curators could 'neutrally' make spaces for dissensus without compromising their position within the

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[106] Mick Wilson 'Curatorial Moments and Discursive Turns' in *Curating Subjects*, ed. by Paul O'Neill (London-Amsterdam: Open Editions -de Appel, 2007), pp. 201–216.
[107] Paul O'Neill, 'Curating: Practice Becoming Common Discourse', */Seconds*, 3, (2006) <http://www.slashseconds.org/issues/001/003/articles/poneil/index.php>.
[108] Ibid.

neoliberal or conservative institution.[109] The influence of Chantal Mouffe and her theories

around pluralist agonism cannot be underestimated in this regard. Mouffe seeks to institute a

hegemonic order of democratic values. She believes that this is only possible through the

institution of pluralist and universally accessible conflict: 'Antagonism is struggle between

enemies, while agonism is struggle between adversaries'.[110] It is a project that has been

hungrily adopted by cultural producers and curators, because they have the desire, space

and resources to create platforms for agonistic discord. While Mouffe's agonism influenced

exhibition-makers, it was the discursive event that was considered inherently more

accessible, inclusive, pluralistic and, thus, truly democratic.

One of the key criteria for functional counter-hegemonic critique is a 'political antagonist'

who can orchestrate an 'agonistic public space' and intervene in the hegemonic order.

Obviously, the aspiring political curator self-identifies with this 'political antagonist', but

Mouffe stipulates that they must first identify and map out the structural power relations and

hegemonic forces in a given (institutional) context.[111] Indeed, at the outset of this research, I

adopted the position of an antagonist and equipped myself with the critical faculties to curate

'agonistic public space', something I write more about in the next chapter.

I do not disagree with the first camp when they insist that the exhibition is a fundamentally

political medium as it is ideological.[112] It can function as a counter-hegemonic or, equally, a

hegemonic tool. The exhibition curator is therefore a political actor who can, through the

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[109] Western curators of the post-1989 era turned towards leftist philosophers to help them to address neoliberal ills through exhibitions. As part of this turn to the political left, it became commonplace for curators to invite philosophers to bring their radical politics into the art establishment (Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, Bruno Latour, Mouffe herself). Lynne Marie Wray, *Turning Left: Counter-Hegemonic Exhibition-Making in the Post-Socialist Era (1989 – 2014)* (Liverpool: Liverpool John Moores University, 2016), p. 5.
[110] Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, Radical Thinkers, Repr. (London New York, N.Y.: Verso, 2009), p. 15.
[111] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Radical Thinkers, 2nd edition (London: Verso, 2014), p. 102.
[112] Bruce W Ferguson, 'Exhibition Rhetorics' in *Thinking About Exhibitions*, ed. by Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 125–136.

decision-making process of curating, make small changes and have incremental impact.

O'Neill argues that exhibitions are politically effective by 'overcoming, transgressing, evading, renegotiating or bypassing the dominant in some small way'.[113] Christov-Bakargiev claims that the exhibition curator can undermine the hegemony of the institution through an interventionist exhibition.[114] They argue that Mouffe's criteria for an effective hegemonic critique can be met through exhibitions, and Mouffe agrees, but she insists that they must additionally be truly accessible to all, free from commercial interests and facilitate a level of common understanding so that conflicting factions may confront one another.[115]

It is important to recognise that the rise of the curator – particularly the independent one – and the subsequent boom in curatorial discourse is at once symptomatic of, and enabled by, the conditions of neoliberal capitalism. They are seen as a flexible, post-Fordist cognitarian that can bring visibility, social and cultural capital and legitimacy to a pre-defined 'project'[116] – often as part of culture-led placemaking schemes. The management and mediation of art through a well-recognised curator's 'project'[117] also adds value to an artist's work. Politicising both institutional exhibitions and project-related modes of production in the expanded field of art seems politically implausible, or at least problematic. How can a curatorial project be counter-hegemonic if the very institution of the curator is part of the neoliberal hegemony? What are the strategies and tactics which might offer a way out of this double-bind?

[113] Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson, 'Curatorial Discourse and the Contested Trope of Emergence', *ICA Bulletin* (2008) <https://archive.ica.art/bulletin/emergence/>.

[114] Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, 'A Twist of Paradox', *On Curating*, 10.04: The Political Potential of Curatorial Practice (2019), p. 11 <On-Curating.org>.

[115] Chantal Mouffe, 'The Museum Revisited', *Artforum International*, 48.10 (2010) <https://www.artforum.com/print/201006/chantal-mouffe-25710>.

[116] Pascal Gielen, *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude: Global Art, Memory and Post-Fordism*, Antennae (Amsterdam: [New York]: Valiz; Distribution [in the] USA, D.A.P, 2010).

[117] Luc Boltanski, Eve Chiapello, and Gregory Elliott, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, New updated ed. (London: Verso, 2018), pp. 103–4.

The practices of Marion von Osten, a feminist artist/curator, reengineered the exhibition to counter the hegemonic order of the art institution. Calling them 'project exhibitions', von Osten described her curatorial work in her 2018 PhD as a 'parainstitutional practice that aims to take long durational, dialogical and material approaches and local agencies into account'.[118] Von Osten was interested in a critique beyond the institution of art in -- quoting Brian Holmes – 'extradisciplinary investigations'.[119] She was always an independent curator, working with institutions on long-term research-based projects that the curator Tirdad Zolghadr describes as a 'comparatively collaborative, study-driven, discursively ambitious, transdisciplinary, and trans-institutional query'.[120] They were openly critical of the neoliberal regime and its alliance with the institutions of art. Thus, the content of her early work addressed class warfare and the precariousness of cultural production and insisted on truly interdisciplinary projects to avoid atomising art from everyday life.

The most important aspect of Osten's curatorial practice was that, for her, the content and the context are unalienable from the modes of research, framing and making public; in her words, 'how sites, artifacts, visual cultures, and political and social contexts are formative for a practice'.[121] This echoes the poster as part of a performance by art collective Freee made in 2014 that declared in '[a] properly political art must be twice political,' highlighting their demand that an art practice is political in both its content and its process.

[118] Marion von Osten and Lunds universitet, *In the Making: Traversing the Project Exhibition In the Desert of Modernity: Colonial Planning and After* (2018), p.4 <https://portal.research.lu.se/files/42117484/In_the_Making_PhD_Marion_von_Osten.pdf> [accessed 22 March 2022].
[119] Ibid.
[120] Tirdad Zolghadr, 'The Transversal Imperative' in *Marion von Osten, Once We Were Artists: A BAK Critical Reader in Artists' Practice,* ed. by Maria Hlavajova and Tom Holert (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2017), pp. 245–46.
[121] Ibid. p.16.

0.7.6 Curating Housing

When considering how to curate critically in new towns or urban forms, I look to public

programmes that compose an important and valid critique of spatial inequities with

representations of the concerns and struggles through artwork, exhibition or symposium,

such as *Idea Home Show* at MIMA Middlesbrough, 2017. While important and interesting,

such projects fail to consider the 'productive' element of art, i.e., proposing a reconstruction

of an alternative or proposal for a different way of living, such as the expansive project, *The*

Housing Question/Wohnungsfrage, which investigated the tension-ridden relationships

between architecture, housing, and social reality.[122]

Academic and curator Andrea Phillips makes one of the strongest cases for artists and

curators to be involved in a productive critique of the systems which uphold housing inequity.

Through discursive programming and research projects on art and how it relates to housing,

Phillips troubles the notion of 'the public' in following the financialisation of real estate and

the concurrent crumbling of the welfare state. Phillips and Fulya Erdemci's public

programme and book *Social Housing – Housing the Social* highlights the key theoretical

positions within urbanist discourse, debates the role that artists and art have played in

gentrification and considers alternative models for housing that have emerged from the field

of art[123] – some of which I refer to in this thesis.

I am interested in my practice to consider the alignments that curators or curatorial projects

can make with political movements. Elke Krasny's feminist and research-led projects try to

intervene in socio-political realities and forge new alignments in the face of increasing spatial

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[122] *Wohnungsfrage* [Exhibition], (HKW, Berlin. October–December 2015).
[123] Such as Ultra-red and Chto Delat?

and social injustice. *Mapping the Everyday. Neighbourhood Claims for the Future* examined

the possibilities of community-based political activity as articulated in relationship with

contemporary artistic and institutional practices.[124] Large wall texts used quotes from the

Downtown Eastside Women's Centre archive of the campaigns and demands made on

behalf of Indigenous, migrant and working-class women in the locality (Downtown

Vancouver). Demands for the future were also made by participants. Krasny and the

collective were explicitly concerned with the politics of 'collectively forming demands and

making a public claim' to them as a performance of citizenship, particularly in resistance to

the specific inequities in Vancouver, i.e., gentrification, (post)colonialism, white supremacy,

etc. While in new developments and towns neither the political movements nor the

community groups have formed yet, to curate politically might however be to consider

alliances outside the field of art.

This is something that Ultra-red does. Ultra-red is a group of artists, curators, archivists and

activists whose political-aesthetic project reverses usual socially engaged models. Having

started out as AIDS activists, their primary political concern is gentrification, and their

practice is a mix of sound art, publishing and community organising. They ask in their

mission statement:

> If we understand organising as the formal practices that build relationships out of
> which people compose an analysis and strategic actions, how might art contribute to
> and challenge those very processes? How might those processes already constitute
> aesthetic forms?[125]

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[124] *'Mapping the Everyday: Neighbourhood Claims for the Future'* [Exhibition] (Audain Gallery Simon Fraser University, Vancouver. November 2011–February 2012).
[125] Ultra-red, 'Mission Statement' (2020) <http://www.ultrared.org/mission.html>.

In 2012, Ultra-red convened School of Echoes, Los Angeles to cultivate a network of popular educators and organisers committed to moving beyond complicity with capital and the state. In 2015, School of Echoes created and organised the LA Tenants Union. Today, the LA Tenants Union has hundreds of active members across the city (many of whom are artists). These Locals organise tenants building-by-building to defend and nurture community. My research considers what is at stake when community organising is a curatorial endeavour and examines how the curatorial can 'contribute to and challenge those very processes'.[126]

0.8 Research Questions

The new town or large-scale housing development and its relation to contemporary art is predominantly understood through the paradigm of placemaking, which, even when deploying the participatory imperatives of socially engaged practices, reproduces the problems of neoliberal capital. The critiques of socially engaged art and placemaking above are valid, but rarely do they offer a way out of theoretical arguments through practice. Much critique either remains on the page or in exodus from the field of art into the field of politics. There are examples of complex and challenging curatorial projects and critical practitioners that tackle the inequalities in housing and urban planning, but I struggle to locate a curatorial methodology that moves beyond the gallery space to address these concerns in situ.

Considering the practices and discourses above, my research asks: *how can a curator practise critically in the space of the twenty-first century new town in a way that does not reproduce the problematics of creative placemaking?*

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[126] Ibid.

0.9 Thesis Chapter Plan

Chapter 1: What's Wrong with Critique?

Chapter 1 works through *Growth Point*, a project that I curated in the twenty-first century

new town of Cranbrook, Devon, to consider what it means to be a 'critical curator' drawing

from theories of critique from Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Irit Rogoff, Gregory Sholette

and John Roberts. I ask, to what extent does critique function to intervene in the

infrastructures of the newest housing developments? I investigate the way that critique

functions in the *Growth Point* project from different perspectives: the artists, their work, my

position, the residents of Cranbrook and the public participants.

Chapter 2: New Towns as Post-Political Enclosures

Following the critical analysis of the function of critique in critical curating in Chapter 1, I re-

frame the *Growth Point* project in relation to the processes of de-politicisation. Extrapolating

out from the project in Cranbrook, I then investigate de-politicisation as a practical,

ideological and ontological dimension of new towns, in the past and the present. In this

chapter, I ask to what extent can theories of de-politicisation contribute to an understanding

of the figure of the socially engaged curator, their position, and their practice in twenty-first

century new towns and large-scale housing developments? I propose that the newest new

towns are de-politicised by design, and with a post-political perspective, I begin speculating

on the role of the socially engaged post-political curator.

Chapter 3: Curating Conflict

Chapter 3 questions what is at stake when attempting to materialise a political sphere as a

curatorial practice. In an attempt to engineer a political sphere within the institution of art, I

leveraged my privileged position as Research Curator at MK Gallery, Milton Keynes to stage

two international conferences. At these conferences, I wanted to create the conditions for a political debate. I brought together members of the public, artists, and writers with the expectation that they would engage in productive conflict with powerful professionals working in the fields of placemaking, housing development, planning and cultural funding.

Chapter 4: The Post-Political Curator

Chapter 4 shifts away from critical analyses and argumentation towards a speculative mode of practice. I propose that the post-political curator takes up a protective role to defend political emergences from the forces of de-politicisation. I question what they risk if a curator centres opacity instead of public exhibition in their practice. In order to meet the aims of the post-political curatorial strategy, I consider how the curator can work with artists and public programmes to manipulate the experience of time as a protective and offensive tactic against de-politicisation. I tentatively draw an allegiance between the post-political curator and the community organiser and ask what strategies they could share in an attempt to foster the growth of political agency.

Chapter 1: What's Wrong with Critique?

As outlined in the literature review, I am deeply sceptical of placemaking even when it is proposed to be politically motivated or socially engaged. Rather than walking away from placemaking, however, my research project is concerned with trying to figure out how to be political despite my aversion to the placemaking agenda. How do we, curators and artists, come to these curatorial opportunities (and there are many) while maintaining the political? In this chapter, I want to think more about where critique, specifically in relation to the curatorial, comes from, how the literature and practice correspond, how critical curating became dominant and what it can and cannot do.

Critique functions in literature and in practice, and these two modes are interdependent. Critical curating, as addressed in the previous chapter, owes much to the emancipatory promises of critical theory. In the Marxist tradition, critical theory critiques forms of knowledge and the forms of practice that correspond to them. Critique is practical and emancipatory in the sense that it aims to firstly understand and then to contribute to a transformation of the social world.[1] Marx's 'immanent critique' rejects the dichotomy of an internal or external critique, meaning there is little distinction between the internal contradictions of a social order and how it exists in the social imaginary.[2] Immanent critique involves the detection of societal contradictions and the identification of ideology as the product of history and then suggests possibilities for emancipatory social change.[3]

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[1] Robin Celikates, *Conceptions of Critique in Modern and Contemporary Philosophy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
[2] Ibid. p. 101.
[3] Robert J. Antonio, 'Immanent Critique as the Core of Critical Theory: Its Origins and Developments in Hegel, Marx and Contemporary Thought', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 32.3 (1981), 330 <https://doi.org/10.2307/589281>.

When is curating critical? Where is the critical agency located? And could the ubiquity of criticality as a logic for curating lead to a loss of meaning? Criticality might be located in an exhibition of critical artworks, a programme of work by critical artists or a project organised by a critical curator with or without critical works or critical artists.[4] In what follows, I consider the location of criticality within the projects I have curated during my doctoral research and attempt to identify the critical agency of the curator and/or artist and/or public. Through understanding where critique functions as a productive challenge to the status quo, I can consider if and how it opens possibilities for a different reality. I will also consider whether this is a systemic issue, particular to the *Growth Point* project, or one specific to the infrastructure of a new town.

There are multiple variations of the critical in curating and art. This chapter is an attempt at disentangling them from one another while still recognising that, at a certain point, they cannot be smoothed out, nor should they be. Critique holds some power to shift the way we think and act – but this can equally be neutralised if it is absorbed and instrumentalised within the institution. What is now critique quite possibly could become hegemonic. As in Mouffe's concept of agonism and Ranciere's concept of dissensus, 'once a critical position has become widespread – or worse, dominant – then it can no longer be considered critical'.[5] To have a chance at transformational change through critical cultural practices, we must continuously reformulate the mode and methods of critique.

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[4] Paraphrased from Dave Beech, 'Notes towards the Critical Biennale', *Art & the Public Sphere*, 5.2 (2016), 167–84 <https://doi.org/10.1386/aps.5.2.167_1>.
[5] Ibid.

1.1 Socially Engaged Curating: A Critical Form?

In this section, I will consider whether there was critical agency in the curatorial form of *Growth Point* in Cranbrook (2015–2016). When I took on the project, I considered that a socially engaged and dialogic form[6] was the most suitable form for an artists' residency project that addresses the social and physical infrastructure of Cranbrook. This was an implicit rejection of object-based, studio-based art production in favour of a discursive mode of co-production in the community. It could be argued that through discursive practices, critique is a formal method that proposes more democratic alternatives outside art institutions and the art market. It has become dominant or even ubiquitous[7] in the field of art, charted by Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson in *Curating and the Educational Turn*,[8] and it is the chosen curatorial approach for critical curators such as Marion von Osten, who believes that, by establishing a discourse, the project radically challenges the neutrality of the art space and the related representational regime.[9]

My focus in Cranbrook was initially on the fostering of criticality through discursive events. I was concerned with how best to create spaces for exchanging views, public discourse, argumentation and participatory engagement. These objectives shaped the format of the residency, determined the artists that I invited and informed the concluding public event. The residency hosted two artists, Margareta Kern and Jonathan Hoskins, whose practices were discursive in nature, or, in other words, process-led and non-object-based. The processes they designed and entered into, often in collaboration with other people, became the

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[6] As defined and positioned in the practice and literature review in the Introduction.
[7] Marina Lopes Coelho, Corinne Rinaldis, and Lindsay Sharman, 'Interview with Paul O'Neill', *On Curating*, 22, (2014) <https://www.on-curating.org/issue-22-43/interview-with-paul-oneill.html#.YjnWKS-l2NK>.
[8] *Curating and the Educational Turn*, ed. by Paul O'Neill and others, (London: Open Editions, 2010), pp. 11–22.
[9] Marion von Osten, 'Another Criteria… or, What Is the Attitude of a Work *in* the Relations of Production of Its Time?', *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, 25 (2010), 56–69 (p. 69) <https://doi.org/10.1086/657463>.

material for producing their art. Neither of these artists make object-based work, preferring

rather to use documentary material, text and/or performance.[10] The content of both Hoskins'

and Kern's independent work is concerned with the aesthetics of social relations and how

communities represent themselves. The form of these kinds of practices (not just their

content) were well-suited to my discursive curatorial practice.

To mark the end of the residency period, I organised a symposium to share the work in

progress with all the participants and the public. There were presentations, video

screenings, an artist's workshop and a collaborative performance. I could have curated an

exhibition or edited a book, but I was trying to make a space for discussion. Working as a

curator or an artist in this dematerialised, discursive way was an implicit critique of the

commodification of art. To work in a socially engaged way, where we reached out from the

institution and directed our practice towards Cranbrook residents, was an explicit rejection of

elitist and inaccessible institutional structures of art.

As outlined in the literature review in reference to Kwon, Kester, Lacey and others,

discursive and situated socially engaged curating aims to expand art into the everyday lives

of people. The move away from the art institution and towards the community as a site for

co-producing art was a critical manoeuvre enacted by the community artists of the 1970s, as

I will examine more closely in Chapter 3. While these are still methods for socially engaged

art and curatorial practices today, my concern here is that their form alone no longer

challenges the status quo because the institution of art has expanded beyond the gallery

walls.

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[10] See Margareta Kern <http://www.margaretakern.com> and Jonathan Hoskins
<http://www.jonathanhoskins.com>.

John Roberts states that the expansion of the arts into the everyday is not liberatory; rather, after years of practising in this way (particularly in creative placemaking), it has normalised the 'extra-gallery situatedness,' and, what is worse, it has opened up art to capital.[11] The transformative potential of art, he states, is conditional and cannot be achieved through a spatial evacuation from the institution.[12] The critique of the art institution may be implicit in my socially engaged curatorial activity in Cranbrook, but could there be any real critical agency in the socially engaged form if the art institution that I was aligned with, Spacex, was fully supportive both financially and ideologically of this move? Along similar lines, the discursive mode of curating is no longer necessarily a critical challenge to the exhibition or an art object. As Marina Vishmidt points out, the critique that was ushered in by the discursive turn in curating brings added value; it bestows a 'discursive legitimacy' upon the institution, thereby increasing its cultural capital. If *Growth Point* as a socially engaged and discursive curatorial practice cannot make claims of criticality in terms of its form, where is its criticality located and how could it have otherwise claimed criticality?

While *Growth Point* was not critically reflexive of its discursive curatorial form, which has anyway been normalised and institutionalised, the project was a formal challenge to the institution of creative placemaking. I never 'sold' the project to the development consortium with a promise of beautifying Cranbrook or strengthening their community bonds. I had no intention of curating an artist-led, participatory planning workshop or another form of dressed-up community consultation. I was motivated by the possibility of holding the development consortium to account. In this way, the open brief and the intangible, discursive form were intentional and critical methods, performing a critique of the functionalisation of art for placemaking. This critical form led to some complications in terms of evidencing impact

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[11] *The Problems and Horizons of Socially Engaged Art Today: Prof John Roberts*, Feinart (University of Wolverhampton, 2021) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WAAmDo7Iurk>.
[12] Ibid.

for funders and for documentation purposes. However, it enabled a series of 'off-the-record' exchanges of sensitive information between stakeholders without the fear of recrimination.[13]

It should be said that Spacex, the organisation that employed me to curate the project, did not expect me to deliver a project that promised visibly ameliorative impact. The producers who invited me were aware that I positioned myself as a 'critical curator' and that I was more interested in the experience of the people living there than the positive image projected by the marketing material for Cranbrook. Spacex was eager to produce a programme that was both accessible to children and a general audience, as well as a programme that was politically engaged and investigative in nature.[14] The Arts Council England funding body takes the default position that any art project in the public realm in a new town with non-art audiences is 'good for you', so our presence there was enough, from ACE's perspective. While the form of *Growth Point* could be considered critical of placemaking, it is possible that it could be used by one of the placemaking advocates to add value to their portfolio. Delancey, the developers of major regeneration area Elephant and Castle, did exactly that when Eva Sajovic and Rebecca Davies produced a project that enabled community representation, often critiquing the changes. Delancey's support for and promotion of the artists' project, *People's Bureau*, demonstrated not only their willingness to engage with residents, but that they would welcome criticism.[15] However, in Cranbook, the artists and I did make it extremely difficult to do so by not producing any tangible artworks and forbidding any documentation of the public workshop.

[13] To be addressed in Chapter 2.
[14] See *The Post Political Curator's Handbook*, Section 2.
[15] Delancey, *Executive Summary: Delancey and CSR* (November 2015) <http://www.delancey.com/CSR_Policy_Mar_Internal_Version_Nov2015_Online_Version.pdf>.

This leads me to ask: if the boundaries of the art institution are always shifting to incorporate a growing field, is reflexive institutional critique always immediately recuperated by the art institution? What happens if the institutional arrangements of art are relatively new, as is the case for creative placemaking, where it might not yet be clear what the particular institutional value structures are that need critiquing?

On the one hand, I could argue that the critique of the institution of placemaking or public art commissioning has not yet been recuperated and may still have the potential to challenge. On the other hand, programmes curated under the rubric of placemaking, even if their content is critical of the system that upholds the neoliberal hegemony, are already merged with institutional structures within the established art world. Gregory Sholette would argue that such art and curatorial forms have become indistinguishable from the service economy produced within the non-profit structures and corporations that they sought to critique, mimic, or subvert, thereby doing little more than assuaging a 'system spinning out of control'.[16] It is too imminent a danger that critique in the context of placemaking could be co-opted.

1.2 Critical Curator and/or a 'Critical Attitude'

How does a curator practise critically? This is a slightly different question from locating the critical agency of a curatorial form, as addressed above, and is more about the agency of the curator to claim criticality and satisfy the conditions of critical practice. To help me to think through this, I will look to Foucault's idea of a 'critical attitude' and Irit Rogoff's notion of 'embodiment' to locate the criticality in my curatorial positioning. It may be a misleading exercise to distinguish the form of a curatorial project from the position of the curator or from

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[16] Gregory Sholette, *Art of Activism and the Activism of Art* (S.l.: Lund Humphries, 2021), p. 138.

the content of the project – much like it is to separate theory and practice, art and politics, analysis and action. I argue, however, that, in the process of analysis, these things can be separated out to locate critique and understand how it functions, while remembering that they do not exist in isolation or in opposition to each other.

Politically engaged curators, myself included, regularly claim criticality both explicitly and implicitly.[17] The introductory project text that I wrote for Spacex in 2016 indicates that the artists were interested in 'critically exploring' the new town of Cranbrook.[18] To 'critically explore' something indicates an investigative process that is critical in nature, or a certain disposition towards critique. I wrote that the artists had the critical agency, apparently removing myself from the process as it is presented to the public. I did this to exist in the background rather than being counted as an 'explorer'. This is a point that I will return to later, since I think it is typical of a curator to frame themselves in the background or in a supportive role. Before I do, I need to consider what a 'critical attitude' is in relation to critical theory, the objective of such an attitude and how I tried to practise this.

Critical theory is a philosophical method that is practically applicable in the search for societal transformation. First, the critical theorist must identify and explain what is wrong with society and who or what is responsible for the problem. Then they must indicate who is best placed (in terms of class) for changing it. The critical theorist must make it possible to measure and propose achievable goals for social transformation. That transformation, according to Horkheimer, 'has for its object [human beings] as producers of their own historical form of life.'[19] Critical Theory has emancipatory aims that follow from the nature of

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[17] See: *Cautionary Tales: Critical Curating*, ed. by Steven Rand and others (New York, N.Y.: Apexart, 2007). See: BAK (2009) 'What is Critical about Critical Curatorial Practices?' < https://www.bakonline.org/program-item/curating-beyond-exhibitions-critical-curatorial-practices-and-contemporary-society/>.
[18] Please refer to Section 2 in the *Post-Political Curator's Handbook*.
[19] Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York, N.Y.: Continuum Publishing Corp, 1982), p. 244.

critique. Critique contributes to emancipation and works 'to create a world which satisfies the needs and powers [of human beings]'.[20]

The aim of critical thinking, as outlined by Foucault, is to destabilise a framework or system that is otherwise axiomatic, thereby making it possible to think of other realities. Foucault rejects the idea that critique aims at an analytic of truth and legitimacy of knowledge. Instead, for him, critique is a transgressive and political practice. Foucault emphasises the practical aspect of his 'critical attitude', otherwise referred to as the 'art of critique', when he says that it is a 'mode of action... it is capable of exerting.'[21] This is what makes it so applicable and attractive to curators who want to work politically; the 'critical attitude' makes it seem possible. Foucault's art of critique is relatable to a curatorial practice; he claims that a transformative critique must affect what is happening here and now.[22] The here and now is important because, for Foucault, the philosopher or critical thinker who critiques the present moment is congnisant of their own enmeshed position within it. Embeddedness is a central aspect of curatorial practice, as it was for me in Cranbrook. I was working between the artists, the district council, funders, etc., under the assumption that my entangled position offered me a vantage point from which to organise an effective critical project. Arguably, such a heteronomous position with conflicting priorities *is* the position of the curator.[23] As Charles Scott argues, '[i]t finds itself to be composed of the elements that it is also putting in question'.[24]

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[20] Ibid. p. 246.

[21] Michel Foucault and Paul Rabinow, *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954-1984.*, (New York: New Press) 1997, p. 87.

[22] Christina Hendricks, ed. by Johanna Oksala and Robert B. Pippin, '*Foucault on Freedom* (review)' *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 22.4 (2008), 310–12.

[23] Angela Dimitrakaki and Nizan Shaked, 'Feminism, Instituting, and the Politics of Recognition in Global Capitalism', *On Curating*, Instituting Feminism, 52 (2021) <https://on-curating.org/issue-52-reader/feminism-instituting-and-the-politics-of-recognition-in-global-capitalism.html#.YjnetC-l2NL>.

[24] Charles E. Scott, 'The Question of Ethics in Foucault's Thought', *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 22.1 (1991), 33–43 <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071773.1991.11006929>.

After years of working 'critically', when I arrived in Cranbrook, I was immediately looking for discrepancies and imbalances of power. Before inviting Margareta, who then invited Jonathan, I undertook desk research into the establishment of the new town. I researched the existing and planned physical infrastructure of the new town, using the material publicly available via organisational websites, social media and local press. It became clear, if only from desk research, that the official representation of the master-plan differed considerably from the lived experience. I spent some time in Cranbrook meeting with the Growth Point Development Consortium representative and the community engagement officer. A 'critical attitude' is an ethical stance that explicitly aims to articulate and put right perceived wrongdoings as a transformative practice. Was this predisposition to identify a crisis indicative of a 'critical attitude'?

Looking around at the field, there are numerous curators and curatorial projects that are critical of social and political circumstances or are critical in the self-reflexive mode which are also political. New institutionalism, arriving in the 1990s and led by curators such as Charles Esche, Maria Lind and Nina Montmann is well-documented in Jonas Ekeberg's book of the same name, *From Within the Institution*. They critically and publicly examined collections and used public programming to reposition their role as curators to address issues in wider society. My assumption that to be political one ought to be critical arrives out of this mode of curating. However, what is less clear to me is how critical practice relates to political practice or political change.

For *Growth Point* in Cranbrook, practising critically as a curator meant that I identified a 'crisis' (of representation). From an implicated position, I set up a residency situation in which the artists could think critically about their context. Throughout the process I supported the artists by providing access to individuals, stakeholder organisations, resources and

space to develop an imaginative intervention into the crisis. I was a critic of their work and an interlocutor with shared interests. I also tried to shelter the artists from the expectations of the funding bodies, the development consortium and the commissioning agency, by introducing the project to them in one-to-one meetings, speaking on the artists' behalf and articulating the expected project outcomes to manage their expectations. This would, I hoped, allow the artists to work without the pressure to produce work that was compatible with placemaking. I curated the event at the Phoenix Theatre in Exeter so that the artists could enact this intervention in public, documentation of which is in the handbook. I also wanted to provide a forum for others to critically reflect on the whole project. There are two terms here that I want to consider: 'implicated' and 'crisis'. The former is inherent to the mode of curating, where curating is understood as producing the conditions for an autonomous practice to take place and a prerequisite for claiming criticality, as I will analyse below. 'Crisis', as I will argue, is constitutive of a critical project in terms of its content.

Theorist Irit Rogoff defines her use of the term 'criticality' as a curatorial method for the embedded and embodied practitioner. Rogoff echoes Foucault when she writes that modernist critique was judgement from a distanced position and, thus, ineffective, and too concerned with a resolution. In a more distanced and 'objective' critique of modernism, there is an assumption that meaning is immanent, that it is always already there and precedes its uncovering.[25] Out of frustration with artists and curators who claim to be critical by investigating and making manifest previously hidden or invisible power relations from a distanced position, Rogoff demands a different kind of critical practice:

> But what comes after the critical analysis of culture? What goes beyond the endless
> cataloguing of the hidden structures, the invisible powers and the numerous offences

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[25] Irit Rogoff, 'Smuggling – An Embodied Criticality',EIPCP (2008) <http://eipcp.net/dlfiles/ rogoff-smuggling.>.

we have been preoccupied with for so long? Beyond the processes of marking and making visible those who have been included and those who have been excluded? Beyond being able to point our finger at the master narratives and at the dominant cartographies of the inherited cultural order? Beyond the celebration of emergent minority group identities, or the emphatic acknowledgement of someone else's suffering, as an achievement in and of itself?[26]

The answer to her own questions is not to propose new cartographies and master narratives, nor to suggest that someone's suffering ought to go unacknowledged. There is a distinction between a critique from an implicated position as a transformative practice and a critique involving proposals for a straightforward replacement of the problematic framework. As Foucault, via Butler, maintains, the former is critique as a practice that 'suspends judgment' and 'offers a new practice of values based on that very suspension'.[27] None of the three authors are engaged with constructing another hegemonic infrastructure to replace the existing oppressive system. They do not engage in value judgement or propose actions for a new system, since their responsibility is to lay bare the systems and relations of power as well as theirs and our positions within it. For Rogoff, criticality as a transformative curatorial practice aims to promote a 'heightened awareness' and 'access a different mode of inhabitation'.[28] In other words, the role of a critical curator in the contemporary moment is to critique,

... the underlying assumptions that might allow something to appear as a convincing logic but to do so operating from an uncertain ground of actual embeddedness.[29]

[26] Ibid. p. 2.
[27] Judith Butler, 'What Is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue', EIPCP (2001) <https://transversal.at/transversal/0806/butler/en>.
[28] Rogoff, p. 2.
[29] Ibid.

In doing so, the curator comes to know about the oppressive power relations and hidden structures as an idea but also experience it as a lived reality. Living things out 'has a hugely transformative power as opposed to pronouncing on them'.[30]

Rogoff insists that critical cultural practices are transformative practices that can take up a liminal position through the ethics of occupation. 'Occupation', 'smuggling' and 'subterfuge' are key terms that she deploys as the methods of 'criticality'. The practice of smuggling involves a surreptitious introduction of contraband or destabilising forces that do not observe limits and borders. Transferred to critical cultural production, this might mean planting seeds of doubt or disrupting certain truths from deep within a situation or institution. Influenced by Rogoff, I sought to put a notion of curating as an embodied criticality into practice.

My work in Cranbrook was entirely contingent on organisational stakeholders. But rather than rejecting their support for fear of compromising the project's critical agency, I considered my contingent position as Rogoff's mode of 'embedded criticality'. The *Growth Point* project was contingent on the support of the development consortium, and, as such, I was complicit with the same institutions that I sought to critique. Rather than rejecting the support, I considered complicity as a necessary condition of embodied criticality. I agreed to work with Spacex to access the resources available to placemaking projects and to become a conductor for attention and funds according to the placemaking principles.[31] Furthermore, I saw my complicit position as an opportunity to 'smuggle' in critical artistic strategies for shifting perspectives and awareness among the stakeholders. I would have argued at the time that it was also central to an embodied criticality that required a recognition of our inescapable implication in the complex entanglements of contemporary life under capitalism.

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[30] Ibid.
[31] See evidence in *The Post-Political Curator's Handbook* Section 2.

I did not criticise the developers or their problematic operations, and I took for granted their assumption that all art was a 'good for you'. I placed myself as the linchpin between the institutional stakeholders and the artists as a curatorial manoeuvre to safeguard the artists from the administrative and/or political problematics of a socially engaged art project. I saw it as my priority to care for the artists, to facilitate the production and reception of their work without the distraction of complicity. This curatorial manoeuvre would ensure that the artists' critical agency was not burdened with the expectations and hopes of the institutional stakeholders and their placemaking prerogatives. They instead were burdened with the expectations of the residents and workers in Cranbrook. The intention was for the artists' criticality to function in relation to the participants they chose to engage and the crisis of representation in Cranbrook, not the organisational schema that got them there. That was my job, as I claimed in the critical form detailed earlier. My criticality served firstly as a mode of curating that reflexively critiqued the inexorable contingencies and acted as a buffer for the artists, but one was not more critical or more embedded than the other. Rather, it was the context in which we were embedded and the focus of our 'critical attitude' which differed.

What this required in practice was, admittedly, some dishonesty. Anyone involved in negotiations with bureaucracy and (cultural) industry must be to some extent dishonest to get what they think they need. By advocating for smuggling and subterfuge, Rogoff gives the critical curator permission to break the rules, for the sake of the integrity of the knowledge produced. Architectural historian and theorist Keller Easterling goes even further and mandates all cultural producers to hack state infrastructure through gossip, rumours and hoaxes (among other subversive strategies) for the sake of bringing about societal change.[32] For my part, with smaller ambitions, I simply agreed when asked if the project would support

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[32] Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (London; New York, N.Y.: Verso, 2014). Chapter 4.

community-building in the new town, and I explained to the developers that the artists were interested in working with residents to strengthen their identity as 'Cranbrookers'. I made an appointment for Margareta and me to visit a show home, posing as a couple looking for a house to buy. From this experience, we learned of the developer's dishonesty – e.g., evidence that shows that show homes are 20% larger than the actual homes built and that the custom-made furniture is always 20% smaller than normal-sized furniture. The discrepancy between what developers' agents show to prospective new residents and the lived reality was symbolic of a wider crisis of representation across all of Cranbrook.

I have tried to verify a claim to criticality through my own positioning or 'critical attitude', and, by Rogoff's measure, I think I satisfy the conditions of an embodied criticality. Nevertheless, I question whether a curator's critical efficacy is contingent on the artist's project or the content of the curated programme.

When one works with socially engaged artists in the way that I do, the artists are usually commissioned to make work with communities or the people in the organisations where they are 'in residence'. This means that my claim for criticality is to a certain extent contingent on their 'critical attitude' and/or the critical agency of their work. This is something to be explored in more depth in the next section, but it highlights a concern I have with Rogoff's consideration of criticality as a curatorial mode – at least in the field of socially engaged and 'placemaking' practices.

Curating, as indicated above when thinking about contingency and complicity, never exists in isolation and is dependent on the work and commitment of others. While the curatorial form can emerge from a tradition of institutional critique and the curator can practise with 'embedded criticality', are projects such as *Growth Point* necessarily critical if the artists and

their work are not? Is the content of a curated project critical if the position of the curator is compromised by a hegemonic institution? What remains unclear in Rogoff's thesis on curatorial critique is where a claim for criticality comes from and for whom. It is not at all clear who the critical curator's practice as embodied is a transformative process for. Is it the curator themselves? Or do they produce the conditions that facilitate a transformative experience for the audience? Rogoff does recognise that audiences and participants produce meaning through their encounters with the work and each other:

> … participants, be they audiences, students or researchers, produce meaning not simply through the subjectivities they project on works whose circuits of meanings they complete, but that they produce meaning through relations with one another and through the temporality of the event of the exhibition, or the class, or the demonstration or the display.[33]

The participants' encounter with the work may try to bring us close to the same critical transformation, but Rogoff does not consider the artwork's or the artist's relation to the critical agency of the curator. I think that this consideration of criticality as a mode for curating may be an insufficient transposition of critical praxis onto the practice of curating, even if it is 'embodied'. Curating has so many contingencies, moving parts, so many competing priorities and so much administration that it is difficult to reconcile an intellectual and transformational praxis of critique with the contingent and multifarious curatorial practice.

I have more concerns about Rogoff's 'embodied criticality' that I cannot resolve. Being dishonest, smuggling in radical ideas and inviting complicity is ethically problematic, and I

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[33] Rogoff, pp. 1–2.

feel a sense of shame when recounting it. More importantly, however, I am not sure that it is effective. I am not confident that critique has the power to be transformative if it upholds the system that it critiques. Is the argument for embedded criticality an excuse for not trying harder to find out ways to dismantle the hegemonic regime? I also do not think it is possible to live and practise totally autonomously, since all our lives are enmeshed within the systems that we may oppose, and ultimately this is the dilemma that Rogoff sought to address. But I do wonder whether her re-composition of an embodied criticality is effective. If the ambition of critical curatorial practice is to make opportunities for a transformative lived experience, I am not sure it is enough to simply be aware of and critical of one's own complicity. To help think through these questions further, I want to analyse the content of the *Growth Point* project and the artists' work more closely.

1.3 The Critical Agency of the Artists and their Work

As mentioned above, it may not be helpful to think of each component of *Growth Point* as distinct entities since they are interdependent. If the work that I commissioned from an artist is critical, one could infer that I am a critical curator and/or that the project has critical agency and/or that the artists' work is also critical. While bearing in mind the inextricability of each element of a curated project, I want to closely consider the actual residency that Margareta and Jonathan undertook, our collective intentions for the project, the critical agency of the participants and the outcome of the residency period.

I was invited to Cranbrook, and I brought with me some assumptions about Cranbrook being in crisis. How could it not be in crisis? Here was a profit-led, public-private consortium leading a new town development on a privately owned flood plain that residents had tried to

obstruct since before the plans were even drawn up.[34] *Growth Point* was shaped by my

prerogative to analyse the twenty-first century new town, with a specific interest in the

physical and social infrastructure. I sought to orchestrate a kind of investigation, working with

artists as 'co-investigators'. I invited the artists, and we all came with assumptions about the

new town and the development consortium, in part informed by our layperson's

understanding of housing development and the financialisation of real estate under

capitalism. We were also all very excited about Keller Easterling's latest book,

Extrastatecraft, which spoke to us of the perniciousness of planned cities and suburban

sprawls.

Easterling argues that new forms of power are being created and that they circulate through

less visible infrastructural systems that are beyond the reach of governments, such as

broadband provision in rural Kenya, global standardisation of all products and services

promoted through the International Organization for Standardization, infinitely replicable

suburban housing developments (like Cranbrook) and free trade zone cities like Dubai in the

UAE, Shannon in Ireland and the new capital of Kazakhstan, Astana. What links these

seemingly disparate entities is *extrastatecraft*: invisible rules that structure the space around

us to maintain social order.[35]

Margareta, Jonathan and I wanted to map the different intersections of state and corporate

power, the flows of capital and the spatial forms (architecture, town plans) that consolidate

the power of extrastatecraft.[36] Armed with a new way of understanding the banality of

twenty-first century new towns and garden villages, we started to see them as covers for

zones of exception – where citizens' rights are diminished and democratic participation is

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[34] 'Thousands Object to New Town' (2002) <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/2358875.stm>.
[35] Easterling, *Extrastatecraft*, p. 26.
[36] Ibid. p. 17.

foreclosed – through an uneasy melding of private and public investment. Our intention (borrowing these terms from Easterling) was to 'hack' into the infrastructure of Cranbrook, disrupt its 'smoothness' and redirect the flow of power and capital to those who have previously been excluded. We believed we could, and so do Easterling and Rendell, who both have confidence in the transformative possibilities of the critical cultural producer. Artistic interventions, Rendell argues, conjoin theory and practice to create spaces of representation to resist the 'dominant social order of global corporate capitalism'.[37]

The aim of my engagement with Cranbrook was to work together to critically challenge the developer consortium as an artistic and public project. I believed this could assist the residents in gaining more control over their lives in Cranbrook. If Easterling's theories about suburban developments being microcosms or models for reproducible extrastatecraft were correct, then our critical intervention in a small town in Devon could have significant consequences.

To critically challenge crises beyond the field of art is a complex enterprise. In *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice*, Boris Buden makes very clear what has been implicit in much contemporary art and curatorial practice: 'we (still) believe that art is intrinsically equipped with the power of criticism'.[38] The artists and I identified a 'crisis' in the substandard infrastructure in Cranbrook, and an absence of any political means for the residents to address the problems. As Buden goes on to say, 'a diagnosis of crisis implies the necessity of criticism'.[39] Others, including Butler, do not use the term 'crisis', perhaps because of its hyperbole, but Butler does describe the problem in which a critic chooses to

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[37] Rendell, 'Critical Spatial Practice', p. 2.
[38] Boris Buden, 'Criticism without Crisis: Crisis without Criticism', in *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice* (London: Mayfly, 2009), pp. 33–42 <http://mayflybooks.org/?p=205>.
[39] Ibid. p.33.

address an epistemological impasse wherein the existing order leaves discourse incoherent or unspeakable. [40]

Referring to the understanding of critical praxis in the previous section, the practice of critique responds to a crisis by producing ways of recognising and understanding the conflicts that constitute the impasse and set the ground for new knowledge or practices to emerge. Within this diagnosis of a crisis, which I saw as a central component of my method of critical curating in Cranbrook, is an assumption that curating, and art commissioning, could mount an effective (i.e., transformative) critique to facilitate resistance to the disenfranchisement imposed by developers, global capital and the neoliberal state. Curator and theorist Peter Wiebel said in 1994:

> It is no longer purely about critiquing the art system, but about critiquing reality and analysing and creating social processes. […] The aim of this social construction of art is to take part in the social construction of reality. [41]

This is a significant working assumption made by many who engage in 'critical' practices that I think needs to be examined more closely.

At the time of practising in Cranbrook, I was confident that the best art and curatorial practices shifted public perceptions about societal issues and energised audiences to act. This confidence comes from a milieu of the 'critically engaged' art world, for which Brian Holmes argues that an extra-disciplinary practice is an effective critical practice that involves

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[40] Judith Butler, 'Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street', *Transversal Texts* (2011) <https://transversal.at/transversal/1011/butler/en>.

[41] *Kontext Kunst: The Art of the 90s; Katalog zur Ausstellung 'Trigon '93', veranstaltet von der Neuen Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum, Graz, Steirischer Herbst '93, 2.10. - 7.11.1993*, ed. by Peter Weibel and Neue Galerie Graz, trans. by Barnaby Drabble (presented at the Trigon, Köln: DuMont, 1994), p. 67.

'learning the methods of another discipline and opening up its toolbox'.[42] Holmes (I imagine) and I would agree that art and curating can rupture the disciplinary field and investigate such remote practices in the military (Forensic Architecture), business (Pilvi Talaka) and psychiatry (Jakob Jakobsen) and contest them in their respective fields, as well as bringing the material back into the field of art for further scrutiny. Critical practice is a complex operation that 'never neglects the existence of the different disciplines, but never lets itself be trapped by them either'.[43] Holmes aligns the political potential of socially engaged art with forms of tactical media that sit very much outside the art institution,[44] but that often make their way back into the gallery space.

With the assumption that critical art practices could act upon the field of politics, economics and urban planning, we began speaking to people across the social spectrum in Cranbrook about their frustrations with the development consortium. The artists spent prolonged periods of time in the new town and developed strong connections with some of the residents and one county planning officer. This was how they spent what I termed their 'research residency', with the expectation that they would return soon to develop a more significant body of work.

The residency *Growth Point* facilitated a close engagement with the people and place which fostered trust. The period of research enabled the curator and artists to have access to a variety of stakeholders with varying degrees of power. I led the symposium *Living Together* at the Exeter Phoenix multi-arts venue, and I framed the theoretical and aesthetic concerns of infrastructure in a new town, offering relevant knowledge in support of the stakeholders

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[42] Brian Holmes, 'Extradisciplinary Investigations. Towards a New Critique of Institutions', *Transversal Texts* (2007) <https://transversal.at/transversal/0106/holmes/en>.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Brian Holmes, *Unleashing the Collective Phantoms: Essays on Reverse in Imagineering* (Brooklyn, N.Y: Autonomedia, 2008).

and recognition of the unique challenges of living in a new build development. Dr Ben Campkin, from UCL Urban Laboratory, titled his keynote *Images as Urban Infrastructure*. Torange Khorsani of architecture/artist agency Public Works and Prof Clive Barnett, Professor of Geography and Social Theory, University of Exeter, gave their perspectives on community-led development. There was a screening of the video work *Zonen* (2005) from artist Pia Ronicke and, finally, *Cranbrook Must Not Fail: A Convention of Future Experts*, a workshop devised by Kern and Hoskins. The artists initially planned on using the dialogue generated through the workshop to co-produce the radio play.

The artist-run workshop, *Cranbrook Must Not Fail: A Convention of Future Experts*, was open to the public to attend in person, but those who participated were mostly Cranbrook residents, Exeter university students and faculty, Growth Point Consortium planners and project officers, Spacex arts administrators, an architect/academic and myself. Through the workshop, *Cranbrook Must Not Fail*, Kern and Hoskins created a space – fortified by me as curator – that enabled the residents, together with consortium staff and planning specialists, to articulate their concerns. In this case, any potential conflict between the Growth Point Consortium and the residents of Cranbrook could not be made public, either as part of a curated programme or in open letters published in the local news, for example. Indeed, I am not permitted to include any of the participants' contributions in this PhD project, five years later. Before a collective could form in order to bring the residents of Cranbook's action to a public platform, the aggrieved parties censored themselves. They were not threatened by individuals, politicians or even the consortium. It was (and remains to be) the threat of market devaluation that foreclosed antagonistic exchanges.

The prompts for discussion which are detailed in the workshop script in the Handbook Section 3, were resolutely critical of the Growth Point Consortium, the administration of

Cranbrook and its infrastructural failings. ████████████████████████

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██ I want to break here to reflect

on what my intentions and expectations were for the critical function of *Growth Point*.

I was at that time, confident in art's function to critique, expose and hold accountable those

who were failing to provide basic infrastructure. The emotive energy fuelled a desire to hold

the developer consortium and the state to account for the major infrastructural failings. What

the residents expected when they moved to Cranbrook was not what they were

experiencing, and it was contributing to a poor quality of life and conflict among neighbours

and even threatened their homes. At the time of curating the project, I aligned my practice

with that of the artist and writer Gregory Sholette and as such I wanted to harness the

radical potential for cultural workers in collaboration with citizens to self-organise and insert

'itself into the ripped fabric of neoliberal cities *from below*'.[45]

The message from this position, which a number of artist-activists hold, and with which I

identified, is that if cultural producers amongst the counter-public 'dark matter'[46] heed the

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[45] Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture*, Marxism and Culture (London ; New York, N.Y.: Pluto Press, 2011), p. 178.

[46] Dark matter is an exciting concept that many theorists and practitioners (e.g. curator Nato Thomspon, artists/curators Chto Delat, writer/curator Kuba Szreder) whose work is concerned with the democratisation of the field of art have taken up. Sholette proposes that there is a shadow activity, out of view of the dominant art world comprising critics, art historians, collectors, dealers, curators and arts administrators. Dark matter includes informal practices such as home-crafts, makeshift memorials, Internet art galleries, amateur photography and pornography, painters, self-published newsletters and fanzines that are unrecognisable to and unconcerned within institutions. Power comes from dark matter's inherent precarity and Sholette makes a rallying cry to harness this potential for popular resistance. Ibid.

lessons of activist movements in history, then social change through art is possible. In Cranbrook, an aspect of *Growth Point* was an effort to galvanise a counter-public to collaboratively stage a critical-interventionist artistic practice. This I understood as essential since there was no town council yet, the land was privately owned and despite Devon County Council's involvement, they were beholden to the developers and their shareholders above the new communities.

It became very clear that this was not going to happen, since the critical agency of the residents and workshop participants was more effective than my curatorial criticality. In fact, my embodied criticality in practice compromised their critique to the extent that I had to leave the workshop early and cannot to this day use the discussion as evidence in my research. The curatorial project was perhaps, a solutionist approach to the problem – much like Sholette advocates – and responds with immediacy to the developers' shortcomings rather than considering the long-term and more systemic failings.

The discussion at the artist-run workshop *Cranbrook Must Not Fail: A Convention of Future Experts* was only possible because of the confidentiality that the artists insisted upon and enforced on behalf of the participants. The imperative for confidentiality for employees of the Growth Point Consortium was obvious: their jobs and livelihoods could be at risk for speaking disparagingly of the new town. The residents wanted to keep their identities hidden and needed to keep their concerns about the infrastructure, the housing construction and the governance of Cranbrook completely confidential. While they desperately wanted their concerns to be addressed by the consortium, airing their grievances in public had a direct impact on the price of the houses that they had just bought with mortgages secured against the market value. On the one hand, their homes and their futures were at stake if the crisis was publicised. But, on the other hand, their livelihoods were at risk because there were no

means of resolution through the political apparatus. The *Growth Point* project ended that day – principally because there was no more financial support; Spacex was forced to close all operations, but also perhaps because the project, as it was, could not provide what the residents needed.

1.4 Neo-Governmentality and De-Politicisation

This was not the outcome that I had intended, nor did the critical agency of the project function in the way that I had come to expect. However, it was only through attempting to mount a critical resistance through a curatorial project that I arrived at several conclusions on, or rather re-considerations of, critical curatorial practice. Most significantly, it became clear that critical curatorial practices do not necessarily function as a 'wake-up call' and a transformative call to action for those who are already 'awake' but unable to act. The question then becomes, why are these citizens unable to act? And what conditions or practices are required to motivate citizens to act?

The conditions within which the residents stopped themselves from speaking out about the failings in their new town, I would argue, is symptomatic of a neoliberal 'governmentality'. *Governmentality* is a term that refers to the art of governance, the strategies and tactics by which a society is rendered governable.[47] *Neoliberal governmentality* refers to an art of governance where the 'exercise of political power can be modelled on the principles of a market economy'.[48] The consequence of power being de-centred away from the state and aligned with the market is that citizens play an active role in their own self-government. It has been a central component in the production of conservative subjects, as was achieved

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[47] Michel Foucault and Michel Senellart, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–79*, Lectures at the Collège de France, 1st pbk ed., [Repr.] (New York, N.Y.: Picador, 2010), pp. 87–104.
[48] Foucault and Senellart, p. 131.

through Thatcher's 'right to buy', and has since become a condition of participation in a new town community. Self-governance or neoliberal governmentality is inevitable in circumstances where there is a total absence of or access to political institutions. Artistic and curatorial projects that rely only on the function of critique are ill-equipped to address political, economic, and infrastructural crises in de-politicised conditions. Criticality brought to bear on placemaking through a curatorial project was not productive because it got stuck at critique: there was no direction in which to expand the project or resolve the problems.

My critical practice revealed that the space created by art may be considered benign enough to host critique and conflict. The stakeholders agreed that within the safe space created by *Growth Point* (throughout the process of research as well as at the symposium and workshop), it would not threaten their livelihoods. Speaking with curators and artists as part of an 'art project' was perceived to be far enough removed from the consequences of making the concerns public that they could passionately share their concerns over the fairness and legality of the consortium's actions. That simultaneously meant that the space created by art was strong enough to keep residents safe from harm from the market. Paradoxically, the strength of the curated project is its perceived benign status.

However, by upholding the benign strength, the critical curator then supports the idea that these concerns need to be kept secret and can have no wider effect. This is an ethical dilemma that I faced in practice: is the criticality of the project at odds with the critical agency claimed by the participants? I think the answers to this question come down to how we as curators set up the expectations or objectives of transformative thought in critical curatorial practice; with multiple stakeholders claiming critical agency, we need to recognise that our curatorial intentions are not equivalent to political outcomes. Cultural theorist, and sometime

curator Sarat Maharaj addresses this succinctly and points towards a new mode of practice

that privileges the criticality of the constituents with whom the curator works:

> For as critique levels off into the everyday, the basis for an immanent strategy is
>
> laid, for teasing out transformative possibilities and alternatives from the grain of the
>
> globalizing process itself, for critical thinking 'from below'.[49]

Considering the various layers of criticality at play in my socially engaged project and looking

back to Cranbrook with a new perspective on the governmentality at work brings into focus

the most consequential impasse: the near total absence of the political. Cranbrook (and

perhaps all twenty-first century new town developments) has excluded the possibility for

public political conflict: the new town in its master-planning (no public space), its lack of any

local state infrastructure (only the private-public consortium) and the volatility of the UK

housing market (particularly new builds).

This does not, however, mean that it is completely evacuated of the political. In fact,

arguably the most significant function of my critical practice in Cranbrook, rather than to

politicise the residents or solve the new town's problems, was to reveal the already existing

political momentum and make it possible to diagnose the pressures that tried to foreclose it.

1.5 Conclusion

What possibilities are there for the critical curator if the spaces in which they curate are de-

politicised? One must recognise that critique is at risk of being either subsumed into the

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[49] Sarat Maharaj, 'Merz-Thinking – Sounding the Documenta Process Between Critique and Spectacle', *On Curating*, Curating Critique, 9 (2007), 11–18.

neoliberal order and instrumentalised by its actors or rendered inoperable due to its capacity

to harm. What might have looked like a failure to productively critique the problems in

Cranbrook in fact demonstrated that what the political curator ought to be paying attention

to, were the arrangements which obfuscated any opportunity for critique.

I would now argue that it is possible for the curatorial project to be a space that is

simultaneously strong enough to host a critical exchange between residents of a new town

and benign enough to avoid instrumentalisation and market harm. To consider how this

benign/strong space to hold the political can be enacted, the curator needs to understand

better the context within which opportunities for political conflict are supressed. The next

chapter will explore the processes of de-politicisation and the implications of this for

politically engaged artistic practices. I will consider how they can serve as a diagnostic tool

to discern the processes of de-politicisation and hopefully the latent political that is obscured

by the mechanisms of politics and neoliberal governance.

Chapter 2: De-Politicisation

The previous chapter articulated how a critical curatorial project with the aim of motivating citizens to revolt against their hegemonic conditions and express their own political agency resulted in self-censorship. Residents are treated like disgruntled customers by housing developers, but they are more than that – they are disenfranchised citizens who have no recourse to achieving fair living standards. In Cranbrook in 2015-2016, the residents lived in a vacuum of accountability where the state authorities had little influence and the corporate authorities remained answerable to their shareholders. Such structural problems cannot be resolved by an art project, despite its creators' commitment to crafting a critical and transformative engagement. By reflecting on the *Growth Point* project in Cranbrook, I recognised that we were working in conditions where any access to political engagement was foreclosed by the corporate design of the market-led development. In an example of Foucauldian governmentality, residents stopped themselves from speaking out to avoid reputational damage and a consequential drop in property values. Moreover, both the homeowners and tenants knew that if bad press discouraged new people from moving to the new town, then the preconditions for the next phase of development would not be satisfied. The next phase in development was supposed to bring a supermarket, a town centre and a GP surgery – urgently needed facilities. The ambitions of the critically engaged project could never have been met, or if they had, it would have been done without the consent or involvement of the residents.

Through trying to understand my disappointment with the function of criticality in the context of the new town, I have come to understand the link between de-politicisation and the curatorial. In this chapter I discuss the processes of de-politicisation and how they impact cultural production and placemaking, particularly in a new town. I want to consider the New

Town Movement and de-politicisation together, since the association between these two entities has been little theorised, and they are, I would argue, intrinsically related.

The post-war new towns were experimental testing grounds for new modes of planning and governance, including de-politicisation. In Easterling's words, such arrangements are a 'repeatable formula' that would come to be reproduced elsewhere. What we find in the new towns of this century is a near total de-politicised enclosure. Such patterns of governance and planning are not commonplace; these conditions are specific to new settlements that are created in the image of their master-planners. The history of de-politicisation as inscribed in new towns is compelling and unwritten. However, this PhD project does not have the scope to capture it all. Instead, I am interested in capturing one particular part of this history – namely, how these processes of de-politicisation that shape the new towns of the twentieth and twenty-first century are entangled with the art produced in them. Coming to understand the groundworks of de-politicisation is crucial if curators are trying to work critically and politically.

I want to outline what is at stake for cultural production in de-politicisation and consider the theory's usefulness and limitations. The reader will notice that I am discussing art and cultural production rather than curating or the curatorial. It was only in the 1990s that exhibition organising was professionalised and that the curator emerged as a creative agent.[1] Later in the chapter, I will address the figure of the curator and their implication in the de-politicising processes to consider how a 'post-political curator' might practise in the future.

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[1] Paul O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: The MIT Press, 2012), p. 17.

2.1 Theories of De-Politicisation

The process of de-politicisation involves the denial of real political choice, the delegation of decision-making to technocratic mechanisms, the avoidance of conflict and debate in favour of consensual procedures, alongside a growing public disengagement from politics. As was clear in Cranbrook, residents do not know how they can influence change in their communities, towns and cities without doing harm. Because of multiple state and corporate stakeholders with competing interests, it has become impossible to know who is responsible for decision-making and who can be held accountable.

Theorists such as Wendy Brown, David Harvey, Chantal Mouffe, Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Ranciere and Slavoj Zizek[2] have written about the evacuation of the political and the post-political condition in slightly different ways, but they all agree on the source of de-politicisation: global corporate power, the dominance of neoliberal thinking and the rise of consensus-orientated and technocratic governance. Writing specifically about the de-politicisation of towns and cities, the geographer Erik Swyngedouw defines the condition in the following way:

> The evacuation of the political… that defines the very possibility of the polis… characterised by the rise of a neoliberal governmentality that has replaced debate, disagreement and dissensus with a series of technologies of governing that fuse around consensus, agreement, and technocratic management.[3]

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[2] Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006) <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400827473>; Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, Wo Es War (London; New York, N.Y.: Verso, 1999); Jean-Luc Nancy, 'The Political and/or Politics', *Oxford Literary Review*, 36.1 (2014), 5–17 <https://doi.org/10.3366/olr.2014.0083>; David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 1. publ. in paperback, reprint. (twice) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Chantal Mouffe, 'Deconstruction, Pragmatism and the Politics of Democracy', in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, ed. by Simon Critchley and Chantal Mouffe (London; New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 1996).
[3] Erik Swyngedouw, 'The Post-Political City', in *Urban Politics Now: Re-Imagining Democracy in the Neo-Liberal City*, ed. by BAVO (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2007), pp. 58–76. (p. 58).

The post-political is both a condition wherein genuine political engagement is foreclosed or obscured and an analytical frame to trace and unpack a process of de-politicisation. The post-political condition is a hegemonic order in which the antagonistic dimension of the political has not been sublimated, but instead repressed.[4] It is the outcome of de-politicisation and does not exist (yet) as a *fait accompli*, but there are post-political arrangements and policies which try to impose a totalising logic of consensus.

As an analytical frame, 'post-political' does not imply that the political is in the past. Instead, it is a prompt to recognise that what follows 'post' is something to think about. It marks an enquiry into the meanings, processes, disappearances and possibilities of the political. A post-political analysis is one that deploys a critical lens on arrangements and processes of de-politicisation.[5] For clarity in the following text and unless otherwise stated, I will refer to the condition as *de-politicised* and the analytical lens as *post-political*.

Swyngedouw likes to think of the process of de-politicisation as a set of densely intertwined processes that operate on the registers of the pragmatic, the ideological and the ontological.[6] Swyngedouw's thoughts on the de-politicised city are helpful because his theories are grounded in spatial justice and urban politics, both pertinent for analysing new towns. I will gloss the pragmatic, ideological and ontological dimensions of de-politicisation here; later in the text, I will draw upon key aspects in new towns to illustrate how they operate.

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[4] Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*, Thinking in Action (London; New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2005), p. 18.
[5] Japhy Wilson and Erik Swyngedouw, 'Seeds of Dystopia: Post-Politics and the Return of the Political', in *The Post-Political and Its Discontents* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 1–22, JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt14brxxs> [accessed 22 March 2022].
[6] Ibid. p. 1.

Pragmatic de-politicisation involves politicians shifting to an indirect governing relationship. The state and its politicians seek to persuade the *demos* that they can no longer be reasonably held responsible for a certain issue, policy field or specific decision[7] and, therefore, must defer responsibility to tools, mechanisms and institutions, e.g., the market, the EU, the Arts Council England and the New Town Development Corporation.

The consequences of this regime of de-politicisation are that political contradictions or antagonisms become reduced to policy problems to be managed by experts, policed by regulators and legitimised through public consultations. Democratic accountability is little more than performative as our representatives become subordinate to non-state, multilateral institutions. Widespread de-politicisation and the privatisation of once public bodies (British Gas, National Rail Services) leaves very little that the government is accountable for and turns over all responsibility to the market.

In the process of de-politicisation, there emerges a distinction between *politics*, which are the mechanisms, systems and bureaucracies that allocate resources, and *the political*, which is the struggle or antagonistic relations between groups for power and resources. This is the *ontological* dimension of de-politicisation. Institutional politics de-politicise the political through erasure of the political as a distinct category from institutional politics. Theorists of the post-political draw a distinction between *the political* and *politics* (Mouffe) or in other terms *democracy* and *policing* (Ranciere) and *politics* and *post-politics* (Zizek). Because I take up Mouffe's notion of 'agonistic pluralism' in the next chapter, I will choose her terms when distinguishing politics from the political.

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[7] Matthew Flinders and Jim Buller, 'Depoliticisation: Principles, Tactics and Tools', *British Politics*, 1.3 (2006), 293–318 (p. 296) <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.bp.4200016>.

Key to this aspect of ontological de-politicisation is recognising that the political is neither a naturally occurring phenomenon nor is it transcendental throughout time. It is a constructed and contingent condition that involves antagonistic exchange. Politics are the institutions and mechanisms of social order that are built on top of the political. The political is what lies beneath politics, and that which de-politicisation attempts to obscure or deny. To recognise that the political is contingent or groundless is to recognise that the social order of institutional politics can be undermined and that radical change is indeed possible. If we do not see institutional politics as constructed on top of the political, then we can only interact with the politics (see pragmatic de-politicisation) which serves to conserve and optimise the dominant order. Mouffe says that we are unable to think politically because we cannot grasp the ontological dimension of the political.[8]

The residents of Cranbrook censored themselves because they felt there were no means by which they could address and rectify their town's infrastructural weaknesses. There was no alternative for them, other than making things even worse. Ideological de-politicisation operates to place certain issues beyond the scope of politics. What was once considered central to political contestation – such as the distribution of scant resources or state intervention into the market – is no longer considered a debatable concern since, in the words of Margaret Thatcher, '[t]here is no alternative' (T.I.N.A.).[9] What was there to debate? Facilitated and upheld by the pragmatic modes of de-politicisation, the very notion that there could be an alternative to the existing regime of neoliberalism is unthinkable.

Political conflict is made more difficult by the absence of any public space, or space that is not privately owned to which residents have free access to gather, protest or simply be seen.

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[8] Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, p. 9.
[9] Margaret Thatcher, 'Speech to Conservative Women's Conference' (Festival Hall, London, 1980).

Judith Butler states that political claims are made by bodies as they appear and act.[10] For the public and thus political sphere to emerge, it is imperative that bodies are seen and voices are heard and that the spaces of appearance can intervene in the spatial organisation of power. This is not entirely foreclosed in a new town with no public space, but it is a physical and legal obstacle.

Every new town built in the twenty-first century is on privately owned land (the one exception is Ebbsfleet, where a few hectares have just been purchased by the development corporation from the landowners that the council sold it to in the first place) and the trend for privatisation is encroaching on public land in villages, towns and cities, too.[11] These factors: T.I.N.A., disengagement from political life and the absence of public space, for Habermas at least,[12] amount to the decline of the public realm as a political institution and the disappearance of the public sphere. The conditions of a new town or enclosed development is what Stefan Notowny calls the 'radical inclusion of neoliberalism'.[13] This describes a condition, as explained by Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge in their 1972 book *Public Sphere and Experience*, in which there is no longer the public vs private dichotomy of the public sphere but instead there is 'the oscillation between exclusion and intensified incorporation'[14] of the sphere of production.

In operation, consensus politics or the post-political consensus can most clearly be observed in governance structures related to urban planning and development policy. It is uncritically

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[10] Butler, 'Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street'.

[11] See: 'Pseudo-Public Space: Explore the Map – and Tell Us What We're Missing', 24 July 2017, section Cities <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/jul/24/pseudo-public-space-explore-data-what-missing>.

[12] Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought (Cambridge, M.A.: MIT Press, 1996), p. 62.

[13] Stefan Nowotny, 'Clandestine Publics', *Transversal Texts* (2005) <Clandestine Publics Stefan Nowotny Translated by Aileen Derieg>.

[14] O. Negt / A. Kluge, *Offentlichkeit und Erfahrung. Zur Organisationsanalyse bürgerlicher und proletarischer Offentlichkeit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972), p. 37.

accepted that urban development on a large scale will lead economic regeneration,

attracting investment capital and consumers.[15] Mega projects, like Ebbsfleet Garden City[16]

or Thamesmead Regeneration,[17] are viewed as providing a solid foundation for fostering

future growth and functional transformation. This growth is expected to go beyond the city

limits and support a wider regional recovery and internationalisation strategies.[18]

This kind of development is a major shift away from more traditional approaches of

redistribution[19] or broadening ownership,[20] for example. In order for such mega projects to

be possible, a form of institutional or quasi-institutional governance is required that takes the

form of horizontal associational networks of private (market), civil society (usually Non-

Departmental Public Bodies) and state actors providing what until recently was provided or

organised by national or local government.[21] Such arrangements that are beyond-the-state

do not employ democratic debate at any level, but they do engage in 'participatory'

processes with endless consultations that are inclusive but engineered to arrive at

consensus with zero accountability.[22]

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[15] Swyngedouw, 'The Post-Political City', pp. 60–61.

[16] See: £310million investment from central government: Ebbsfleet Development Corporation, *Ebbsfleet Development Corporation Corporate Plan 2016-2021* (Kent, 2017) <https://ebbsfleetdc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PUBLIC-Corporate-Plan-V1.pdf> [accessed 9 September 2020].

[17] See regeneration plan: *Thamesmead and Abbey Wood Oppprtunity Area Planning Framework* (Greater London Authority, December 2020) <https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/thamesmead-and-abbey-wood-opportunity-area-documents>.

[18] *The Globalized City: Economic Restructuring and Social Polarization in European Cities*, ed. by Frank Moulaert, Arantxa Rodríguez, and E. Swyngedouw, Oxford Geographical and Environmental Studies (Oxford ; New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[19] Such as building on brownfield sites or demolition and redevelopment.

[20] Such as community land trusts, housebuilder-led estate regeneration and council development vehicles such as Brick by Brick, see: Brick by Brick <https://wearebrickbybrick.com>.

[21] Erik Swyngedouw, 'Governance Innovation and the Citizen: The Janus Face of Governance-beyond-the-State', *Urban Studies*, 42.11 (2005), 1991–2006 (p. 1992).

[22] 'Soundings: The Consultation Industry in the Elephant & Castle', *Corporate Watch* (2013) <https://corporatewatch.org/soundings-the-consultation-industry-in-the-elephant-castle/> [accessed 2 December 2021].

2.2 Curating and De-Politicisation

De-politicisation narrows the scope of political action by political actors and, most importantly, citizens. It is a process which strips individuals and communities of their agency to effect change.

Curating regularly contributes to the processes of de-politicisation. Even those curators who claim that they practise critically, or politically, and those who present programmes about politics are, in fact, often upholding the evacuation of the political from civil society. This can be seen when curatorial projects become a proxy for actually existing political struggle and the public outcomes result in performative entertainment and publicity rather than addressing those in positions of power.[23]

If I re-examine *Growth Point* in Cranbrook through a post-political analytic frame, I can see that I chose a political problem to investigate, critique and perhaps even 'resolve' through an artists' commission and public programme. Together with the artists, I did my best to develop a compelling programme for both the residents and members of the wider public. Ultimately, however, I never had the power or access to resources that the community really needed. The issues that the residents in Cranbrook had ought to have been debated publicly with all parties involved, followed by action being taken to address concerns including the adequate allocation of provision. Instead, the residents and other stakeholders remained impotent. As a politically engaged curator, I felt that it was my responsibility to 'help' the community to articulate the problem.

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[23] Such criticism has been levelled at the Seventh Berlin Biennale for example. See Jakob Schillinger, 'The 7th Berlin Biennale', *Artforum International*, Summer (2012) <https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/201206/the-7th-berlin-biennale-31092>.

Some of the most well-meaning socially engaged art projects appear to have little more than a therapeutic function that helps community members to feel better about their predicament – but the problems remain.[24] Some socially engaged art projects silo a political problem into the field of art, which may risk exhausting, exploiting and/or pacifying community members so that they ultimately give up their struggle.[25] This leads me to question: if the form of socially engaged art and curating has the capacity to uphold de-politicisation, can it also resist it?

It is arguable that the method of shielding artists from the messiness of funders, state agencies and developers puts artists on a pedestal, reinforces the fantasy of the artist as isolated genius and ultimately de-politicises them. Whichever the outcome for the residents of Cranbrook, the artists and I were left feeling frustrated because, despite my commitment to emancipatory politics, I was unable to support them in resolving the problems in their town. The questions that we curators must ask ourselves at this stage include the following: is it possible to practise within such situations and not collude with the post-political infrastructure? What conditions are required, in the specific context of a de-politicised new town, for a socially engaged art project to galvanise a community and lead to community-led direct action?

2.3 Post-War New Towns, De-Politicisation and Art

My assertion is that the master-planned new town has always been a site for experiments in de-politicisation or disenfranchisement. The coal mining towns of the late nineteenth century

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[24] See CREATE, the curatorial agency that has organised several projects that attempt to address social problems, but I argue that they uphold the processes of de-politicisation including *People's Bureau* (2018), *Box Chicken* (2013)*, School of the Imagination* (2013). CREATE <www.createlondon.org>.
[25] See https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/museum-life/lansbury-micro-museum-planning-the-dream, and https://createlondon.org/event/the-peoples-bureau/.

(Bolsover, Cresswell), the company towns of the early twentieth century (Bournville, Port Sunlight) and the garden cities of the 1920s (Letchworth, Welwyn) were paternalistic and commercial experiments. They were built on land bought by the companies, or in the case of the garden city movement, by social reformist Ebenezer Howard, and they were planned to control their populations. They were not democratically instated, and residents had no influence over planning or administration in the towns, resources were tightly controlled and behaviour was policed. However, my focus here is on the post-war new towns movement since it is simultaneously crucial to the evolution of participatory planning and neoliberal de-politicisation, both of which are now ubiquitous throughout cities and institutions. There was space and opportunity to act politically in the post-war new towns, and this was often facilitated by community artists.[26]

Some of the towns built as part of the New Town Movement are deemed 'successful'[27] (Milton Keynes, Harlow), while others are considered eyesores (Skelmersdale, Craigavon). Despite their differences, they share the same initial aims: to attract and populate an uninhabited space with residents and industry, assemble an appropriate infrastructure and establish educational and recreational facilities which would all be new for both the planners and architects as well as the people who arrived. It is an endeavour that involves decision-making that is highly contested and political in nature: deciding on how people live.

New towns were structurally utopian, and they were new beginnings charged with the responsibility of solving the problems of existing towns and cities. New methods were sought for holistically generating culture, community, economy and well-being. The new towns were testbeds for architecture, engineering, the social sciences, art and culture. The successes of

[26] See: *The Post-Political Curator's Handbook* Section 4: "Belated".
[27] Transport, Local Government and the Regions Committee Report, *'The New Towns: Their Problems and Future'* (30 June 2008) <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmselect/cmcomloc/889/88902.htm>.

the New Town Movement were replicated elsewhere – including (or especially) the technocratic de-politicised development corporation.

In this section I will look at snapshots from the history of cultural production in post-World War Two new towns to tease out the political conditions from which the artworks emerged.

2.4 The De-Politicising Development Corporation

After World War Two, the new Labour Government addressed the housing crisis through the designation of new towns. The creation of new town development corporations was necessary as part of a post-war consensus to rebuild the country. Each new town had a development corporation comprised of (unelected) politicians, civil servants, planners and architects who became responsible for the master-planning and management of the new towns until their maturation. The development corporation, its institutional mechanisms and its arms-length management practices are often referred to as 'statecraft' and are pragmatic apparatuses of de-politicisation.[28] By the late 1960s, on the wave of civil rights movements and a new political consciousness, such pragmatically de-politicised entities were no longer fit for purpose. I want to consider what impact this shift away from public accountability and towards the development corporation as a top-down technocratic agency had on cultural production.

Development corporations were exceptionally powerful agencies with the jurisdiction to make compulsory purchase orders, acquire huge swathes of land and capture the increase

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[28] Swyngedouw, 'The Post-Political City'.

in land value[29] as they granted themselves planning permission and developed the infrastructure. The development corporation was a new form of independent organisation wherein the country's most visionary master-planners were undemocratically appointed by central government to spearhead utopian master-plans – as can be seen in the first wave of British new towns such as Lewis Silkin in Stevenage (1946), Frederick Gibberd in Harlow (1947) and A.V. Williams with Victor Pasmore in Peterlee (1948).

Development corporations combined the totalising and top-down logic of late modernity with a nationwide post-war consensus. The first wave of new towns was pregnant with political problems (e.g., how to balance council housing provision with private ownership), but their governing bodies were created especially so that they could plan and build without the interference of democratically elected local and regional councils. The New Town Association (of development corporations) claimed that their *elective* democratic character meant they more legitimately represented the changing character of the New Town areas and could provide a framework for understanding local concerns.[30] However, their fundamentally undemocratic constitutions had consequences for the impending residents and the cultural production.

Development corporation accounts were not subject to public scrutiny. For the earliest new towns, such as Harlow and Peterlee, the budgetary conditions of public art were not subject to deliberation, nor was the commissioned artwork partisan. Influenced by the leading planners and architects at the time (e.g., the members of CIAM including Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, Hannes Meyer), new town master-planners felt that was their responsibility

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[29] Department for Communities and Local Government: London, *Transferable Lessons from the New Towns* (Oxford: Department of Planning Oxford Brookes University, July 2006), p. 48 <https://www.westminster.ac.uk/sites/default/public-files/general-documents/Transferable-Lessons-from-the-New-Towns.pdf>.

to bring high modernist art to a broader public. The planners believed that the synthesis of planning, architecture and art could produce healthier and more industrious citizens.[31] Art was promoted as having a social function and was no longer only a public monument, a curio of the elite or a commodity on the art market.

This democratisation of elitist art can be clearly seen in Harlow, where the Development Corporation, under the direction of Master Planner Frederick Gibberd, incorporated sculpture into every neighbourhood in the town plan so that its mostly working-class residents would encounter it in their daily lives.[32] Gibberd established The Harlow Art Trust in 1953 to acquire works for his plan, including left-overs from the Festival of Britain (Barbara Hepworth) and new site-specific commissions from his friends, Henry Moore, Lynne Chadwick and dozens more lesser-known art students.

Ironically, sculpture installed in the public realm then became a defining totem of the visionary democratic settlement. The planners held the conviction that the integration of contemporary art and artists into the process of urban planning, and within the resulting neighbourhoods, would create and bond communities from groups of strangers. The plans, the architecture and the public art of post-war new towns were inscribed with the ideology of their genesis.

Peterlee in County Durham, designated a couple of years later in 1948, was the only new town built at the request of the people living on the land. The labourers in the surrounding

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[31] Urbanism is the framework within which architecture and the other plastic arts must be integrated to perform once more a social function. This integration will be achieved through a synthesis of effort contributed by architects, painters, and sculptors working in co-operation in the true communion of a single team. CIAM 1952 *The Heart of the City: Towards the Humanisation of Urban Life ; CIAM 8*, ed. by Jacqueline Tyrwhitt, and Jaqueline Tyrwhitt, Documents of Modern Architecture, Nachdr. d. Ausg. London, Lund Humphries, 1952 (presented at the International Congress for Modern Architecture, Nendeln: Kraus, 1979).
[32] Andrew Hunter and Roman Vasseur, *Harlow Town Centre North Public Art Strategy: Integration of Sculpture into the Development* (Harlow: Essex County Council, December 2009)
<https://www.placeservices.co.uk/media/23969/Harlow-Town-Centre-North-Public-Art-Strategy.pdf>.

mines were living in inadequate housing and pressured their MP to request new town status

from central government. Such democratic foundations perhaps prepared the ground for a

more radical approach to planning and public art. The abstract painter Victor Pasmore took

up the position of Consulting Director of Urban Design, where he worked alongside

corporation architects Peter Daniel, Frank Dixon and Theo Marsden and Chief Architect

Harry Durrell to produce 'low cost and low-rise housing of brick construction arranged in

units of single, semi-detached and terraced blocks' and to 'devise a new approach to

community development'.[33]

The new collaborative working methodologies broke down the autonomous categories of

planner and artist in what the modernist planners would have called a 'true communion'[34] of

art and life. The 'communion' resulted in a collaborative *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which included

whole estates designed as artistic compositions and the sculptural concrete structure, the

Apollo Pavilion.

Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, art continued to serve as a symbol of democracy in

a less than democratic context. Central government permitted development corporations to

trade local democratic accountability for strong leadership. While devoid of a democratic

constitution, the development corporations assigned a civilising and regenerative function to

public art, charging it with political character. As David Roberts argues in his revision of the

modernist 'total work of art', artistic synthesis of the aesthetic, political and spiritual was

bound up with the desire for social and cultural renewal.[35] The development corporations of

[33] Victor Pasmore, *Victor Pasmore: Towards a New Reality*, ed. by Neil Walker (London: Lund Humphries, 2016),
p. 166.
[34] Tyrwhitt and Tyrwhitt, p. 168.
[35] Roberts, p. 2.

the early new towns are only an example of early, pragmatic moves towards de-politicisation, but this already had some impact on the role of the artist.

2.5 Participation in Planning, Participation in Art?

The 1946 Town and Country Act gave the government complete authority to clear slums, or any neighbourhoods that they deemed squalid. By the 1960s, communities across the UK had started to revolt against the sweeping destruction that they had no way of objecting to or forestalling.[36] It was the same legislative act that paved the way for the de-politicised development corporations and the creation of many of the new towns that were subsequently considered failures.[37]

In response to the civil rights protests and subsequent changes in legislation, leading planning theorist Paul Davidoff wrote in 1965 in the American Institute of Planners Journal about the political dimension of city planning which could not sit in isolation from the shifting terrain of policy, calling not only for the planning profession to engage in the contention surrounding political determination but also for planning processes to encourage democratic urban growth. He went even further to claim that planners ought to be advocates representing the diverse constituencies concerned with the future of community.[38]

A new generation of citizens were in favour of a more participatory form of politics that they believed could transform the unequal relationships between the state and society and thus emancipate and empower citizens. They took an anti-statist position and demanded more

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[36] See: *Slum Clearance Compensation Bill (1956)* (House of Commons, Westminster, 1956). See: *Slum Clearance Update* (House of Commons, 1957).

[37] *The Needs of New Communities* (London: Ministry of Housing and Social Government, 1967).

[38] Paul Davidoff, 'Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning', *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 31.4 (1965), 331–38 (p. 332) <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944366508978187>.

involvement in political processes, and their major adversary was the centralised welfare state. Calls for more citizen participation coupled with state retrenchment led to a situation where participatory discourses and techniques became central to decision-making processes in a variety of sectors of society – especially that of town planning.[39]

The changes were integrated into the 1968 Town and Country Planning Act, with new legislation dictating that consultation with the public must form part of any development plans by local councils. The international growth in participatory, rather than representative, democracy was coupled with a growth of public interest in the urban environment. In 1969, *The Skeffington Report: People and Planning. Report of the Committee on Public Participation in Planning* was prepared by Arthur Skeffington MP and the Ministry of Housing and Local Government after they had conducted a major survey into how citizens wanted to be involved in state-led planning. *Participation* was defined as follows:

> The act of sharing in the formulation of policies and proposals… which leads to greater understanding and co-operation rather than to a crescendo of dispute.[40]

Notable was the last part of the definition, where the aim of participatory planning was to arrive at consensus. Conflict was eliminated from the state's version of participation, foreclosing any real possibility of the political in the Mouffian sense.

Planning bureaucracies responded to the discontent and the Skeffington Report by incorporating participatory processes into their protocols. Participation in planning was used rather ambiguously from the beginning, and often abused where councils had little regard for

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[39] T Kaminer and M Krivy, 'Introduction: The Participatory Turn in Urbanism', *Footprint*, 7.2 (2013), p. 2.
[40] *People and Planning: Report of the Committee on Public Participation in Planning*, ed. by Great Britain (London: HMSO, 1969), first para.

their local citizens.[41] The vague and contradictory notions of participation in planning

evolved into specific processes of consultation where the views of community groups and

individuals were sought by planning committees.[42] Sherry Arnstein's *Ladder of Citizen*

Participation deemed consultation, as opposed to true participation, as nothing more than

tokenism. Despite the ubiquity of Arnstein's ladder among policy-makers and planners

throughout the 1960 and 1970s, still today the government continues with the tokenistic form

of consultation[43] in every statutory process.[44]

Participation in art also emerged in the late 1960s alongside the calls for wider political

participation by citizens living in western liberal democracies. I want to highlight here that it

was not simply the two independent disciplines shifting in parallel; rather, it was the new

fever for participation that brought together planning and artistic practices into proximity and

collaboration. Engaging artists in the process of planning was a form of opening planning to

the non-professional public and, thereby, one of the methods by which planning was moving

towards a less hierarchical and more democratic model.

This was combined with a shift in cultural policy from central government which advocated

for the arts to have a central role in any 'civilised community'.[45] Involving artists in the

process of planning was a means to further civilise and democratise the discipline. This can

be seen in the activities of David Harding in his role as Town Artist for Glenrothes New Town

from 1968 onwards. A triangulation of artist, planners and public emerged as a set of equal

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[41] Peter Shapely, 'Introduction', in *People and Planning: Report of the Committee on Public Participation in Planning*, ed. by Great Britain and Peter Shapely, Studies in International Planning History (New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2014).
[42] Ibid.
[43] See 'Context' in Richard Brown, *Developing Trust – Conference Report*, HOMES & PLACES (London: Centre for London, 1 August 2019).
[44] *The Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2015*, 2015, Article 15 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2015/595/contents/made>.
[45] Jennie Lee, 'A Policy for the Arts: First Steps' (London: HMSO, 1965), point 14.

values with the artist acting as an interlocutor between the parties. His brief was 'to contribute as an artist to the development of the external environment of the town'.[46] A clause was inserted into all planning briefs which stated that 'the artist is to be consulted at every stage of development'.[47] Harding took his responsibility seriously and chose to live in a rented council house in the town.[48]

Harding, on the one hand, was committed to the brief of contributing artistically to the built environment of the town, but, on the other, he was also concerned to create opportunities for other townspeople to do so. These participatory practices with the residents resulted in a series of collectively built murals, interventions in underpasses and council estate colour schemes.

The latter of these was one that Harding was particularly proud of and highlights the point that I am trying to make: artists became part of the process of democratising planning, performing a role like that of a consultant. Harding positioned himself as an equal, or at least a mediator, and he actively created a public, making a relation between strangers through seeking their participation.[49]

In Harding's identification with his work's public, and his role as representative of that public to the Development Corporation, he saw his role as much about making visible the public to the corporation as it was making the public visible to itself. As Warner would say, it exists by virtue of being addressed.

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[46] David Harding, 'Glenrothes Town Artist 1968-1978', *Davidharding.Net* (2005) <https://www.davidharding.net/article12/>.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 1. paperback ed., 3. print, 4. print (New York, NY: Zone Books, 2010), p. 50.

2.6 Community Art

Community art was at first very attractive to New Town Development Corporations, who invited community artists to live and work in the new towns on placements or residencies. The development corporations saw the role of the artist as a mix between community builder and social worker with the view of bringing art to a mass audience. Community art was also counter-hegemonic and politicising and the development corporations knew this. It is not surprising that the development corporation supported the more challenging community art since the planners had utopian visions of the future – idealistic ambitions that relied on critique to demolish the present system to create a better future.

In the mid-1970s, community artists started working as part of the community development teams in the new Social Planning departments and developed programmes with new arrivals, e.g., Inter-Action (London/Milton Keynes), Telford Community Arts, Corby Community Arts and Northampton Community Arts. As Su Braden points out about new towns in her 1982 report into community arts:

> … in no other situation is a comparative effort made to bring so many forms of art and recreation, so self-consciously, to such a wide range of society.[50]

There was a common assumption that a sense of community and culture is lacking in a context where the environment is new and the inhabitants drawn from different parts of the country.[51] It was because of this that the Arts Council (also established in 1946) was particularly generous to artists working there. The community arts movement was never a

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[50] Su Braden, *Artists and People*, Gulbenkian Studies (London; Boston: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1978), p. 38.
[51] Ibid.

coherent group of aligned practitioners; rather, it was a loose network of artists for whom the relationship between them and the community was part of the artwork, and, as such, was implicitly or explicitly political.[52]

The more politicised community artists rejected singular authorship and commodification of the art market and insisted on collective production, collaboration and participation. They were committed to art as a method for collective consciousness-raising, building civic capacities to think differently, challenging assumptions and norms and articulating new ideas and visions. These artists and groups were invited and/or funded by the more socially ambitious development corporations because it fit into their ambitions to be (seen as) progressive and democratic.

The uncharted landscape of new towns was an attractive context for the ideological motivations of the community arts movement, as there was a common desire to make a better future. There emerged, as the historian Owen Kelly describes in his analysis of the Community Arts Movement, 'a new kind of political activist who believed that creativity was an essential tool in any kind of radical struggle'.[53] It was a central tenet of community artists in new towns that guided artistic expression was one way to give people control of their new and unfamiliar environment.[54] For them, art played a major part in the process of political subjectivation and building bonds between people – something which was especially important in a totally new environment.

[52] Alison Jeffers and Gerri Moriarty, *Culture, Democracy and the Right to Make Art: The British Community Arts Movement*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), p. 37.
[53] Owen Kelly, *Community, Art, and the State: Storming the Citadels*, Comedia Series, no. 23 (London; New York, N.Y.: Comedia Publishing Group in association with Marion Boyars, 1984), p. 149.
[54] Braden, p. 56.

Community artists' involvement with the New Town Development Corporations as quasi- or full employees did mean that they became subject to managerial control, and, for some, their radical politics became compromised or left behind. Interestingly, however, the opposite happened in Milton Keynes. Community artists, or 'animateurs', were a central part of the social development strategy, *The Plan for Milton Keynes*, devised by the Milton Keynes Development Corporation (MKDC) in 1970. This strategy demonstrated the newest theories around community development, which emphasised the importance of citizens' participation in developing their own communities. Despite this, there was no elected council, and the development corporation claimed all the power but none of the responsibility. This is possibly the earliest example of an effort to redirect the energy that citizens had for political participation into artistic participation. In Milton Keynes in the 1970s, however, the community 'animateurs' and social development officers took that energy and threw it back at the development corporation.

The community development department of the MKDC was successful. They were in fact too successful at creating, energising, animating and galvanising a self-organised community. Guy Ortolano details in his book, *Thatcher's Progress*, several well-organised protests that Margaret Thatcher encountered on her visit to the city in 1981. The development corporation was embarrassed.[55] The protests were the direct result of the support and resources of the community development department, the community centres and the artists. The communities of early Milton Keynes were politically engaged and motivated. They had the physical (placards, banners, newsletters) and social tools (tenants' organisations, community networks) to represent themselves. Communities defined themselves against rather than alongside the development corporation.[56] They were angry

[55] Guy Ortolano, *Thatcher's Progress: From Social Democracy to Market Liberalism through an English New Town*, Modern British Histories (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 143.
[56] Ibid.

because much of the housing was inadequate, the rents too high and, crucially, no one was being held accountable.

The MKDC was an unelected body, insulated from local politics, and represented the first major state-sanctioned step towards de-politicisation. The residents of Milton Keynes felt that keenly, so they radicalised and acted. On several occasions, their protests and publicity led to major changes with regard to housing maintenance and repairs as well as public transport. The Social Development Department had achieved what they set out to do – a new town of self-organised communities. By 1981, however, the MKDC decided that the wrong sort of communities was developing, the kind that challenged their authority and threatened their ability to work with the new Conservative government.[57]

The Social Development Department shifted its priority away from the self-organised communities towards the satisfaction of individuals and family units. The community artists and animators either moved on or reined in their political ambitions. The communities effectively realised a transformative change in their living situations and became an existential threat to the development corporation.

This is a pivotal event because it was a brief but significant moment when cultural production was central to political change in new towns. If new towns were test beds for technology, planning and social development, then this moment when the authorities recognised the potential power that art had to galvanise and radicalise communities is very important. Participation in political action was analogous to participation in community art for that short

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[57] Ortolano, p. 179.

time in Milton Keynes. What followed in the 1980s was both a concerted effort to neutralise community art and a campaign to further de-politicise British society through privatisation.

From this point on, cultural production with communities had become a victim of its own success. After fighting years for recognition and resources from the Arts Council, community artists finally received generous funding, but usually for projects that focused more on the development of artistic skills and future opportunities or on therapy-based art projects rather than political change.[58]

Politicised community art like that of the 1960s and 1970s was undergoing its own process of de-politicisation. By the 1980s, community art was well-recognised and funded by the institutions of art, and the arrival of New Labour in the 1990s propelled community-based arts into the field of social work and, crucial to my project, placemaking. The neoliberal evolution of community art into an Arts Council England sanctioned social good is well argued by Bishop[59] and Jeffers and Moriarty,[60] so I do not need to rehearse that here. There were of course many community projects that resisted and troubled development in the 1980s and 1990s, like that of the *Dockland Community Poster Project* by Peter Dunn and Loraine Leeson (1982–1985), who resisted the Dockland Development Corporation in favour of a People's Plan for regeneration. Because the community art of the past has been de-fanged into a form of de-politicised socially engaged art, it is now most amenable to the newest new towns.

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[58] See Inter-action Milton Keynes. Although it is a political project to support access to art for disabled people, Inter-action had been a socially progressive art-activist group fighting for the rights of all working-class people, with art. See Interaction MK < http://www.interactionmk.org.uk/about/>
[59] Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, pp. 13–15.
[60] Jeffers and Moriarty.

2.7 Twenty-First Century New Town Art

Despite economic crises, there has been a huge surge in global migration, surplus capital and urbanisation, and there has been a return to master-planning as an appropriate framework for urban growth.[61] In the UK, the renewed trend for major master-planning[62] is paired with the financialisation of real estate; thus projects are major profit-making enterprises. The newest new town developments are a radical example of a de-politicised enclosure that forecloses political agency as part of a socially engaged art project as much as community struggle for public services.

More sinisterly, I think that contemporary socially engaged practices as part of a placemaking programme in a new development act as a buffer to protect the de-politicising forces from a real political challenge. The co-option of critical art projects in the newest new towns can be seen in Jeanne Van Heeswijk's *Show Home for Real Living*[63] commissioned by Futurecity for Great Kneighton/Trumpington, open between 2015 and 2016. It was a 'radical' three-year commission from a politically engaged artist[64] by one of the world's largest creative placemaking companies to open a freely accessible and community-led common space in the new village which hosted 'events focused on what community means to old and new residents in the Abode Show Home'.[65]

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[61] Lucy Bullivant, *Masterplanning Futures* (London; New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), pp. 7–8.
[62] In addition to the newest new towns, see Nine Elms, Kings Cross and Barking Riverside Greenwich Peninsula.
[63] See Future City, 'A Showground For Real Living', *Future City* (2016) <https://futurecity.co.uk/portfolio/a-showground-of-real-living/>. See: Jeanne van Heeswijk, 'Habitorials', *Jeanneworks* I2014) <https://www.jeanneworks.net/projects/habitorials/>.
[64] Jeanne van Heeswijk is an artist who facilitates the creation of dynamic and diversified public spaces in order to 'radicalize the local'. Her long-scale community-embedded projects question art's autonomy by combining performative actions, discussions and other forms of organising and pedagogy in order to assist communities to take control of their own futures. From Jeanne van Heeswijk <https://www.jeanneworks.net/about/>
[65] Ibid.

It was political in the sense that it invited residents to take responsibility for the space to share it and use it collectively. They had (temporary) agency over the common resource of a house which became a space of deliberation, planning and socialising. Artists in residence brought in guests who led sessions on community ownership, documentary film-making and local history. Like in Milton Keynes, there was a local newsletter that celebrated the activities in the new town, listed current affairs and commissioned articles from residents, artists, historians and urbanists, many of which were critical. Warner would recognise the public that came together and was sustained for the *Show Home for Real Living*, and it was a public sphere.[66] At the end of the project, Van Heeswijk proposed that the community should take over the administration of the show home, to 'take control of their futures', but this proved impossible, and not apparently because of costs. The energy for the *Show Home* was initially channelled into a PUBLIC SHED (temporary shipping container) and has now evolved into the Clay Farm Community Garden with permanent buildings and a greenhouse which is a vibrant volunteer-run community project, but it is planned, funded and administered by the developer, Countryside Properties.[67] It is a valid and important community project that makes no claims for art or overt politics. The garden is a public space for the residents of Trumpington, and the three years of organising and sharing the common space of the *Show Home* may have galvanised a community, but the agency, the opportunity for debate over resources and the public of the newsletter dissolved.

Even if *Show Home* in Trumpington or *Growth Point* in Cranbrook were not able to produce and sustain a truly public and political space within the de-politicised enclosure, it could be argued that they might instead be considered as a strategic tool for the curator (and invested stakeholders) to discern the nascent resistance and the fragile political movements that were

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[66] Warner, p. 18.
[67] 'Clay Farm Garden' <https://clayfarmgarden.org>.

beginning to coalesce around associated concerns: the mothers in Cranbrook who were at once concerned about the communal facilities available to them while their children were too young for school and afraid of the criminalisation of their teenagers who had nowhere to socialise; and homeowners and consortium planners who began to realise that they shared the same distrust in the consortium leadership. Most of the residents whom the artists and I spoke with wanted a more accountable, transparent and democratic governance structure in place (at the time of curating, a town council had only just been established). What became clear to the stakeholders was that theirs was not an individual experience: it is a common experience within a community that is atomised by design, which keeps them from collectivising and acting.

2.8 Creative Placemaking and De-Politicisation

Where do the practices of creative placemaking intersect with processes of de-politicisation? Is placemaking constitutive of the post-political condition, and, if so, can it be practised differently? Most creative placemaking schemes are not overtly concerned with the political. They appear to want art to make people happier, wealthier and more generous.[68] But this must be policed to prevent conflict or unrest.[69] The majority of creative placemaking aims to celebrate the aesthetic and commercial potential of its context and it does not consider the conflictual relations that are required for political potential to be realised.[70]

Social practice placemaking does however make explicit claims that this kind of artist-led community-driven placemaking is politicised. Here I am appealing to the concept of *social*

[68] 'Wellbeing Principles for British Land, The Happy City' <https://thehappycity.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Wellbeing-Principles-for-British-Land.pdf> [accessed 10 December 2021].
[69] Mark Treskon and Sino Esthappan, Cameron Okeke, Carla Vásquez-Noriega, 'Creative Placemaking and Community Safety', *URBAN INSTITUTE*, 2018 34.
[70] See Future City, 'Public Realm Projects', *Future City* <https://futurecity.co.uk/public-realm/>.

practice placemaking as defined by Cara Courage and outlined in the literature review as 'comprising a cluster of coproduced, relational creative practices that employ a social practice arts approach to social, cultural and material urban issues'.[71] Courage and others[72] invested in social practice placemaking and claim that the places that they co-produce with community members, in which they address issues that come from the bottom up, lead to 'citizenship conscientisation'.[73]

Differentiated from social practice only by its focus on place and space as both productive and constitutive of identities, social practice placemaking facilitates an active citizenry and a deep attachment to place. It invokes the Right to the City,[74] which is the freedom to make and re-make our cities and ourselves in common as a resistance against the commodification of our social relations by capitalism. Public space is proposed as a place in which political movements can take up space and allows their action to be seen by the powerful and, equally, those without power. Courage and others lean heavily on Chantal Mouffe's notion of agonism in a recognition of the constitutive function of conflict to the political:

> Agonism is useful for resolving the paradoxes of the neoliberal dilemma by revealing and acknowledging global power relations that constitute space and place, the acknowledgement being the basis for the creation of a progressive political outlook.[75]

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[71] Cara Courage, *Arts in Place: The Arts, the Urban and Social Practice*, Routledge Research in Culture, Space and Identity (London; New York, N.Y.: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), p. 16.
[72] *Creative Placemaking: Research, Theory and Practice*, ed. by Cara Courage and Anita McKeown, Routledge Studies in Human Geography (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2019); *Transcultural Cities: Border Crossing and Placemaking*, ed. by Jeffrey Hou (New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2013).
[73] Courage, 'Making Places: Performative Arts Practices in the City', p. 3.
[74] Henri Lefebvre, *Le Droit a La Ville* (Paris: Antropos, 1968).
[75] Courage, *Arts in Place*, p. 294.

The premise of social practice placemaking is that it is a critical spatial interventionist practice that supports a discursive process of citizens' becoming conscious of their own position in order to foster grassroots social criticism that 'trickle up' to challenge the political structures. These aims are very similar to my own for the *Growth Point* project in Cranbrook, outlined in Chapter 1. It would be presumptive to claim that the post-political condition forecloses all the political potential of critical curatorial practices on the grounds of what happened with a single project in Cranbrook. However, the governmentality of the new town was such that the residents censored themselves to avoid the public conflict that resulted from a critical intervention.

The kind of critique that Courage writes of in social practice placemaking is what Marina Vishmidt claims is too easily co-opted by the capitalist (art) institution as a cybernetic system – an institution that renders it both unreceptive to radical change and conducive to the neoliberal hegemony. Creative placemakers mean well when they attempt to create spaces for political discourse, but my concern is that it could sustain, rather than shatter, the post-political order. This could be for a number of reasons: as articulated in Chapter 2, a critical or political project risks being co-opted by the very forces that it seeks to critique. In her critical self-reflexive mode, Courage admits that her practice is ineffectual with regards to wresting actual power or ownership of a space. She also recognises that the practitioners and participants she worked with have no control over whether their narrative is co-opted and repurposed for a neoliberal agenda.[76] Van Heeswijk's *Show Home for Real Living* show home was closed by the developers because it had satisfied their S106 obligations.

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[76] Courage, 'Making Places: Performative Arts Practices in the City', p. 220.

Also noted in Chapter 1 is the consistent evidence that visible creative placemaking increases property values in urban areas, displacing the most vulnerable – even if the curator, artists or art is politically motivated and anti-gentrification.[77]

Roberts would recognise this, as the attempts at political exercises leave behind false models of the transformative potential for art. That is not to say that art cannot be transformative, but rather that it can, but *not* in the way intended.

Based on my practice-led research, I would assert that there are two outcomes for critique as social practice placemaking in a de-politicised context. The first is that the emptied-out and co-opted critique re-produces the de-politicised arrangements. The second option is a moralistic and nihilistic approach. I suspect that if I had spitefully made public the project *Growth Point,* or if the Cranbrook community had decided to risk their and their neighbours' livelihoods by launching a public intervention, it would have openly challenged and damaged the development partnership. It would have done so, however, probably at a higher cost to the collective will of the residents, the progress in forging lasting bonds and the mortgage holders. We instead resorted to a neutralised dissent, behind closed doors, and the processes of de-politicisation were left unchallenged. In the context of Cranbrook, my project could not harness critique for political change. But to what extent is issue this systemic and to what extent was it particular to that time and place?

2.9 Withdrawal and De-Politicisation

Withdrawal from the institutions of art and placemaking leads to two key outcomes for critical cultural producers: extra-institutional practices and anonymous guerrilla tactics. For Stephen

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[77] Wavehill Ltd., Section 5.

Pritchard, the practice in exile from the institutions of art and placemaking involves rebuilding the institution of art and culture that has a different mode of political engagement. Through 'cultural democracy' (Hope, Belfiore), Pritchard and his colleagues at The Movement for Cultural Democracy[78] seek to break down the existing order to rebuild culture (definition, institutions, resource distribution) in a truly democratic way. Indeed, I have many sympathies with what they are calling for.

However, I have serious concerns. These are, firstly, that insisting that an extra-institutional position is the most suitable domain for praxis (because it is not bound up with compromising entities such as councils or the state) leads to a marginalisation of the field of art. Furthermore, there is little scope for the Movement of Cultural Democracy to find its way into the twenty-first century new towns, since it takes for granted an already existing cultural infrastructure that can be rebuilt by 'empowered' citizens. It would be a very interesting proposal for a contemporary new town to adopt cultural democracy as an infrastructural blueprint. But, I argue, the proposal must be made from an engaged position; in other words, it must be made from the position of a curator or cultural producer who is speaking from the terrain of placemaking.

The margins of the field of art are precisely from where Gregory Sholette claims emancipatory practices emerge. Sholette advocates for the proliferation of spontaneous, critical insurrections that are short-lived and anonymous so that they cannot be co-opted by capital. The examples that Sholette gives for critical-interventionist artistic practices (that operate often through mimicry and mockery), such as Yes Men, tactical media producers NeuroTransmitter or Critical Art Ensemble, function as a politics of insurgency.

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[78] See: 'The Movement for Cultural Democracy' <https://culturaldemocracy.uk>.

I would, however, counter that the effectiveness of the practices that Sholette advocates for in the contemporary new town is limited. The insurgent practices that Sholette proposes take for granted the open space of the political public sphere where there is freedom to act politically.[79] As Oliver Marchart outlines, an exhibition in an institution or events in a public space may (if universally accessible) only meet the absolute minimal criteria of what is required to produce a public sphere.[80] If even this cannot be guaranteed in places such as Ebbsfleet, Poundbury or Otterpool, then what chance is there that any of the other conditions required for a political public sphere (conflict, construction of counter-positions, etc., mutual legibility) are possible?

Unpredictable eruptions of dissidence would also be alienating or indeed asynchronic in a post-political new town, since what ought to be constructed, namely counter-positions to the de-politicised status quo, is a political praxis that operates on a more minor, quotidian scale, over the long term. Furthermore, guerrilla tactics from outside the field of art, as a means of addressing the post-political conditions in new towns, are illegible to those who encounter them. I would in the first instance concur with Roberts that, while they constitute an artistic rebellion, they dissolve art into the non-art solutions[81] of political activism, rendering it incoherent and potentially destructive.[82] I indeed overestimated the agency of art to facilitate social change, however I do not agree with Roberts' claim that by interfacing the category of art and non-art activism they dissolve along with the pre-figurative function of art.[83] The 'collapse' of my critical practice in Cranbrook was due to a reliance on critique in the de-

[79] Oliver Marchart, 'The Globalization of Art and the Biennials of Resistance: A History of the Biennials from the Periphery', *On Curating*, (Zurich: OnCurating.org, 2011), 43.
[80] Ibid.
[81] *The Problems and Horizons of Socially Engaged Art Today: Prof John Roberts*.
[82] Note: *Growth Point* could have been destructive if we chose to publicise and criticise the developments. An insurgent action without the collaboration and consent of the residents would be incoherent to them and the wider public.
[83] Ibid.

politicised context to ignite social change. However, it did something else instead, which was to reveal the foreclosure of the political and render the potential political agency discernible.

From my practice in Cranbrook, I would counter the claim that bringing together the two distinct fields of art practice and politics decapitates their political potential. This perhaps only happens if they are both trying to do the same thing. Marchart decries what he calls the 'spontaneous ideology of the art field', a school of thought which locates the political potential of art in its autonomy or difference from non-art and the political.[84] Those that espouse the spontaneous ideology of art (such as Ranciere, Roberts, Berry) maintain that 'the specificity of art consists in bringing about a reframing of material and symbolic space. And it is in this way that art bears upon politics.'[85] Perhaps, though, this position is in fact anti-political and this disposition is de-politicising curating and art institutions. If this is the case, then there would be a deracination of critique from art and, as such, we curators are left staying with the consensus and status quo of placemaking.

2.10 Conclusion

From the argumentation above, de-politicisation ties people to a conservative idea of the market and as a result it tends to force out the desire for any conflict in favour of building consensus. Consultation is a staged discussion that may involve some critical discussion but ultimately produces consensus around the value of the new town and the de-politicised space. A question that arises is how might the curator orchestrate a place where conflict can exist in a safe way that does not place residents at risk? The institution of art might be a site that could hold a degree of agonism that is required to open up a space for politics. In the

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[84] Marchart, *Conflictual Aesthetics*, p. 13.
[85] Ibid.

next chapter, I come to the possibility of curating conflict as a form of resistance against the

de-politicising consensus through an examination of two conferences that I curated as

Research Curator at MK Gallery in 2016 and 2019 with professional placemakers from

diverse political positions.

Chapter 3: Curating Conflict

As I have argued above, new towns are de-politicised spaces that foreclose the political through the lack of opportunity for conflict and challenge. Might the curation of conflict, or the production of agonistic debate, be an option for the critical curator? Rather than attempting to engender such action amongst residents who cannot risk the publicity of open dispute, might the curator make issues public through the staging of agonistic exchange between experts?

I pursue these enquiries by analysing two conferences that I organised as part of my PhD research practice while working as Research Curator at MK Gallery, Milton Keynes. The first, in July 2016, was *Right to the (New) City: Art, New Towns and The Commons*, and the second, in 2019, was *The Coming Community: Art, New Towns and Place.* The guest speakers included artists, academics, activists, community organisers, placemaking professionals, curators and town planners. After their presentations and after the attendees had come to know and understand the speakers' positions, I organised a series of workshops in which the attendees and guest speakers could work out a problem or propose a project together. Here I want to consider how I pivoted my practice away from community-based social engagement and used my 'added value' as a curator to speak directly and frankly to the people responsible for cultural strategy and funding.

Mouffe's conflictual relations of the political are smoothed over by the processes of politics, never more so than in the newest of towns and developments – as I explored in Chapter 2. The concern is, as evident in planning, developing, policy-making and creative placemaking, responsibilities which are subcontracted to commercial entities by public/private consortiums. There is little public scrutiny or conflictual relations between positions or even

rival contractors, but there should be. This is because rather than simply a chain of de-politicisation, it is more of a domino effect, which could potentially result in totally smooth enclosures stripped of any possibilities for political engagement or the actualisation of political subjects.[1]

Maria Lind refers to Mouffe's notion of the political when she re-defines 'the curatorial' as being a critical mode of practice that stirs smooth surfaces and agitates environments both inside and outside the white cube.[2] Can the art institution be a site of contestation – not just for what happens inside the institution (which is what Lind wonders) but for what happens outside the institution of art?

To address these questions, I will focus on the conferences, firstly by examining one workshop from the 2016 event and its outcomes. Then I will move on to a panel discussion from the 2019 conference when I tried to ignite a conflict between three very different speakers, each taking a position on placemaking and new towns, before analysing another more fractious workshop from the same 2019 event.

As referred to in the literature review, paraphrasing Iles and Berry, the discursive format often espoused by Kester which invites openness, discursivity over commodity, critical engagement and the democratisation of art has already been adopted as a tool by the cultural managers, placemakers, and landowners in property developments to engage with the public.[3] The conferences and workshops here were an attempt to make a safe space for

[1] Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*, 2. Aufl (Online-Ausg.) (Cambridge Mass.: The MIT Press, 1998) p. xxiv.
[2] Maria Lind, 'The Curatorial', *Artforum International* October (2009), 103.
[3] For example: 'Soundings Consultation' <https://soundingsoffice.com>.

agonistic conflict within the field with specialists, away from the residents for whom conflict is risky.

3.1 *Right to the (New) City: Art, New Towns and The Commons*

Right to the (New) City was a day-long event held in the former Milton Keynes bus station because MK Gallery was closed and undergoing major refurbishment. I curated (with support from curator Alec Steadman) the day's talks, screenings and workshops in order to consider Lefebvre's demand for the 'right to the city', specifically in relation to new towns. The 'right to the city' is the call for a collective redress of the commodification of our social relations by capitalism. Henri Lefebvre claims that capitalist logic forecloses the possibility of making new meanings in and of the city. He makes a demand, on behalf of the people, for the democratic right to participate in and appropriate the city as if it was a collective work of art.[4] I wanted the day's discussion to focus on what Lefebvre's demand means in a new town and how new town communities, artists and institutions could make and re-make the city as a common endeavour. I wanted to take Lefebvre's call literally and think about using artistic strategies of 'commoning' to inhabit Milton Keynes as if it was a work of art. Both conferences had a similar format, with three panels of guest speakers, a workshop session, a de-brief and a final concluding panel.

The workshop in the afternoon was led by Public Works, an art and architecture practice working within and towards public space, and we were set a task: to figure out the best use of the Grade Two listed bus station. All the details of the workshop are in the *Post-Political Curator's Handbook.*

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[4] David Harvey, 'Right to the City', *The New Left Review*, 53 (2008)
<https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii53/articles/david-harvey-the-right-to-the-city>.

Around the table in the former bus station in Milton Keynes, we gathered to discuss its future use. I sat with a director of the MKDP, a MK City Council councillor, a London-based writer and artist, an academic and artist from Northampton and a chair of a local cultural organisation. I was the only female participant on our table. Because of the controversy around the bus station and the MKDP, I did not have permission to record the proceedings, and I cannot name the people involved. The discussion was lively and the ideas that were brainstormed included a centre for architecture and urbanism, co-working spaces, artists' studios, a hacker space. I asked what Milton Keynes really needed – was it more cultural infrastructure? I thought the city's appetite for culture was well-served enough, especially given there was a new MK Museum on the horizon and millions were already being spent on an expanded and renovated MK Gallery.

I suggested that the bus station could be used as temporary housing for refugees or the homeless. The response from the councillor was that this proposal was not possible, given that the building was for community use. The chair of the cultural organisation reminded us that the workshop was for us to consider what cultural use the building could have, since it was just not suitable for sleeping in. The artists in our group argued that it could be both and that the homeless were also community members. We had very limited time but represented our group's ideas to the rest of the workshop groups. The representatives from the MKDP took notes and gathered up all the post-its, and the mind-maps.[5] I was later invited by the MKDP to put together an official scoping document for the viable options for future use of the bus centre but declined.

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[5] See *The Post-Political Curator's Handbook*, Section 7.

On reflection, the invitation was made to me because I was an art curator and, as such, I would be expected to deliver a report that privileged art and cultural resources. The directorship of the MKDP was not at that time open to a debate over its use and the bidding and decision processes for the future use of the old bus station were confidential and in-house.

I was frustrated by the fact that the workshop had felt staged and those involved were fixed in their positions. I was unable to curate a site of contestation to deliberate the future of a community asset that would result in any kind of change – due in large part to the wholly undemocratic process of bidding and selecting the tenant. If the decision-making process is de-politicised, then is a curated conflict little more than a staging of positions?

In November 2016, the MKDP announced that the Old Bus Station would house the Winter Night Shelter and other charity services to address the homelessness crisis until March 2017. During this period, the partnership would be inviting proposals from businesses and organisations to take over the building for the long term. Under pressure from community groups and the Housing and Community Committee of MK Council, and a major intervention from the Leader of MK Council, Cllr Pete Marland (who is also on the board of the MKDP), the MKDP accepted the bid from Winter Night Shelter in partnership with twenty-nine other charities to take over the bus station in the long term, providing a range of support and services for homeless people in Milton Keynes.[6]

I would really love to take some credit for this outcome, but I cannot prove any link. I imagine that the homelessness crisis became so glaringly obvious that they could no longer ignore it.

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[6] 'Bid to Build a Permanent Homeless Shelter in Milton Keynes', *MKCitizen* (2016)
<https://www.miltonkeynes.co.uk/news/bid-build-permanent-homeless-shelter-milton-keynes-1183652>.

It is remarkable that the city's most valuable piece of real estate is now in the service of the most vulnerable rather than the most profitable.

Even if the workshop did play a role in the decision to turn the bus station into a centre for homeless people in Milton Keynes, can we really claim that because the beliefs of the powerless became the same beliefs as the powerful, we facilitated real political transformation? I am more inclined to think that I and the artists at the workshop were part of a shift in mood, or alternative habit of mind as Keller Easterling would say;[7] one that values the homeless as part of the wider community rather than a carbuncle on it. Adept community organising by the Winter Night Shelter consolidated power within the community and collectively intervened in the decision-making process.[8]

Considering the workshop in 2016 through Mouffe's agonism leads me to question whether it is possible to curate an agonistic encounter that is transformative. Mouffe's design for a democracy called 'agonistic pluralism' is a theory of the political that is incompatible with rational consensus. Agonism, for Mouffe, is a pluralist politics in which conflict is essential for its creation and continuity. In recognising it as such, it does not seek a rational consensus amongst rivals but rather a recognition and tolerance of the other's right to exist.[9]

The workshop appeared to meet all the relevant criteria: it provided a platform for voicing private or non-mainstream socio-political beliefs and enabled the formation of counter-collectives whose beliefs are not silenced, leading to commensurate incommensurability.[10] What, however, is not clear to me is what distinguishes this curated workshop from an artist-

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[7] Keller Easterling, 'IIRS', *E-Flux Journal*, 64 (2015) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/64/60837/iirs/>.
[8] 'Bid to Build a Permanent Homeless Shelter in Milton Keynes'.
[9] Mouffe, *On the Political*, p. 20.
[10] Mouffe, 'Deconstruction, Pragmatism and the Politics of Democracy' , pp. 1–12.

led community consultation which, as the last chapter pointed out, lacks any real power to influence. When some of those in the workshop had significant power and were responsible for making political decisions (such as the councillor and MKDP director), while the rest of us were self-employed or freelance art workers, how, in Mouffe's words, commensurate could the incommensurability of power be?

In this case, influence was achieved through a consolidation of power and an intervention into a de-politicised decision-making process to challenge the established procedure. The conflict or agonism is present in that confrontation.

If it was possible to curate conflict, I am worried that agonism in the institution is insufficient to constitute the political, and, if it were, I am not sure if I could identify it. I considered this through practice again a few years later in 2019, which I will unpack in the next section, alongside writing by Marchart, who takes issue with Mouffe's insistence on institutionalising antagonism and puts forward a new term, 'conflictual aesthetics'.[11]

3.2 Institutionalised Conflict

The Coming Community: New Towns, Art and Place was a conference on placemaking in new towns that I curated in 2019 as Research Curator at MK Gallery in Milton Keynes. The conference considered the specific context of twenty-first century new towns and called for a new and specialised form of placemaking. I sought to bring to the discussion the history of art in new towns, critical perspectives on placemaking and artists' proposals for working in new housing developments. Documentation from the event including artist Verity-Jane Keefe's contribution can be found in the Handbook, Section 6.

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[11] Marchart, *Conflictual Aesthetics*.

As I have argued above, conflict is designed out of twenty-first century new towns in favour of de-politicised consensus. The problem with this is that, as constitutive of a political sphere, and if there is no open debate, then the political is foreclosed. Rosalyn Deutsche, when attempting to theorise the relations between the public sphere and public art, recognises this when she says that:

> ... conflict, division, and instability, then, do not ruin the democratic public sphere: they are the conditions of its existence.[12]

The foreclosure of democratic debate on key aspects of life in the newest developments is de-politicisation, and it can be seen clearly in the mechanisms for governance and policing in Ebbsfleet Garden City, Kent. The Ebbsfleet Development Corporation (EDC) is an example of a policy instrument which puts decision-making even further out of reach of the public sphere and beyond what is usually democratically determined by elected councillors in publicly accessible meetings. Comprised of both private and governmental actors, the EDC has total authority in the town with regard to planning, policy-making and policing. The estates now inhabited (e.g., Whitecliffe, Castle Hill) are policed by SGC, a private security service, rather than the police.[13] Any public assembly or protest could be dispersed or prevented since they patrol private land. The power of police comes from the common consent of the public, as opposed to the power of the state[14] which, in theory, fosters a mutual respect and accountability between the police and civilians. Security guards, unlike police, are not held to account for discriminatory or discourteous behaviour and do not act

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[12] Deutsche, *Evictions*, p. 289.
[13] See: 'SGC SECURITY SERVICES WELCOMES WHITECLIFFE INTO ITS CUSTOMER PORTFOLIO', *SGC Security Services* <https://sgcsecurityservices.co.uk/sgc-security-services-welcomes-whitecliffe-in-ebbsfleet-into-its-customer-portfolio/>.
[14] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/policing-by-consent/definition-of-policing-by-consent

based on a code of ethics.[15] Private security is not 'policing by consent'; it is policing without consent. In Ebbsfleet, the rule-setting, implementation and policing is private and uncontested. There will surely be some internal conflict, but a post-political consensus is reached and rolled out by selective institutional associations within the EDP.

This is fundamentally different from conurbations like London or Liverpool, where there are leaky strata within governance, diverse ownership, collective agency and public spaces of assembly. Deutsche even states that 'Urban space is the product of conflict'. She claims that the relations of oppression present in the urban space that result in conflict are predicated on a division between a conservative image of a unitary image of urban space and the excluded that threaten it – i.e., the creation of an exterior. Relations in the urban space are open to continuous contestation for which there are no meta-rules or fixed societal norms, she claims, and therein lies the political sphere.[16]

What make the new town or major development so different from this conception of the urban are the regulatory systems that mean that public spaces are not created out of conflict and are not sustained through continuous renegotiation. Decision-making in these new assemblages of state and non-governmental private entities is done through consensual and market-led negotiations. Therefore, what is legitimately political is either foreclosed or beyond reach.

These conditions, however, are not fixed. Public spheres could emerge in Ebbsfleet, and the green shoots of tenants' groups are present on Facebook and Twitter.[17] Furthermore, de-

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[15] Peel Instructions: Ibid.
[16] Deutsche, *Evictions*, p. 278.
[17] See Castlehill Resident's Group <https://www.facebook.com/groups/castlehillebbsfleet/about/> , and Ebbsfleet Green Residents Group <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1727568460884725/ , and Ebbsfleet Residents' Association <https://ebbsfleetra.wixsite.com/home>.

politicisation is far from limited to new towns and can be seen creeping into all urban areas, as Swyngedouw pointed out in 2006.[18] There are similar policy instruments in London which disenfranchise residents, such as The Nine Elms Vauxhall Partnership[19] or the HS2,[20] both of which have major accompanying art programmes. Interestingly, Gavin Wade, the director of Eastside Projects, who has commissioned artists to make work for the HS2 arrival station in Birmingham claims that the role of art in contested sites is to alert the public to the conflict. Speaking about Susan Philipsz's commission, he comments:

> We're not asking artists to make a judgement.
> *Station Clock* addresses these conflicting voices. It is about the make-up of Birmingham and our country and who has a voice. It is a work of both harmony and discord.[21]

Amplifying dissenting voices is not, however, the same as listening to them and making changes, as Tom Jeffreys points out in the same article.[22]

The privatisation of public space with security guards makes it increasingly difficult to publicly deliberate our rights through protest. Not only is the public arena evacuated from radical dissent, critique and fundamental conflict, but the parameters of democratic governing itself are being shifted, announcing new forms of autocratic governmentality.[23]

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[18] Swyngedouw, 'The Post-Political City'.
[19] See Nine Elms <https://nineelmslondon.com/about-us/partners/>.
[20] See HS2 <https://www.hs2.org.uk/about-us/>.
[21] Tom Jeffreys, 'What's the Role of Art in the Row Over HS2?', *Opinion* (2018) <https://www.frieze.com/article/whats-role-art-row-over-hs2>.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Swyngedouw, 'Governance Innovation and the Citizen: The Janus Face of Governance-beyond-the-State'.

The political is the conflictual debate over the rights and foundations of society that is

spatialised through public spheres.[24] There are multiple, unstable public spheres that

continuously emerge and are re-activated to intervene in or overturn the hegemonic political

order. Conflict ignited through critical cultural production may expose inequities or highlight

injustices as a call to arms in an urban centre where there is an active public sphere and

where different incommensurable positions can be debated. The opportunities may be few,

but there are some.[25] This is in contrast to Ebbsfleet, where antagonistic interventions as art

may threaten homeowners and there is most likely no engagement because there are no

options to deliberate. In a space that has been entirely de-politicised, consensus-building

smooths out conflict and reduces politics to at most a performative conflict between

indistinguishable factions and an administrative process.

Antagonism is what is required to break open the hegemony of consensus into a political

sphere,[26] but is the very thing that the art and democratic institutions of late capitalism seek

to avoid. Marchart, pushing further than Mouffe and Laclau, argues that the public sphere as

a political space emerges precisely where consensus breaks down.[27]

Curating conflict in the art institution was my attempt to enact the political. I did this while

considering Mouffe's notion of agonism, which is a form of institutionalised antagonism,

required for democratic engagement.[28] Curating agonistic spaces is a politics from within the

art institution that has for decades, '… been linked to the construction of bourgeois

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[24] Deutsche, p.xxiv.
[25] For example, the exhibition *Spectres of Modernism -- Artists Against Overdevelopment*, Bowater House, Golden Lane Estate, London EC1Y 0RJ. View from Fann Street, EC1. 5 October–10 December 2017.
[26] Laclau and Mouffe, p. 105.
[27] Rosalyn Deutsche, 'Art and Public Space: Questions of Democracy', *Social Text*, Duke University Press, 33 (1992), 34–53.
[28] Chantal Mouffe, Elke Wagner, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London ; New York, N.Y.: Verso, 2013).

hegemony, but this function can be altered'.[29] Mouffe's re-investment in the institution

through agonism offered me an alternative to abandoning the institution as others such as

Marchart and Sholette have called for, and suggested a way for me to work from within the

public gallery system despite concerns about recuperation by the institution.

3.3 *The Coming Community: New Towns, Art and Place*

Through the *Coming Community*, I chose to move away from practising from within the new

town communities and to create opportunities for critics to speak directly to placemakers,

funders and developers using the space of the art institution as a site of agonism. At the

conference, I did not consider the discursive form as critical of the institution of art. Rather, I

used my institutional position as an asset when bringing together a diverse set of

contributors to debate the legitimacy of placemaking. I modelled recent curatorial projects

that have used the conference form to build traction around an issue, to deliberate between

differing positions and to advance scholarship and creative work in the field, including

Former West: Art and the Contemporary After 1989 (2014-16) and the *Cork Caucus* (2005).

My hypothesis was that a conference in an art gallery could be a temporary substitute for a

functioning political sphere that could produce agonistic democracy (in opposition to

consensual participation).

I had been asked by Arts Council England to organise the conference, and it was fully

funded by a Grant for the Arts. ACE and I both knew that there is/was a lot of capital

investment in new towns and major developments, and it is a potential source of huge sums

for art and culture. ACE and I were both invested in art's contribution to new town

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[29] Chantal Mouffe, 'An Agonistic Conception of the Museum', *Museu* (2016) <http://proyectomuseu.org/an-agonistic-conception-of-the-museum/>.

communities, and we wanted to facilitate a social space to meet different agents involved in

the field. I, however, also wanted to use the conference as a diagnostic tool to understand

the different agents involved in the field and the power imbalances between them. I did not

feel duty-bound to present a celebratory or promotional event, so I was able to select

contributors whose work challenged ACE's position.[30] I wanted to better understand how

critique and conflict functions when imported into the institutional space with its attendant

constraints, which might generate new methods for future practices such as scripted

provocations, workshops, competitions or deliberate gaps in scheduling.

In 2019, *The Coming Community* took place in the newly refurbished MK Gallery, in the

context of the exhibition *Lie of the Land* that I co-curated about the connections between

land, art and leisure in the United Kingdom.[31] The conference considered the specific

context of the new town and questioned the legitimacy of creative placemaking, its evolution

from the public and community art of the 1970s and the perspectives of commissioned

curators and artists.

Curating potentially tense encounters was a strategy to place the critics, anti-placemakers or

'placeguarders'[32] in the same space with the successful professional placemakers,

developers and funders so that they could exchange views publicly and in person. All the

criticism I had come across was written in books and theses or on blogs. Never had I seen

those people who vehemently reject the premises of placemaking or developer-led art speak

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[30] 'Strengthening Our Place-Based Approach and Supporting Levelling Up', in *Let's Create Delivery Plan 2021-2024* (London: Arts Council England, 2021) <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/themes-actions/strengthening-our-place-based-approach-and-supporting-levelling>.

[31] See *The Post-Political Curator's Handbook*, Section 4: "Belated".

[32] Stephen Pritchard, 'Place Guarding', in *Creative Placemaking: Research, Theory and Practice*, ed. by Cara Courage and Anita McKeown, Routledge Studies in Human Geography (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2019).

with developers. As a curator with an institutional title, I had access to these people, and I thought I could construct a productive agonism in the space of the art institution.

The *Coming Community* conference started with three papers and a panel focusing on the art history of post-war new towns. Following this were three presentations and a panel discussion that brought together three different perspectives on creative placemaking: from Sir Nicholas Serota, the Chair of Arts Council England, Cara Courage, the Director of Tate Exchange and a widely published author on Social Practice Placemaking, and Stephen Pritchard, an artist, academic and very vocal critic of placemaking. The different positions presented are ones that I have covered in the literature review and are not particular to those individuals; rather, these speakers were chosen because they represented the key approaches to creative placemaking in the UK.

Pritchard had published in 2017 a widely read blog criticising Serota's appointment of Elizabeth Murdoch to the board of Arts Council England, also suggesting that the funding of Serota's wife's art organisation was a conflict of interest.[33] Despite the indiscreet exposé, Pritchard presents an articulate challenge to the ubiquity of creative placemaking, and all three speakers are very well known and respected in their fields. I was expecting sparks to fly and chose a very measured chair, whom I forewarned about the controversy. I wanted there to be tension and arguments between the three speakers and I wanted Serota and Courage to respond to Pritchard's attack on placemaking. I expected Serota and Courage to make a strong case in favour of using art and culture to shape a place that really challenged Pritchard's anti-capitalist argument for artists to withdraw from placemaking. Considering conflict as constitutive of agonism, I wanted to make visible the differing factions which in

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[33] Stephen Pritchard, 'Elisabeth Murdoch's Appointment to Arts Council England National Council Is a Corporate Takeover of the Arts – a Takeover Facilitated by Sir Nicholas Serota and His Wife Teresa Gleadowe', *Colouring in Culture* (2017) <https://colouringinculture.org/blog/murdochserotacorporatetakeover/>.

turns make it possible to construct counter-positions.[34] This heated exchange never happened. What did happen was a rehearsed performance of their positions and a very polite recognition of their differences.

I can infer a few things from this outcome. Firstly, staging a conflict between the three people was not possible because their positions on creative placemaking are *not* mutually exclusive. They function in different registers and each advocate argues for their position which, in most instances does not theoretically overlap. Secondly, rather than provoking a productive conflict, setting a stage for them to rehearse their positions without needing to engage in an antagonistic moment actually re-enforced rather than challenged the status quo.

3.3 *Coming Community* Co-Location Workshop

I want to look at one final example of curating conflict through a workshop which resulted in incommensurate incommensurability, the workshop for *Coming Community.* A different member of Public Works was invited to convene the event, which took place in the Sackler education room at the renovated MK Gallery. Marc Jaffrey OBE, a cultural consultant and Kevin McGeough, Head of Placemaking for Ebbsfleet Garden City, presented the problem to be workshopped – how to conceive of and sustain a co-located art institution in Ebbsfleet:

> Ebbsfleet Development Corporation's aim is to co-locate a range of cultural facilities alongside civic uses, in order to maximise usage, viability and sustainability. They believe that this will move development away from siloed thinking and single-use

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[34] Barnaby Drabble and Dorothee Richter, 'Introduction', *On Curating*, Curating Critique, 9 (2011), 8.

assumptions, and establish an ambitious, city-wide vision for cultural infrastructure, co-located with a range of civic functions.[35]

'Co-location' was an unfamiliar term for all the participants, but not an unfamiliar arrangement. Co-location involves organisations and agencies sharing space with other services such as a medical centre, a community centre, a library and/or a school. An idealist would see it as an exciting opportunity to reconfigure the use value of art in a community and a cynic would call it a cost-cutting exercise.

To bring this problem to the guests and attendees of the conference was an incredible (and free) opportunity for Ebbsfleet Development Corporation's placemaking team. Pooled together were artists, planners with vast experience of placemaking, developers and academics all focused on the issue of co-location. During the planning stages of the workshop, the convener contacted me with concern that one of the stakeholders was trying to take too much control over the process. I told her that she was right to be wary and to try and manage him appropriately on the day so that he would not dominate the discussion about how an art institution might function in Ebbsfleet as a 'co-located' institution.

The convenor unfortunately delivered an overly academic and long monologue and was then overshadowed by the cultural consultant who told us what co-location will mean in Ebbsfleet. This was a poor start to proceedings since the point of the workshop was to think through what the possibilities were for the future.

I was around the workshop table with a director of a public/private urban planning consortium (who was present at the 2016 conference), a cultural consultant and two

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[35] 'Cultural Co-Location', *Creative Estuary* <https://www.creativeestuary.com/projects/cultural-co-location/>.

members of senior management from a curatorial organisation involved in Ebbsfleet. As the

organiser of the day's events, I had meant to keep a low profile so that the participants with

less knowledge of the subject area could have the opportunity to learn from each other, but I

began to get angry with the way two male group members dominated the discussion. I

proposed alternative forms of instituting art and culture but suggested that this should only

happen once the new community had arrived. This was so that new residents were

enfranchised and took ownership in the process. The two senior men exchanged their

seemingly fixed views about co-location, which could involve locating an art gallery as part of

a GP surgery so that art programmes could be 'socially prescribed',[36] for instance. I

suggested that co-location exists in other forms with different terminology such as

autonomous social spaces or social centres and that perhaps we should be 'completely

rethinking the model'. The two senior males took it in turns to tell me why my suggestions

were unviable. I must have appeared incensed as I suppressed my frustration, and one of

the biennial directors asked if I was alright. I was not alright. I took the workshop and these

concerns very seriously, and so I challenged them, asking how they thought they could listen

to the new communities of Ebbsfleet if they could not listen to the views around the table.

There was little productive discussion after this. The senior males[37] clearly felt affronted and

questioned my decision to invite them; the females of the group tried to calm the situation

and the workshop ended.

In an analysis of the political function of conflict served in this scenario, Marchart seems

accurate when he says that antagonism cannot be organised.[38] I could conclude that the

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[36] Social prescribing – sometimes referred to as community referral – is a means of enabling GPs, nurses and other health and care professionals to refer people to a range of local, non-clinical services. Examples include volunteering, arts activities, group learning, gardening, befriending, cookery, healthy eating advice and a range of sports. See: Office for Health, Improvement, and & Disparities, 'Social Prescribing: Applying All Our Health' <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-prescribing-applying-all-our-health/social-prescribing-applying-all-our-health>.
[37] The gender politics dimension of the workshop is an important issue, but one that cannot be explored here.
[38] Marchart, *On Curating*, p.43.

conditions were not right for curating agonistic pluralism and that there was not enough time and too few people to build the counter-positions required for a radically democratic public sphere. The constructive conflict was not achievable during the workshop since my interlocutors came from two very different but intersecting fields, and they could not make themselves coherent to one another.

3.4 Conclusion

After attempting to intervene critically in Cranbrook and repeatedly staging conflict in the hope that it would make a space for politics,[39] I see that I was attempting to fix the problems that de-politicisation caused. Critical curating as either the staging of a democratic forum or the staging of a space for conflictual discussion is at risk of remaining just that: a staging. The staging just upheld the existing positions of those with the power to be heard and to make decisions and gave them another platform that they did not really need. However, unlike Sholette or Pritchard, I do not want to withdraw from placemaking and the field of art. I insist that there is a mode of curatorial practice that could hold space and open up opportunities for the political to function. I cannot accept that the collision of art and politics necessarily dissolves their productive capacity, since if curating can uphold de-politicisation, it can resist it. I want to consider how curating might function differently with a post-political analytical lens.

I have deployed a post-political analytical frame to reflect on my practice and it has enabled me to understand what is at stake when we claim criticality in de-politicised spaces. This has allowed me to see how my practice functioned differently from how I intended and how it interacted with the processes of de-politicisation and the political. At the conference, I was

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[39] Deutsche, *Evictions.*

able to closely examine the distinct factions in the field and identify their values and assumptions, and I was able to map their power and influence. The issue becomes not whether cultural production's political potential either reproduces the status quo or deconstructs and challenges it, but whether the arrangements required for antagonistic conflict (the political) are even possible.

Can a curatorial practice function to discern obscured political energy and then hold a space for the political rather than facilitate de-politicisation? What is at stake if a curatorial project involves recognising the productive limits of art and curating within this boundary condition? Can curators work with artists to speak of the constraints of art as well as its potential? Might a reconstitution of a critical and conflictual curatorial practice involve seeing the latent strength in a group but being careful not to drain or placate it? In the next chapter, I will propose how the speculative figure of the post-political curator can work with the interplay between temporality and publicness to embrace methods of political organising to practise in solidarity with political struggles.

Chapter 4: The Post-Political Curator

4.1 The Figure of the Post-Political Curator

Given that in the previous chapter I argued for curators to take up a post-political critical framework that does not try to enact the political but discerns the already existing political formations in a de-politicised space, I want to propose a figure of the post-political curator. I am borrowing the process of figuration from Claudia Castaneda, who, in *Figurations: Child, Bodies, Worlds*, considers the appearances of the child in discourses as well as across them. Castaneda is not concerned with the literary use of figuration, which is about representation, but rather reconceives figuration as a relation between the semiotic and the material.[1] The figure of the curator therefore incorporates a double force: constitutive effect and generative circulation.[2] The figuration of the post-political curator is the account of how the post-political curator comes into being as a figure and the forms they generate.

In order to propose modes of curatorial practice, I am reaching for methodological tools of figuration and situated knowledges. Castaneda's concept of the figure as a semiotic material is based upon Donna Haraway's concept for 'situated knowledges' which is also an apparatus for producing...

> ... a more adequate, richer, better account of a world, in order to live in it well and in critical, reflexive relation to our own as well as others' practices of domination and the unequal parts of privilege and oppression that make up all positions.[3]

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[1] Claudia Castañeda, *Figurations: Child, Bodies, Worlds*, Next Wave (Durham, [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 3.

[2] Ibid, p. 3.

[3] Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies*, 14.3 (1988), 575 <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066>.

Castaneda and Haraway's methodological tools of figuration and situated knowledges enable me to propose modes of curatorial practice from the viewpoint of the curator that can account for the dynamics of power and knowledges that they are constituted by and what they will 'body forth' in turn.[4] From this situated positioning, knowing and thinking are inconceivable without a multitude of relations that also make possible the worlds we think with.[5] *The Post-Political Curator's Handbook* is situated knowledge gleaned from experience and practice, with the aim of making possible worlds to think with and practise through.

In this chapter, I will look at how the figure of the post-political curator might be constituted in terms of their key concerns: exposition and temporality. I will then speculate on what that might generate in terms of methods and practice for collaboratively mobilising, activating and propelling what is already political (or could be), but has been obscured or suppressed. A post-political curator is not beyond politics and nor do they propel the processes of de-politicisation. They can perceive such processes and, with that awareness, intervene and de-stabilise the image of post-political certainty. A post-political curator (and artist) is not concerned with giving a voice to the 'voiceless', publicly exposing inequity or heroically platforming the disenfranchised. Rather, a post-political practice is transformational on a micro-level; it grows over time and is (at least to begin with) contingent on the existing relations in a neighbourhood, town or city.

What resources, privileges and tools does a curator already have at their disposal to protect the new political formations from the processes of de-politicisation? If I am to cast the figure of the socially engaged curator in the post-political mode as a protector of the political in a

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[4] Castañeda, pp. 3-4.
[5] Castañeda.

de-politicised context, then I would suggest that this protection sits in proximity to the act of caring.

However, I hesitate to bring up the notion of 'care' at this late stage in the research project. 'Care' has become a major topic of concern in curatorial and artistic discourse, especially since the publication of Puig de la Bellacasa's *Matters of Care* in 2017. The more recent arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic has understandably thrown political, social and financial issues of 'care' to the forefront of everyone's concerns. Notions of care have always been central to curating and curators frequently invoke the etymological root 'curare', the Latin word for care.[6] This matter of concern deserves attention, but I do not have the space here to explore the nuanced ways in which a curator can care or be careless. What is useful, though, is the relation that Puig de la Bellacasa sets up between Harraway's situated knowledge and care.[7] She claims that the multitude of relations that compose a situated knowledge requires care, which grounds my figure of the post-political curator as a 'protector'.

I will shift my focus to the act of *protecting* as a curatorial method, which could be a dimension of caring. Much like its semantic relation, protection is morally ambivalent and can be employed for good or ill. Like Puig de la Bellacasa, I am not concerned with the moral dimension or with reducing it to hegemonic ethics, but rather I am interested in the ontological dimension of protection.[8]

I am not proposing the cultural protectionism of nation states but rather the curator as a

[6] Jean-Paul Martinon, 'Curators Serving the Public Good', *Philosophies*, 6.2 (2021), 28 <https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies6020028>.
[7] María Puig de la Bellacasa, '"Nothing Comes Without Its World": Thinking with Care', *The Sociological Review*, 60.2 (2012), 197–216 (p. 198) <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2012.02070.x>.
[8] de la Bellacasa.

defender who is responsible for figuring out ways to protect a fragile political agency in a de-politicised enclosure. With a wealth of resources and community support, an autonomous social centre is one way to do this.[9] That would, firstly, be very difficult in a new neighbourhood without existing social bonds, and, secondly, it could operate as a spatio-political withdrawal at the precise moment when those bonds could be forged. As I argued in the previous chapter, withdrawal results in a disengagement with the field and may silo the political activity away from the everyday lives of the residents. I want to know what might be possible if the curator chooses not to withdraw but to engage as a protective figure.

To operate as a protector, I must re-define the terms of engagement from a post-political perspective. It is important to re-frame the fundamental concerns of the curator, which include exhibition/making visible in the constitution of multiple heterogeneous publics. I invoke Edouard Glissant's *opacity* and Stefan Nowotny's *clandestiny* as possible tactics for the post-political curator to leverage the agency of the curatorial and protect the potential political emergences within a post-political enclosure. I differentiate my tactics of curatorial opacity from Rogoff's 'smuggling', which is a metaphor for circulating criticality through the boundaries between fields of knowledge.[10] Smuggling operates from within the institution of art and/or academia and, as Vishmidt observes, considers boundaries as semiotic prejudices rather than material facts, taking the signs of injustice for injustice as such, provoking solely discursive remedies.[11] While Rogoff's smuggling is interesting in terms of the critical and political content of a curated practice that smuggles knowledge across disciplinary lines, it sets up the same problematic that I outlined in the introduction of this thesis: it proposes a curatorial solution to a political problem.

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[9] Autonomous Social Centres or self-managed centres are ant-capitalist spaces for political organising, events and socialising which are independently funded without support from the state.
[10] Rogoff.
[11] Marina Vishmidt, 'The Cultural Logic of Criticality', *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, 7.3 (2008), 253–69 <https://doi.org/10.1386/jvap.7.3.253_1>.

These speculative proposals have emerged directly from my practice-led research and open ambitious new avenues for research, but they need to be tested in practice. I touch very lightly on expansive fields of theory (i.e., visibility, publicness, chronopolitics, time, history) which could be explored deeply through study and practice. I want to point the reader to a future horizon and take seriously art and curating's role in prefiguring other possible worlds. Future research would continue to investigate the proposed tactics in a post-political context over the very long term and consider what is at stake when curatorial practices intervene.

4.2 Opacity, Exhibition and the Post-Political Public

In this section, I am seeking a theory or mode of practice for the curator to defend a fragile political agency that works by subverting the curatorial tendency to exhibit. To suggest that a curator (even temporarily) hide an artist's work or conceal a socially engaged public art project is to reject their curatorial training and impulses to exhibit. However, visibility can be a trap. Donna Harraway makes clear the destructiveness of transparency in *Situated Knowledges*:

> And like the god trick, this eye fucks the world to make techno-monsters… this ideology of direct, devouring, generative, and unrestricted vision, whose technological mediations are simultaneously celebrated and presented as utterly transparent.[12]

In no other profession is discovery and display more central than in curating, so what would

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[12] Haraway, p.580.

it mean to curate against transparency? I want to consider opacity as a political and artistic strategy after Edouard Glissant's idea of the 'right to opacity'. Glissant claims that to be unreadable and indiscernible is protective of the 'other': '[T]hat which protects the Diverse, we call opacity'.[13] For Glissant, opacity is what allows for difference to organise and develop in a reality where transparency, revelation and uncovering is prized. The formation of difference requires opacity, and without it, there is only sameness.[14] This leads me to think of sameness as consensus and that difference, or conflict, is the prerequisite for (the Mouffian concept of) the political.

Glissant is not advocating for absence or obfuscation; rather, it is the opacity of the poetic (artistic) that can account for the complex density of our lived experiences. Jan Vowert writes, in reference to Glissant, that 'hope lies in the inscrutable',[15] Opacity can be neither multiplied as capital nor the basis of one's identity. Glissant argues that opacity is not an act of withdrawal or refusal,[16] but rather is an imperative to engage more closely and more deeply with poetry in a social relation with others. He calls this, 'une relation de pur partage' or a relation of pure sharing.[17] Glissant, in dialogue with curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist, is enthusiastic about a radically utopian museum which would bring people together to exchange and change their unfixed identities in a creative way.[18] Glissant is not against exhibition and the institutions of exhibition since he understands them as mechanisms to counter the homogenising force of globalisation.[19] However, I would argue that the opacity required for pure sharing is in the formation of one's identity and political subjecthood.

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[13] Édouard Glissant and Betsy Wing, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 62.
[14] Édouard Glissant, J. Michael Dash, and Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, CARAF Books, 3. paperback printing (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), p. 98.
[15] Jan Verwoert, 'Against Interpretations', *Freize D/E* (2012) <https://www.frieze.com/article/blickdicht>.
[16] Glissant and Wing, p. 70.
[17] Ibid, p. 582.
[18] Hans Ulrich Obrist, 'A Radically Utopian Museum Model That Has Yet to Be Realized—and Why It's Worth Pursuing', *Artnet* (2021) <https://news.artnet.com/opinion/edouard-glissant-hans-ulrich-obrist-2003069>.
[19] Ibid.

Exhibitions and public museums are important, and they can co-exist with opacity, but pure sharing is vulnerable and could be threatened by exposure if it is not carefully considered and curated.

How might the notion of pure sharing be transposed to the practice of curating? If the post-political curator is working in a de-politicised enclosure, perhaps opacity and subterfuge can hold a space for pure sharing, but how artists and their work function within this is something to be worked out. It may be formal, in the most basic sense, with off-the-record artists' workshops like at *Cranbrook Must Not Fail*, led by Margareta Kern and Jonathan Hoskins in 2016. The call for anonymity, that continues to be upheld, is a kind of opacity as a method for a protective curatorial practice. The closed workshop but public-facing programme of talks and artists' films served, on the one hand, to protect new and unformed political agency and, on the other, provided a platform to think differently about the context and more openly discuss the problematics of infrastructure in a developer-led new town. *Growth Point* was not specifically engineered in the service of a fledgling political movement, but, in its unfolding critical practice revealed the processes of de-politicisation and precisely the responsibility of the curators to 'curate' a smoke screen to protect its workshop participants and residents.

Opacity, in this post-political curatorial practice, is not a style that can be learned and acquired. It is a defensive formal mechanism or a mode of practice that aims not to elucidate every artwork and community-based project for the public, but to make the intentions clear only to those participants involved so that they can share and build connections. Glissant's call for opacity was in response to 'the West's' expectation that 'the other' makes themselves knowable, understandable, and quantifiable.[20] His racialised critique of transparency is even

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[20] IVC Author, 'Visibility in Crisis: Configuring Transparency and Opacity in We Are Here's Political Activism', 28 (2018) <https://ivc.lib.rochester.edu/visibility-in-crisis-configuring-transparency-and-opacity-in-we-are-heres-political-activism/#fn-7167-16>.

more pertinent in the intensely surveyed privatised public spaces of new developments and towns[21] that use surveillance software that is inherently racist.[22]

There is an element of 'hiding in plain sight' for the post-political curator who supports opaque cultural and social production. It is their responsibility to make publicly visible some quantifiable cultural production that can merit continued financial and organisational support but that simultaneously keeps the emerging political formations as opaquely poetic. I suggest here that the post-political curator can choose to work with opacity as a faculty and a creative form as a rejection of publicness. Part of their curatorial practice, then, is to calculate how and when something is to remain hidden and how and when something is to be made public.

De-politicisation, as outlined in Chapter 2, is in part a process through which issues are removed from the public arena of political contestation by placing them instead into the administration of supposedly apolitical bureaucratic, technocratic and/or scientific bodies. I am concerned specifically with what 'public' means and its value in the post-political enclosure and how this impacts the curator's practice. While the post-political enclosure has zero truly accessible space for public discourse, it places a very high value on visibility.[23] Extending Glissant's theories on transparency, the post-political enclosure supports visibility and understandability to firstly foreclose the political and secondly market to its residents most effectively.[24]

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[21] Mattha Busby, 'People at King's Cross Site Express Unease about Facial Recognition', *The Guardian* (13 August 2019) <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/aug/13/people-at-kings-cross-site-express-unease-about-facial-recognition>.

[22] Joy Buolamwini and Timnit Gebru, 'Gender Shades: Intersectional Accuracy Disparities in Commercial Gender Classification', in *Proceedings of the 1st Conference on Fairness, Accountability and Transparency*, ed. by Sorelle A. Friedler and Christo Wilson, Proceedings of Machine Learning Research (PMLR, 2018), LXXXI, 77–91 <https://proceedings.mlr.press/v81/buolamwini18a.html>.

[23] John B. Thompson, 'The New Visibility', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 22.6 (2005), 31–51 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276405059413>.

[24] Ibid, p. 35.

Publicness is a constitutive condition of curating which, historically, is the practice of making (things) public. As Carol Duncan states, the publicness and visibility of art in a state museum or as a public resource is the mechanism through which the relationship between the citizen and the state as benefactor is enacted.[25] The curator is central to this production of the performance of citizenry, and it is predicated on the publicness of the art or artefact. In turn, the privileged position that the curator holds in contemporary culture is as a direct result of the exposure that they give to artists, artwork and histories. The contemporary curator, particularly in the context of a placemaking scheme, is the gatekeeper who confers value upon cultural productions.

With the notion of the 'exhibitionary complex', Tony Bennett argues that the museological institution of the late nineteenth century determined what is seen and therefore what is not seen in society.[26] Exhibitions and the objects they displayed became vehicles for inscribing messages of power to the public, and, in this 'exhibitionary complex', voluntary and self-regulating citizenry was to be produced. Although the contemporary curator of exhibitions, commissions or events outside the institution seems far removed from the 'exhibitionary complex' of the modern museum, the institution of art has moved outside the gallery walls and into public space.[27] The curator still makes a claim on the formation of publicness in terms of what is seen by whom and how.

Is opaque curating a challenge to the very concept or category of the curatorial?[28] Or can

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[25] *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, ed. by Susan M. Pearce, Leicester Readers in Museum Studies (London; New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 1994).

[26] Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (1995) <http://www.123library.org/book_details/?id=112588> [accessed 23 March 2022].

[27] Lopes Coelho, Rinaldis, and Sharman.

[28] Irit Rogoff and John-Paul Martinon, *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating* (London; New York, N.Y.: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p.18.

someone still be a curator if they are not making things public? I am not thinking about private or secret curating, but rather a mode of practice in which research, planning and execution which do not take for granted making public/exhibiting. I agree with Rogoff when she says that critique can no longer be about the revelation of a previously unknown injustice, nor can it focus on the exposure of a new discovery. Rogoff instead holds on to the publicness of an 'event of knowledge' that engages with the urgent problematics that constitute our social, cultural and political milieu.[29] The curatorial is still aligned with an idea of publicness, but that publicness may be produced through the event of knowledge, for which the post-political curator could choose what and how much is made public – or perhaps, more crucially, to shape who or what constitutes that public.

Michael Warner writes in his 2002 book, *Publics and Counterpublics*, that a public is constituted 'by virtue of being addressed', which I take as the curatorial maxim that by making something public, the curator creates a public. Simon Sheikh in his article, 'Constitutive Effects', advocates for this curatorial agency to produce publics and defines the cultural production or exhibition as involving two publics: a) the public (or participant) that is there, in the place of the exposition and b) the public that know of the exposition second-hand through word of mouth, books, the Internet or publicity material.[30] These categories are again predicated on the idea that the publics are constituted through what is made publicly visible or accessible.

Whilst the post-political curator continues to produce publics through address, they are more concerned with what makes it possible for publics to constitute themselves, protected and unseen when that public allows it. This does not mean that there is nothing to see, or that

[29] Ibid.
[30] Simon Sheikh, 'Constitutive Effects', in O'Neill and others, p. 180.

the project is invisible. As I will speculate below, I am interested in a duplicitous curator who calls into being a different set of publics at specific times to facilitate some kind of protective mechanism for an emergent political agency.

All curators know that curating is not just about what is exhibited, and that as part of our practice we usually camouflage or edit out the unsightly or irrelevant elements. There is always a discrepancy between what is produced as part of a publicly exhibited project and what takes place in the process of its production. The public appearance is the last and sometimes the least consequential element, particularly in socially engaged projects. There are the research, the administration, the bartering, the manipulation, the permission seeking and the common ground to be established.[31] Curators know that preceding any appearance is a long prelude of conversations that stretches out in time, especially if it is a continuous project or an institutional programme. Even if the event ends or exhibition closes, there are recurrences as others take interest. This might include continuing conversations, sequels, and whole new events that develop out of the embers of the previous project -- not to mention the permanence of a catalogue or web archive.

Marion von Osten and a few others address the gulf between the messiness of curating a project and the representation of that project through exhibition, event, publication or website.[32] In her doctoral research, von Osten was frustrated that even a research-led, collaborative and politically progressive exhibition must at some point reduce its complex and ongoing process into a digestible exposition. Her attempts at creating decentralised projects,[33] which she maintains were 'counter-public strategy' and involved non-art related

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[31] See the *Handbook* for evidence.
[32] Simon Sheikh, 'Renewing the Curatorial Refrain : Sustainable Research in Contemporary Art', in *Curating Research*, ed. by Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson, Occasional Table (London : Amsterdam: Open Editions; de Appel, 2015).
[33] Such as, *In the Desert of Modernity: Colonial Planning and After*, HKW, Berlin, 29 August–2008, 26 October.

experts, cannot seem to escape the entrenched hierarchisation of knowledge of the public forum.[34] John-Paul Martinon, in his 2020 book, *Curating as Ethics*, briefly addresses the incompleteness of any exhibition or public display. He says that it 'simply catches… a set of flights of thought in their necessary incompleteness'.[35] Martinon's text abstracts curatorial ethics into a deeply philosophical theory which bears little relevance to the actual practice of curating. His text does prompt an ethical question: to what extent ought the exhibition of a long-term and co-produced project be an accurate or 'truthful' representation of what took place in its production? If they never could be commensurate, and as addressed in Chapter 2, the outcomes of collaborative, socially engaged projects are rarely as intended, then why ought the curator feel any obligation to make the process transparent to the public?

Could it be understood that there are different publics, forms and moments of publicness, that none are inevitable nor natural and that the post-political curator is a more calculated and strategic practitioner who manages this? Keller Easterling claims that the most familiar forms of activism 'demand declaration'[36] from their opponents. She argues that those who have the most power achieve it precisely because their undeclared activity is immune to righteousness and prescription. Easterling calls for spatial practitioners on the Left to be less concerned with honesty and righteousness and more interested in how their practice can be more 'sly', fictitious or irrational.[37]

Notions of subterfuge, or at least testing the normative ethics of publicness intersect with the constitution of 'counter-publics'. Nancy Fraser argues that excluded groups create their own

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[34] von Osten and Lunds universitet, p. 11.
[35] Jean-Paul Martinon, *Curating as Ethics*, Thinking Theory (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020).
[36] Easterling, *Extrastatecraft*, p. 5.
[37] Ibid.

versions of public space, thereby creating 'subaltern counter-publics'.[38] Much scholarship on de-politicisation focuses on how the contemporary forms of urbanisation increase exclusions and create public spaces that are effectively dead as sites of democratic participation.[39] As such, one could argue that the exclusionary designs of contemporary planned towns may facilitate the constitution of counter-publics. Perhaps the fragile political emergences are the self-organised relations between strangers that Warner considers constitutive to a counter-public?[40] Counter-publics create alternative public spaces to build the power that makes riskier action possible.

This rich line of investigation stretches far beyond this research project, but I have concerns about the simplistic proposition of a counter-public sphere above. Firstly, the coming together of individuals that I am thinking about is barely perceptible enough to self-identify and to make the appellation which calls it into being.[41] Secondly, I am concerned that forming a counter-public through publishing or publicity in the context of a de-politicised enclosure is unsafe. The risk of being too public recalls Stefan Notowny's account of the 'radical inclusion of neoliberalism,'[42] a condition that is seemingly a parallel to Glissant's transparency. For Nowotny, this condition radically 'includes' the subaltern or colonised identity so that it may be assimilated, controlled, or annihilated. If the twenty-first century new town is indeed a space of radical inclusion, then any counter-public which relies on the more modern concept of the public sphere with its inclusions/exclusions or legitimate/illegitimate voices would be rapidly incorporated and put to work. Nowotny, in *Clandestine Publics,* claims that there has been a collapse of the constitutive relation

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[38] Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', *Social Text*, 25/26 (1990), 56 (p. 67) <https://doi.org/10.2307/466240>.
[39] *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space*, ed. by Michael Sorkin, 1st ed (New York, N.Y.: Hill and Wang, 1992).
[40] Warner, pp. 73–75.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Nowotny.

between the public and non-public and, as such, the counter-public (as Fraser and Warner conceive of it) is at risk of being stripped of its political character. His alternative, 'clandestine public' attempts to re-instate a paradoxical relation between the public and non-public by taking up a radically delegitimised position. To be clandestine is to be illegitimate or de-subjectified and it is from this mute position, he argues, that practices of counter-publicity can emerge into a new theoretical paradox of the public and non-public. Nowotny writes about practices (e.g., Universal Embassy in Brussels) but, for thinking about his theory for the post-political curator, it is limited in its purely speculative and theoretical dimension. Nowotny proffers no methods beyond 'witnessing' the 'clandestine' from the perspective of a critic, which raises a new set of questions around who can legitimately witness. If the post-political curator is to pick up these theories of *opacity* or *clandestiny* as a means to practically defend the political against de-politicisation, that would involve using their singular agency to make the fragile things invisible. What remains unresolved are the ethical considerations when practising as an intentionally opaque or duplicitous curator in a radically inclusive, post-political space.

The post-political curator as duplicitous protector emerges as a kind of community organiser who works towards enabling the networks and connections of people to materialise without being threatened by de-politicisation. If that is the case, it is worth considering what elements of curatorial it remains important to hold on to.

4.3 The Post-Political Curator and the Community Organiser

In the Handbook, I speculate on a mode of practice that deploys the tools of the community organiser and I outline how the two figures, the curator and the community organiser, overlap. Allying the two practices emerges out of the objective to protect the latent political

formations in a de-politicised context. The post-political curator in the new town takes a protective role, and part of that involves building the strength and power of the residents. Because of the special access that a curator has as either a placemaker or part of a placemaking scheme, there is the possibility that they will begin organising a community by default. The post-political curator would need to leverage that access in the interests of supporting the emergence of a political sphere.

Under the guise of the curator, using the strategies and tactics of community organising in a de-politicised space can foster or protect the emergent conflict which has the potential to grow into political agency. To underline that point: if the political agency of art relies on the existence of a political sphere but its formation is obfuscated by de-politicisation, then it is the curator's responsibility to hold a space for a political sphere to come into being. The post-political curator, like the community organiser, is not the political agent but rather the organiser and facilitator who strengthens, galvanises and protects the political agency that is threatened or does not yet exist. The practices of a post-political curator can shield the building of community power in the 'sweet spot' between the benign and the unassailable.

The figure of the post-political curator is not equivalent to the figure of the community organiser, but in our lived reality a curator can also be an organiser (see "Contrapuntal Forms" in the Handbook). The specific function of making public and deploying the category of art to hold opacity and representation in productive tension is the role of the post-political curator, within organising activity. While recent moves within curatorial discourse disconnects artistic production from the requirements of curating,[43] the reality is that curatorial practice is still largely focused on the production of cultural forms, be they exhibitions or events – moments of making public. Indeed, I think it is valuable to hold on to

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[43] Rogoff and Martinon. p. ix.

this function of curating to understand what a post-political curator might do in relation to and in difference to the community organiser. One could just abandon the figure of the curator or artist, but if they remain, then it is because there is something to consider about moments of making public and what forms are right for this making public. The curator Beatrice von Bismarck, for example, considers that the 'becoming-public' is singular to a curatorial practice and that this process is intrinsic to the subjectivation of the curator and the form of exposition.[44] This line of enquiry would be fruitful to explore further to understand better the potential alliances and differences between curating and community organising in the contemporary moment.

4.4 The Post-Political Curator as a Time Rebel

The method of opacity and considerations of visibility focus on a purely spatial understanding of the public sphere. As Chapter 2 on de-politicisation argued, there is little opportunity for the emergence of a public sphere in a de-politicised enclosure. If the curator cannot 'step outside' or will not withdraw from the spaces of de-politicisation for the reasons stated above, one might instead need to work with the temporal dimension of publicness. As such, rather than seeing withholding or making-public as being either/or choices, it may be that that these are related and temporally complex moments. It may be that what the post-political curator is best-placed to manage are the conflicting temporalities of publicness that arise within the duration of a project. In the next section, I will spend time figuring out the post-political curator as a time rebel[45] and the various ways that time can be re-conceived as a defensive resource activated in the service of protecting new political formations.

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[44] Beatrice von Bismarck, *The Curatorial Condition* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2021).
[45] Jeremy Rifkin, *Time Wars: The Primary Conflict in Human History*, 1st ed (New York, N.Y.: H. Holt, 1987), p. 12.

I postulate that time is elemental to a curator's practice and the post-political curator must be even more responsive to temporal shifts – as the prefix 'post' may indicate. Section 3 in the Handbook defines the time of the post-political as alienated in a Marxist sense, forward marching at a fast tempo in a linear and amnesiac progression in order to put forward some practical tactics for a post-political curatorial strategy (belated, andante and contrapuntal). Here in this final chapter of the thesis, I argue the case for temporality as a curatorial concern, its interdependence with publicness and thus its central role in protecting the political.

The interplay between time and space has always been part of the conceptual infrastructure of the political for theorists.[46] It is also the concern of the post-political curator, but they do not need to participate in the debates around whether time is subordinate to space or vice versa. Nor do they need to create the 'effect of dislocation,' which is how Laclau defines time as the political intervention into space, since as Chapter 3 in this thesis argued, it is difficult (or impossible) for the curator to directly enact the political. Marchart states that we cannot enact the political; 'we are enacted *by* the political'.[47] What is at stake for the post-political curator, then, is their ability to perceive it and manipulate our experience of it in the interest of the political event.

The argument is that the curator can play with time, choose the time to be public and use temporal disjuncture to protect the political. The post-political functions at a specific tempo, temporality and teleology. If people collectively refuse to conform to those norms, they may disguise the political agency that needs time to grow. The curator does not have the capacity to engineer a revolutionary act or a purely political event, as Chapter 3 argued. A curator

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46 E.g., Martin Heidegger, Hannah Arendt, Frederic Jameson, Laclau, Claude Lefort, Doreen Massey, David Harvey.
47 Marchart, *Conflictual Aesthetics*, p. 181.

cannot make the political come into being by orchestrating conflict, but the curator can foster the emergence and anticipate it.

Standardised calendar and clock time enables people to come together and act politically, as a public sphere. Hannah Arendt's spaces of appearance, like a public sphere, depend on continuous action made possible through the collective experience of calendar time.[48] Although this is arguably an outdated modernist conception of the public sphere with globalisation and the Internet, it does highlight a relationship between publicness and time which the post-political can be attendant to, since it means that to practise out-of-time and according to non-standard temporalities will form a different kind of public sphere and/or a political opacity. The post-political curator, then, is a time rebel who figures out ways to practise out-of-time, or to hold a space open for a different temporality, suggestions for which can be found in the Handbook.

4.5 The (A)history of the Post-Political

My project argues that the post-political as an analytical framework could render visible the pace of change and the chrono-politics of a context. As demonstrated in the example of *Growth Point*, the post-political arrangements are pre-emptive, predictive and risk-averse. Through self-governance and policing, the privatised, securitised enclosures of consumption foreclose in advance any possible event that may impede the progress of de-politicisation. I want to spend some time addressing theories of the 'contemporary' moment to underline the unique time-space of the new town and developments, and why my speculative proposals for a post-political practice are most appropriate to that context. Peter Osborne's

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[48] V. Browne, *Feminism, Time, and Nonlinear History.* (s.l.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 99–100.

'contemporaneity'[49] is the present condition in which he claims we find ourselves. Here, there is simultaneously a coming-together of all different times in the same historical present[50] and there is no future to think of. The lack of futurity was announced as part of the experience of late capitalism by Frederic Jameson's 'postmodern'[51] and is confirmed in Francois Hertog's description of the 'omnipresent'[52] as lacking a futural horizon. I have already detailed in the thesis' Introduction that short-termism is necessitated by profit-driven planners and developers in Cranbrook and Ebbsfleet. There can be little investment in the future lives of residents if their legal obligation is to their shareholders -- a very real and observable consequence of late capitalism. However, I am not sure that the 'stuck present' of Boris Groys, Jameson, Osborne and Hartog is adequate for the twenty-first century new town.[53]

Groys, Jameson and Osborne's diagnosis of the contemporary is predicated on a certain continuity that the new town does not necessarily have, or at least not in the same way. The twenty-first century new town has a different relationship to futurity, one that is untethered from its specific geography. While the newest new towns were planned with no future horizon in mind, their utopian antecedent have a complex history and futurity. Utopian planned settlements of the twentieth century around the world such as Welwyn Garden City, Milton Keynes and Chandigarh were an attempt to leave behind the social and political ills of their past and present (squalor, overcrowding, conflict). These post-World Wars (One and Two) new towns had big ambitions for a brighter future shaped by urban planning,

[49] Peter Osborne, 'Existential Urgency: Contemporaneity, Biennials and Social Form', *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, 24.49–50 (2016) <https://doi.org/10.7146/nja.v24i49-50.23321>.

[50] Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, First ed., paperback (London; New York, N.Y.: Verso, 2013), p. 17.

[51] Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time*, 2017.

[52] François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*, trans. by Saskia Brown, European Perspectives a Series in Social Thought and Cultural Criticism, Paperback ed. (New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 2017).

[53] Boris Groys, 'Comrades of Time', *E-Flux*, 11 (2009) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/11/61345/comrades-of-time/> [accessed 5 March 2022].

architecture and social engineering. The space-time of the twenty-first century new town, whether claimed by the planners and residents or not, is comprised of a history of utopian futures.

4.6 Time-Travelling

Extending the argument for the post-political curator as time rebel, I think that there is the potential for them to cultivate political formations through the construction of what Marchart calls 'time loops'.[54] This involves the collapsing of the past and future into the present to create the conditions for a political event to emerge. From a curator's perspective, the artistic-political time loop works in two directions. One practice would involve invoking a historical practice or history for a potential future (belated), and another would involve pre-enacting the future in the contemporary moment (pre-enactment).

Achille Mmembe's theories of 'interlocking'[55] suggest that the contemporary moment comprises multiple geographies and temporal dimensions. Mmembe points out that we exist in an unprecedented entanglement of co-existing times and traditions across geographies that 'interlock' the past, present and future.[56] This kind of contemporary moment facilitates the migration of temporalities. If we understand that the new town in Ebbsfleet, for example, is in fact 'interlocked' with Chandigarh in India, which was planned in the 1950s with a utopian future horizon, is there political agency in recognising these entanglements?

In my curatorial practice, I have consistently reached back in time to bring stories of

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[54] Marchart, *Conflictual Aesthetics*, p. 181.
[55] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton Studies in Culture / Power / History (Princeton (N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 109.
[56] Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, Studies on the History of Society and Culture, 41 (Berkeley, C.A.: University of California Press, 2001), p. 16.

community-led art and action to contemporary residents of new towns because this retains within it the utopian visions of the future.[57] It is almost irrelevant if these utopias were realised. It is the radical energy for a better future that made the utopian visions possible. Walter Benjamin wrote that time itself has a history and a politics,[58] and if so, I want to use my agency as a curator to unearth the history and politics of the time of the contemporary new town in the face of its de-politicisation.

This possibility of re-engaging with a utopian time of futurity relates to the idea of 'belatedness' that I briefly referred to in the literature review, from John Roberts.[59] At the start of this research project, I was interested in his call for a revival of an avant-garde art that was distinct from the everyday and as such could de-construct power as a mode of curatorial critique. Returning to his thoughts on the avant-garde, there is resonance between my thoughts on the temporality of the contemporary new town and what Roberts describes as a speculative artistic process that is a 'rehistoricisation of the future pasts,' as a constitutive force of an imagined futurity.[60] The terms 'belated',[61] 'deferred action'[62] and 'anachronisms'[63] refer to a method for practice that reaches into the past for residual revolutionary potential to address contemporary political concerns. Doing so dislocates an argument from the past to challenge the present order. The argument was too early, too short-lived or too rare the first time around, and the plan is to actualise it in the present to supersede its own role in history. This is an unashamedly avant-gardist call for renewal,

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[57] *Community without Propinquity,* MK Gallery, Milton Keynes 2011, Chandigarh project 2013, Inheritance Shenzhen 2011.
[58] Jacob Lund 'Untimeliness in Contemporary Times' in *Futures of the Contemporary: Contemporaneity, Untimeliness, and Artistic Research*, ed. by Paulo de Assis and Michael Schwab, Orpheus Institute Series (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2019), p. 47.
[59] Roberts.
[60] Roberts, p. 216.
[61] Roberts.
[62] Roberts.
[63] Sharon Hayes, 'Kissing Historically: A Performance Lecture' in *Not Now! Now! Chronopolitics, Art & Research*, ed. by Renate Lorenz, Publication Series of the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, 15 (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014). pp. 56–72.

invoking art as a revolutionary force.

'Belatedness' is a mode of curatorial practice that can hold a space for the political in the de-politicised enclosure, which I explore more in the *Post-Political Curator's Handbook*. It is not a nostalgic look to the 'good old days' of the post-war new towns, or the earlier garden cities. Firstly, there was never a time when these utopias were realised – this is precisely the point. Secondly, this nostalgic tendency can be seen in the rhetorical framing of the newest garden towns on the level of marketing and is in fact symptomatic of the de-politicisation of history by stripping it of any radicality.[64] Thirdly, most utopias are actually de-politicised since they propose a future that is without conflict.[65] Nonetheless, I am arguing for an anachronistic re-consideration of a utopian vision pregnant with possibility for a future that never arrived. The post-political curator can exploit it for its energy in the present moment.

Belated practices considered otherwise would be to regard the (art) histories as pre-enactments of political forms. Pre-enactments are artistic rehearsals for political enactments which invoke the tradition in political movements of pre-figuration.[66] Latent political elements are what the post-political curator is looking for, in either past or present arrangements. If what Marchart says is true, and contemporary art practices can anticipate future political events, then the importance of engaging in politically sterile contexts such as the twenty-first century new town rather than withdrawing becomes clear. Pre-enactment for Marchart is 'artistic anticipation of a political event to come'.[67] Obviously, there is no way to know what political event is to come, but I argue that to conceive of time loops of the future and past in these terms is a post-political perspective of temporality.

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[64] See "Inspired by Harlow" https://hggt.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/APPROVED_HGGT_AR_20211.pdf
[65] Yannis Stavrakakis, 'The Radical Act: Towards a Spatial Critique', *Planning Theory*, 10.4 (2011), 301–24.
[66] Marchart, *Conflictual Aesthetics*, p. 187.
[67] Ibid.

4.7 *Community, Land, Trust*

As I have argued in this chapter, the figure of the protective post-political curator could be organising alongside political struggles and curating out-of-time moments of publicness. Returning to practice, this intersection between organising, curating and pre-enactment and re-activation plays out in a project I commissioned from film-maker, researcher and educator Ed Webb-Ingall in response to the exhibition I co-curated, *Lie of the Land* at MK Gallery Milton Keynes in March 2019. The installation he made, titled *Community, Land, Trust*, enacts what Elizabeth Freemen called 'a usefully distorting pull backward'[68] as a method to foster the formation of political movements (see the Handbook "Belated" section). Webb-Ingall re-activated methods and the format of the community access television station in Milton Keynes from the late 1970s to bring housing activists and policy-makers together and to broadcast some aspects of their encounter. Webb-Ingall's work supported the early shoots of a community-led housing movement in contemporary Milton Keynes by giving them the space, paid time and attention to strengthen their campaign. Webb-Ingall, supported by the gallery and the Open University, connected the local campaigners with more established regional groups and eventually the city council, who were not aware of their work. Much of this happened far away from the cameras and continued long after they had gone. The final installation was not a public exposé of the project in its entirety. Instead, Webb-Ingall carefully selected elements of the wider project to be placed in context with the historical prompts, which enabled them to be re-activated.

Such a project draws upon belated political imaginaries from early housing experiments and

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[68] Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, Perverse Modernities (Durham [NC]: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 63.

community media to support the growth of a contemporary housing campaign in a way that is protective and recognises its own aesthetic dimension. *Community, Land, Trust* was nurturing and was aligned with a political struggle, but its representational mode distinguished it from a conventional organising act. *Community, Land, Trust* as a post-political practice harnessed alternative temporalities and held a potentially political space for the housing activists and for the audience who encountered the work.

The speculative figure of the post-political curator, then, emerges from the field of the curatorial and through a protective mode of practice that can discern the political without making it visible and without being visible. They, collectively with others, reach back in time to guide how they act politically in the present, which in turn pre-enacts future political events. From their heteronomous position, the post-political curator uses their skills and resources from other fields of experience to 'body forth' moments of publicness.

5. Conclusion

This thesis addresses the specific context of the twenty-first century new town and attempts to understand how a curator can practise critically within it. In doing so, I have investigated both the limits and opportunities of a curatorial practice that aims to realise a politically emancipatory form of criticality. I have sought to demonstrate that the new town presents the curator with a set of spatial and political conditions which forecloses the emergence of a conflictual public sphere. I recognise the role that art and curating plays in upholding the politically sterile conditions of de-politicisation and consider practical methods that can either intervene in them or at least avoid becoming instrumentalised by them.

5.1 Research Aims and Synthesis

In response to the primary research question, *what is at stake when we practise 'politically' in a context that has been de-politicised, like the twenty-first century new town?* this thesis has made four arguments across four chapters. Firstly, I argue that the conditions of a new town and the policy paradigm of placemaking pose a great risk to critical curatorial practices of subsumption and instrumentalisation. I also make the case that there is a strength in curating, as it is perceived as a benign threat to the hegemonic order. The curated project is in fact strong enough to hold a space open for the public to safely come together and build solidarity. Through a close analysis of the location and function of critique in my project *Growth Point* in Cranbrook, Devon, I highlight the problem of transposing critical theory into critical curatorial practice. While the outcome of my project was very specific to a time and a place, I argue that it nevertheless reveals some more general concerns about the risks that criticality, understood as a dominant strategy for political curating, poses to the public.

Secondly, this thesis has sought to articulate the infrastructural and political particularities of the new town and that this has real consequences for cultural production and curating. Using the theories of de-politicisation of Mouffe and Swyngedouw, it reframes the new town as a testbed for the post-political condition which was entangled with collaborative and community art practices throughout the twentieth century. With the post-political as a critical framework, the thesis set up the argument for conceiving a new form of politically engaged curatorial practice that does not uphold the processes of de-politicisation.

The third argument this thesis has put forth is that a curator who seeks to work politically in the new town must also adopt a post-political analytical framework if they are to discern latent political formations. This is argued from within a discursive curatorial practice which has attempted to orchestrate conflict with professional placemakers, artists, theorists and curators in the art institution, away from the new town residents. Conflict, as a constituent element of the public sphere and therefore the political, cannot simply be staged. In fact, as Chapter 3 claims, staging a debate in the hope of enacting the political, might do little more than provide a platform for individuals to state their rigid positions. Instead, I have argued, by deploying Marchart's critique of Mouffe's 'agonism', the curator can try to make the conditions favourable to an enactment of the political, but they cannot enact it themselves. Instead, the curator can work with critique to discern the post-political condition and the emergent dissensus that it attempts to foreclose, with the aim of facilitating its growth.

The final chapter has argued the case for a different mode of practice for the de-politicised context of the new town and major housing developments. In doing so, it figured the post-political curator as a critical practitioner who harnesses the visibility and publicness of curating and weaponises their privileged access to resources. The post-political curator is primarily a protector of the political, and they consider the ways in which they can disguise it

through manipulating temporalities and aligning their practice with community organising. The argument this thesis puts forward is that a critical curatorial practice in a twenty-first century new town must account for the processes of de-politicisation and consider how they either sustain it or resist it. Such a practice does not reject the dialogic and socially engaged practices espoused by Kester, Lacey and Kwon or the community art practices of the 1970s and 1980s. Rather, a post-political curatorial practice enables, holds and protects a space within which they can function to forge bonds and build solidarity among participants and carefully chooses moments of publicness. The post-political curator could in fact also be a community organiser, but the two practices sit alongside each other rather than collapse into one another. The post-political curator in a new town, with resources from placemaking schemes and direct access to developers and institutions, may find themselves practising with residents who are atomised strangers, rather than a vital community. As such, they may perform some aspects of a community organiser, yet they are primarily concerned with supporting the political green shoots of political arrangements and choosing the moments of publicness and representation in the public domain.

This thesis also makes the argument for the handbook as a speculative practice of post-political curating. *The Post-Political Curator's Handbook* was created to share knowledge generated through practice to practitioners and puts forward proposals for a different mode of curating. De-politicisation is most concentrated in the twenty-first century new towns and large-scale housing developments, but it is creeping into other geographies and fields of practice. The handbook and the thesis together argue that what is required is an appropriate framework and set of methods to practice critically in de-politicising conditions.

5.2 Critical Reflections

This research project attempts to deal with such complex concerns such as the ontological

dimension of the political, the emancipatory function of critique, temporality and publicness.

They are vast fields of study, and I could not in the space of a thesis, consider the curatorial

in relation to them with as much depth as scholars of these fields might rightfully demand. I

would argue that my research project is practice-led and grounded by the real-world

application of ideas and theories into curating. The multifarious theories that my research

engages with are considered in their relation to politically engaged curatorial practice in

twenty-first century new towns. My contribution to knowledge is principally how a post-

political framework might re-orientate the critical curator and their practice.

There are some critics of the post-political and theories of de-politicisation. They argue that it

is unhelpful to make such declarations of a post-political reality because this denies the

already existing political formations.[1] Others insist that democracy and the political sphere

have always been threatened and that to be concerned with the post-political invokes

nostalgia for a past that never existed.[2] I argue that a post-political analytical framework only

overlooks the existence of political formations if one is not attuned to them or is unable to

discern them in the first place. In relation to the persistent threat to the political, I think this is

a strong argument, but I would assert that the processes of de-politicisation and the threats

to democracy have intensities in certain spatio-political contexts. As I have argued

throughout this thesis, a new town in the UK in 2022 is by design de-politicised, because of

both its corporate structure and its lack of democratic institutions. It is a model for a post-

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[1] Ross Beveridge and Philippe Koch, 'Depoliticization and Urban Politics: Moving Beyond the "Post-Political" City', in *Comparing Strategies of (De)Politicisation in Europe: Governance, Resistance and Anti-Politics*, ed. by Jim Buller and others (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), pp. 189–208 <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64236-9_8>.
[2] Sheldon S. Wolin and Nicholas Xenos, *Fugitive Democracy: And Other Essays* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2016).

political enclosure and therefore serves as a test bed for processes of politicisation as well as de-politicisation. Because of the implementation of creative placemaking on a policy level, there is a disproportionate amount of funding available for art in such contexts. I argue that despite the fact that the political has always been obfuscated, it is of concern to a curator who seeks to work politically to understand how they are implicated in that obfuscation.

It could be argued that positioning the post-political curator as a protector firstly risks infantilising the public and setting up a problematic power dynamic. Secondly, there could be a danger that considering the post-political curator as a duplicitous and protective figure confuses political concerns with ethical concerns.

In spite of these limitations, what I hope to have demonstrated in this research project is that viewing new towns as de-politicised enclosures – by designing out conflict and foreclosing the possibility of truly political formations – makes possible a significant contribution to placemaking and curating in the public realm. To assume that socially engaged art and curating is emancipatory or ameliorative because it intends to be risks it being instrumentalised by the very processes that it seeks to ameliorate or be emancipated from: namely neoliberal de-politicisation. By proposing to utilise a post-political critical framework in curatorial practice in the new town, I argue that curating not only makes a space for a public event of knowledge but can render both the latent political formations and the de-politicising processes discernible. That said, this thesis can only speculate on the figure of the post-political curator who chooses to practise politically in the de-politicised enclosure and the future forms this might take. Future research would test this idea in the field. The creeping de-politicisation of space (e.g., Nine Elms, Kings Cross, Liverpool One) means that more and more the curator will need to decide if and how to work in such conditions – the possibility of the post-political will increasingly be tested by the reality of these conditions.

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