

AER RESIDENCY

2020

Concluding Report
March/April 2020

Harriette Meynell

Introduction

In this report, Harriette Meynell (Fine Art, Central Saint Martins) shares her personal experience of her 2020 residency.

My residency at Arbeit Studios (hosted by London College of Fashion's Centre of Sustainable Fashion and Waltham Forest Council) focused on the theme of social economy and making site-specific work about the immediate area around Arbeit Studios, Leyton Green (London, E10).

As an artist and ex-economist, I am interested in how cities function and the impacts of privatisation and gentrification of the public realm. For this residency my focus was on researching and analysing the nature and type of thresholds that exist in relation to the local community and surrounding buildings.

Background

My walking-based art practice explores transitions, on the ground, of public and private spaces, and the associated, often unwritten, rules that govern behaviour. Anna Minton's *Ground Control*¹ provides context, but close investigation of details affords the motivation. The residency enabled me to change the focus and location of my work from central London (zone 1) further east (zone 3), thereby enabling me to develop my practice in a different urban context.

“Walking shares with making and working that crucial element of engagement of the body and the mind with the world, of knowing the world through the body and the body through the world.”²

My degree show installation (BA Fine Art, Central Saint Martins) explored the idea of papering over as a metaphor for what is not meant to be seen in our shiny, regenerated cities. This theme became increasingly important as my residency progressed, though I didn't set out, initially, with this intention.

Getting Started

My residency started in January 2020. As this was a part of London I did not know, prior to the residency officially starting I visited a few times, walking the streets around the studios, photographing anything and everything that looked of interest.

¹ Minton, A., (2009), *Ground Control*, Penguin Group: UK: London, UK.

² Solnit, R., (2001), *wanderlust*, Verso: London, UK, p29.

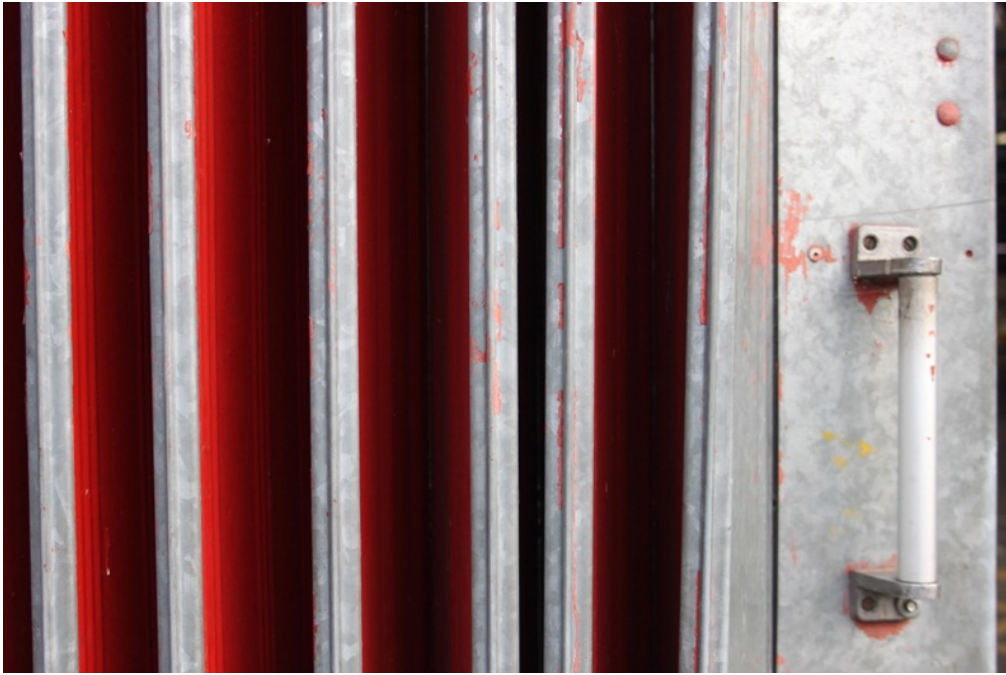


Fig 1: Bus Garage Door (Meynell, H., 2019)



Fig 2: Bags on Wire Fence Behind Market Parade (Meynell, H., 2019)

I supplemented this with some desk-based research about Waltham Forest borough (of culture), local gangs and planning applications in the immediate area. This helped me to 'set the scene'. I also made contact with some Walthamstow-based artists (from Bank Job aka The Rebel Bank) to find out their perspective. This research was useful as it meant I didn't start the residency, which was focussed on social engagement and producing something site-specific, with no local knowledge.

Cashpoint Augmentations

On my first recce I noticed an old cashpoint on the building (Market Parade) in which the studios are located. It still had the metal bollards, painted footprints and crosshatching on the pavement. This set-up reminded me of the barriers that are in place in-front of art works in galleries.



Fig 3: Old Cashpoint, Market Parade (Meynell, H., 2019)

I wanted to play with this idea in a light-hearted way throughout my residency. To get started with something on 'day 1', I decided that I would use the cashpoint as a site for collages that would change on a weekly basis. Using photocopies of my etchings and photographs simply taped into position, my intention was to draw attention to the absurdity of the painted pavement footprints and barriers. I was also interested as to whether the works would be changed by passers-by.

In total, eight different 'cashpoint' paper-based collages were installed, with each one being in situ for about a week. They survived two storms, the exit of the UK from the European Union and the start of the Covid19 pandemic (which meant the last one remained in position).

| | | |
|------------------|---|-----------------------|
| Intervention no. | 1 | Etched Cashpoint |
| | 2 | Cash-in |
| | 3 | Clearance |
| | 4 | Newspeak ³ |
| | 5 | Hot n Tasty |
| | 6 | Cash Point |
| | 7 | Clashpoint |
| | 8 | Alterations |

³ In situ during the week we left the EU. It quotes George Orwell's 1984: *"If you want to hide a secret, you must also hide it from yourself."*

Fig 4: Cash Point Augmentations (installation details) (Meynell, H., 2020)



People only interacted with one significantly (no. 3, which incorporated replica £50 notes) which was interesting and raised ethical issues regarding money in what is a relatively poor area of London. I initially expected more interaction (and destruction) of the collages, but these augmentations highlighted that audiences' reaction to, and interaction with, public work cannot be controlled. Consequently, I didn't build on the cashpoint idea significantly throughout the residency, but it was an interesting experiment nonetheless.

Initial Ideas

My inspiration was always going to come from the streets themselves. So armed with my camera I walked and documented. A lot. Sometimes with others, but mostly on my own initially. And I talked – with locals, bus drivers in the bus garage, shop keepers, studio holders and people coming and going in the communal space (the Common Room) where my studio was situated.

In my initial proposal, my intention was to locate myself within the studio and work with a few local residents, young and old, to better understand their respective thresholds (real or imagined) with regard to the Market Parade building. From this I would develop an alternate perspective of the impact of physical thresholds compared to imagined ones and create work based on the data, sounds and ephemera collected in the area around the building itself.



Fig 5: Market Parade Front Elevation (Waltham Forest Council, 2019)

However, a change of plan was required. The building was a busy place, with locals coming in from all walks of life to use the communal Common Room. The building's thresholds didn't seem to be a significant barrier to local people. I wasn't sure what I could do to enhance the windows and threshold in any meaningful way, especially since the windows and doors were in a shared space that I could not freely physically augment over the duration of the residency.

I felt that I couldn't be messy in the studio space as it was in a shared area and I wasn't there full-time. Perhaps this was my own barrier, or initial lack of confidence about what I was going to do. I briefly toyed with applying mud rock to the façade of Market Parade and rebuilding inside the studio....but didn't on account of the mess and was mindful that leaving something of such large scale in place for a number of weeks might annoy other users of the space.

Given the time I had available (I managed to work on-site for two to three days a week throughout my residency), I also felt I didn't have time to build meaningful relationships with residents in the social housing above the studios to do joint work with them. Doing socially engaged work with communities involves a level of trust that takes time (months) to develop, especially if your social situation is very different in terms of race, religion, age, etc. I knew I needed a different angle with which to approach things.

It took a while to find my 'angle', so, in the meantime, I kept on walking and collecting sounds and images.

The Studio Wall

I am a multi-disciplinary artist, using photography, sound, printmaking, film, sculpture and performance. The ephemera produced in the studio continued in this cross-disciplinary manner. The studio wall became a site for collecting ideas and a way of sharing these with people who were interested when I wasn't at the studio. The walls are where I could be 'messy' and pile seemingly random items on top of each other in an otherwise tidy studio. It was also where I tested ideas out.



Figs 6 & 7: Studio Wall in February 2020 (Meynell, H., 2020)

Several ideas developed from the ephemera on the studio walls, whilst others were discarded (or parked for follow-on projects), throughout the residency. For a while I obsessed about safety yellow rope, bindings and their relationship to road markings. This idea is likely to become a future project incorporating performative photography.

My research relating to a Waltham Forest gang study⁴ was a useful to me for a number of reasons.

⁴ Whittaker, A., (2018), *From Postcodes to Profit*, London Southbank University, London: UK. Available at: www.lsbu.ac.uk (accessed 16/1/2020).

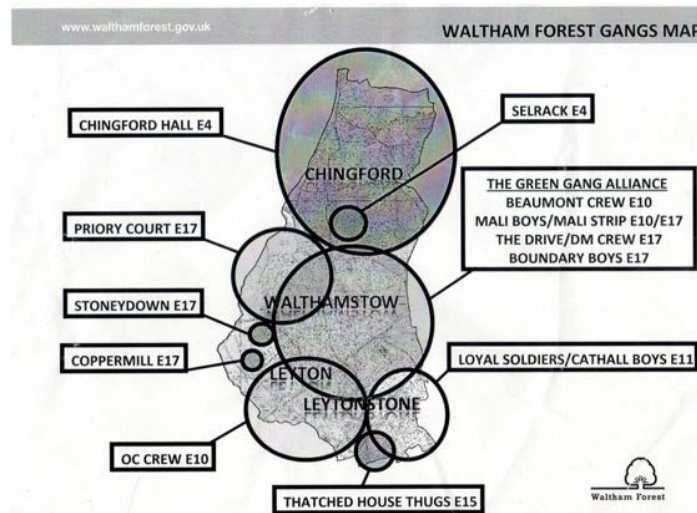


Fig 8: Waltham Forest Gangs Map⁵



Fig 9: Gang Map, watercolour on Khadi paper (Meynell, H., 2020)

‘...territory is valued as a marketplace to be maintained...it’s not about postcodes anymore. It’s about money.’⁶

The role of different postcodes and money, the use of watercolours and creating something aesthetically pleasing from something that isn’t, are all motifs that became increasingly important as my residency progressed.

Building the Soundscape

⁵ Ibid, p25.

⁶ Ibid, p5.

I always knew I was going to do a soundscape from the outset, so I started collecting the building blocks of this on my walks in the area. I gained permission to record in the bus garage (a hanger like space with amazing acoustics), recorded in the alms houses' garden, the local park, street sounds, the garages in the nearby railway arches. The walks down the railway arches, which are dominated by bodyshop garages, are unlike the more gentrified arches in neighbouring boroughs (Hackney and Haringey). The few that had been done up (with new blue security doors and grills) were mostly empty and unlet. A deadzone, compared to the bustle and mess of the bodyshops. Seeing this contrast up close was useful and an idea that threaded through to the final installation.



Fig 10: Inside the Bus Garage (Meynell, H., 2020)

I also recorded background noise within the launderette, Common Room and cafés, but knew I needed local voices to provide a narrative. But what kind of narrative? At the halfway point in the residency, the idea hadn't struck me yet!



Fig 11: Cottage Café Formica (Meynell, H., 2020)

By building the soundscape in this way, the contrasts within the local Leyton Green area became apparent. You could walk in gardens listening to birdsong, come out of a gate directly on to a road heavy with buses and find yourself looking at a drive-thru KFC opposite. These juxtapositions were interesting and often extreme.

Walking slightly further afield in to 'old', very gentrified Walthamstow, the differences with Leyton Green couldn't be more marked. Armed with my camera and notebook, I documented these differences. My approach to building ideas involves looking at things from many perspectives. The residency gave me space and focus to do this.

Photographic Record

Street photography was central to my approach for this residency. The photography focused on barriers, thresholds, facades and windows initially. The small details are important. Also, I like to look at familiar things from unusual angles as this can provide a new perspective on something that might otherwise be overlooked.



Fig 12: Railings (Meynell, H., 2020)

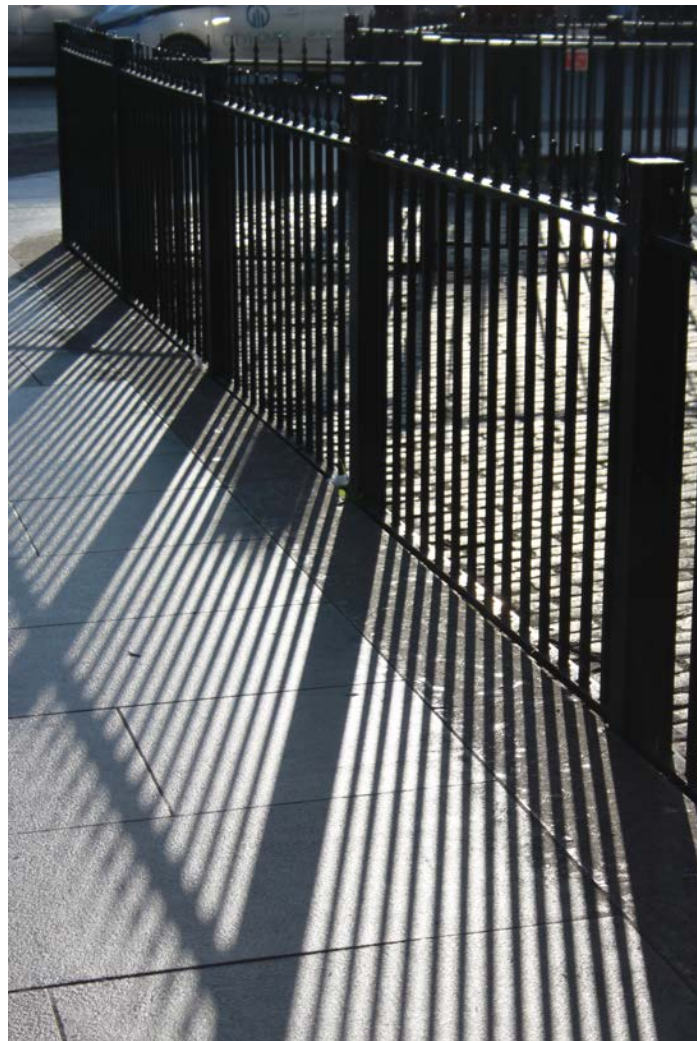


Fig 13: Paddy Power Railings (Meynell, H., 2020)



Fig 14: Panopticon at Market Parade (Meynell, H., 2020)

I also photographed the shop facades in the immediate area around the studio. They are one-of-a-kind types of shops. Once they are gone, they are gone forever. Initially I thought about recreating the high street on the studio walls in a large photo montage of hundreds of photos. I became a familiar face on Leyton High Road with my camera! I often chose drab days to do this façade photography so that the scruffiness of the shop fronts - peeling paint, water damage, dirt etc – was evident.



Fig 15: The Barber Shop (Meynell, H., 2020)

With shopkeepers' permissions, I also photographed (in detail) the interiors and exteriors of specific shops. This too was with the idea to create large photomontages of the whole of these shops from the outside in (and vice versa). In the end I didn't use these photographs in this way. Some were chosen for the final exhibition, but most were not used at all even though they are visually interesting and enabled me to understand exactly what's on sale locally.



Fig 16: Inside the Wedding Palace (Meynell, H., 2020)



Fig 17: Fruit and Veg for Sale, Bakers Arms (Meynell, H., 2020)

A Love for Scaffold

I had already sound recorded scaffold tarpaulins flapping in the wind – a signifier of gentrification in my mind. The front line of redevelopment. When the tarpaulins come down, a new façade is in place. On account of two beautiful sunny days, with unbroken blue skies, I decided to photograph all the scaffold around the studio I could find in the time I had available with the aim of producing a 'zine of scaffold and other juxtaposed images.



Fig 18: Leyton Green Scaffold (Meynell, H., 2020)

The photographs from this series triggered the idea of using scaffolding in the final installation. I liked the idea of bringing jeopardy to the studios in terms of whether they were being redeveloped or not. Also on a practical level, scaffolding was a good way to fill a very large exhibition space and enabled me to hide features that I didn't want seen (a TV, printer, shelving, etc).

The Importance of Colour.

My walks down the railway arches had distilled the idea of, once gone, these type of businesses are gone forever. Though the arches were only a ten/fifteen-minute walk away from the studios (on the E10/E11 border), I felt I needed to get even nearer. The arches walks made me appreciate the uniqueness of the Leyton Green shops. The photographs I had taken (on drab days) of their facades replicated the look of 'gentrifiers' when they move into an area and want to change things. Newcomers often fail to see the beauty, interest or uniqueness of these type of high-street shops. My theme for my final work of the residency was to celebrate their diversity and the value to the local community.

I spoke to users of the studios and the Common Room about the area and what changes had occurred over the years. The closed and opened betting shops, sweetshops, cafes that had changed hands and then closed, the Beaumont Estate and related shenanigans, pub conversions, supermarkets coming and going. I visited the local Seddon Centre to look at their historical photo display of the area. Research, research, research...time travelling through the changes.

A walk and conversation with Serdar, a local resident (and Common Room user), triggered how I would use colour within the work. He talked about how he liked the colours used on the E17 side of the Lea Bridge Road (a road near the studios that signifies the E10 and E17 postcode border). I had already documented these 'heritage' facades. We had a conversation about the colours of gentrification: heritage and pastel shades and why they were used. Out of this conversation, the idea of papering over with a lick of paint to make something more aesthetic became key to the work. I followed up this idea by investigating the colours used in E17 and associated paint names to understand the aspirations these paints attempt to embody.

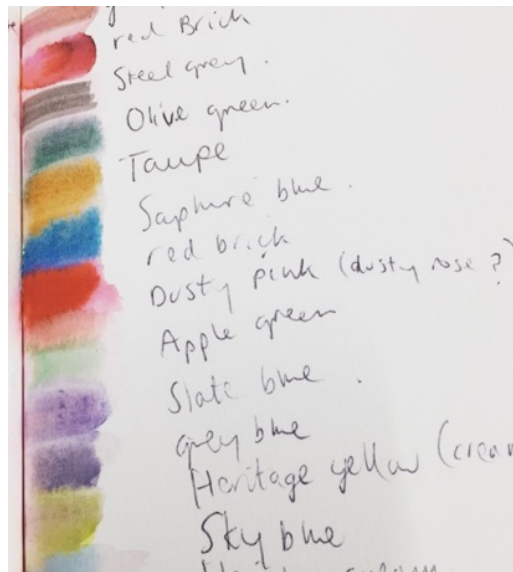


Fig 19: Sketchbook E17 Colour Chart (Meynell, H., 2020)

Grey Berry, Roman Serenade, Poetry in Motion, Breezy Linen, Aged Parchment, Mais Oui, Harp Strings, Urban Haze, Dusk in the Valley, Summer Grey, Granite Fog, Silver Tarnish, Royal Mews Gold, Orange Marmalade, Sunset Bellini, Peach Parfait, Mind Your Beeswax, Pure Joy...⁷

My photographs inside a local tailors (Tayyab Tailors) of yarn spools had many of the same colours. Here the colours are used for repair and adjustment of garments: extending the life or repurposing things. Given the studios are located within a Fashion Hub, it felt apt to bring colour into my final installation.



Fig 20: Spools Inside Tayyab Tailors (Meynell, H., 2020)

Working with Local Shopkeepers

⁷ Paint names, B&Q.

Usually when I work with local communities it takes time to build relationships. I found it easier to talk to shop keepers rather than local residents⁸. There was an immediate common ground: they had things for sale that I could potentially buy. I started the conversations about sound recording with them and photographing their shop interiors and exteriors in detail. Being an artist in residence, hosted by Waltham Forest Council at Arbeit Studios, helped the conversations that I had trying to recruit participants. Some didn't want to contribute, but others did. Others had to 'ask the boss'. The key was not to lose confidence and keep on asking people. In the end I managed to recruit about ten different shop keepers and had fruitful conversations with several others who didn't want to be recorded.

The sound recordings focussed on the answers to four key questions that I asked each participant.

- 1) What's the cheapest thing you sell/do in your shop?
- 2) What's the most expensive thing?
- 3) What is the funniest thing that's happened in the shop?
- 4) What's the saddest thing that's happened in the shop?

I didn't realise how good these four simple questions were until I started recording the answers. People were so generous with their responses and their honesty really moved me. The answers also highlighted the trials and tribulations of running a small shop in the area.

During the process of recording the voices for the soundscape, Serdar spoke about one of his friends, May, who ran a hairdressers on a nearby road who'd had her shop for over twenty years. Though it wasn't in the run of shops that I was focussing on, I was keen to meet her and Serdar introduced me. May was a fabulous interviewee and someone whom I could build the narrative of the soundscape around. I was lucky to meet her.

Because people had been so honest with me, during the editing process I felt that I had a duty to them to be respectful with their answers. The best way to achieve this was to overlay voices in the edit. By multi-tracking them, there is a general sense of the direction the conversation is going, but it becomes harder to attribute specifics to certain people. This ethical dilemma was an interesting one, because though consent to recording was sought and given, and, all participants knew it would be put into a public exhibition, as an artist you still have to make sure that you do not exploit members of the public for your own ends.

Installation Development

Once the sound recordings were completed, I then focused on the final exhibition. It took a few iterations to work out what this was going to be. I discussed ideas with people in the studios and members of the Common Room. By talking about my thoughts, it helped me to work through issues and ideas.

⁸ Here I am talking about those that didn't use the Common Room. I did find out about local residents' groups and walking initiatives in the area. These met on days when I couldn't be at the studio (because of paid work), so unfortunately, I couldn't build relationships in that way. With more time, I would have been more proactive with these groups.

An initial installation iteration referenced the photographic work of Ed Ruscha, particularly *On the Sunset Strip* (1966), where he photographed every façade of Sunset strip and displayed them in a continuous strip and/or rows around the walls. My idea was to line up the façades I had photographed, make collages of the shop interiors and build an installation of the cheapest things sold in each of the shops (black bags, fuses, key rings, etc.). This initial view, I felt, didn't tackle the juxtapositions I had witnessed so keenly during my residency, including the colour changes.

I did however think that a large version of a spliced Market Parade building with supermarket shelving (Market Parade used to be a supermarket), supermarket packaged vegetables and market fruit and veg was a visually interesting juxtaposition of some of the changes in the area. This work went from sketchbook (15cm x 25cm), to maquette (80cm x 100cm) – which had been well received in the studio - to wall (1060cm x 4240cm)!

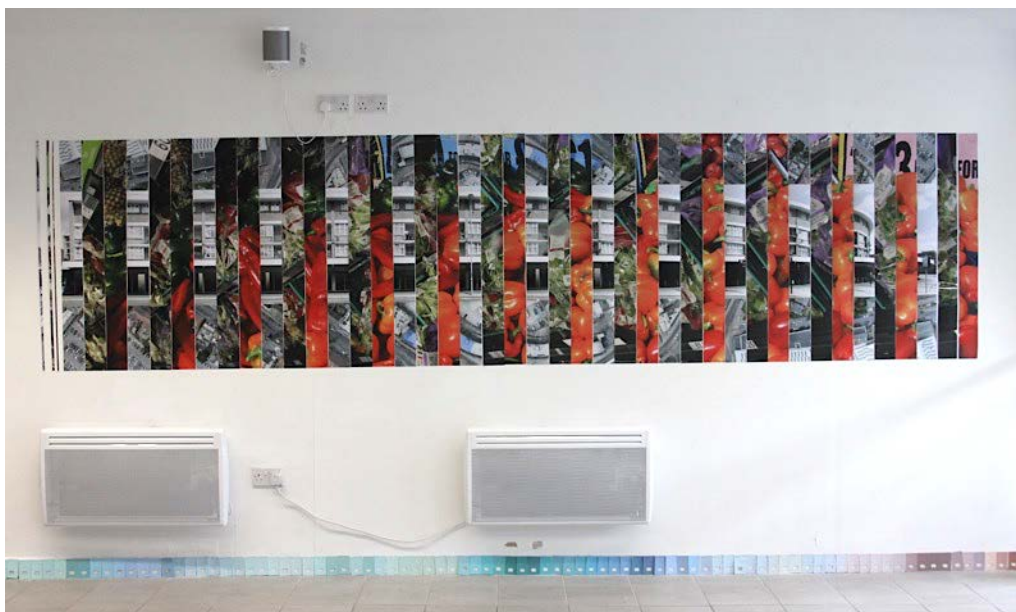


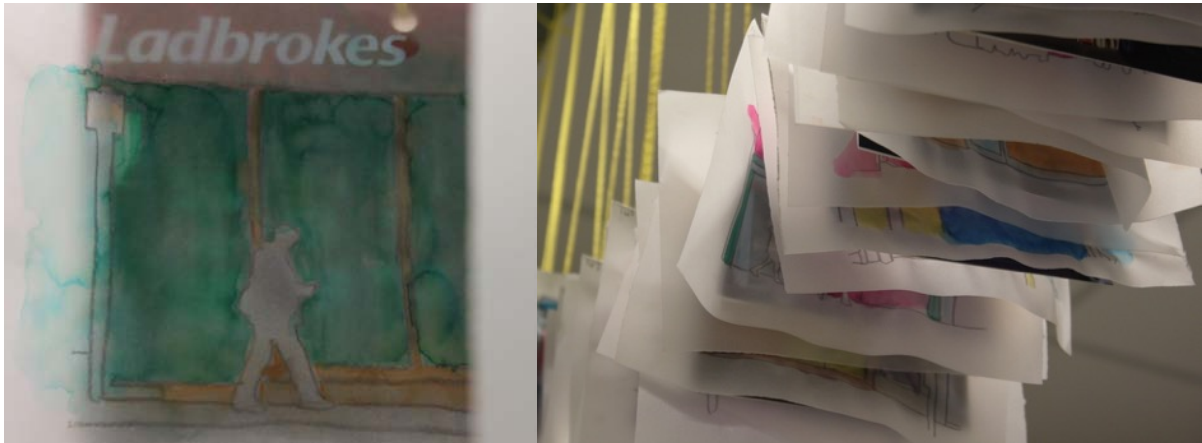
Fig 21: Markets (Installation Shot) (Meynell, H., 2020)

Tracings

Though I often work in monochrome, I decided that I needed to play with the idea of making something 'aesthetically' pleasing to represent the transformations that will inevitably happen on Leyton Green High Road. My approach was to develop a group activity of colouring in (or over) the shop facades. Using tracings of every façade I had photographed, I wanted members of the community to colour in these drawings using a controlled colour palette. I put the request out for volunteers in the Common Room newsletter. This was not so successful as changes to the dates when the Common Room could use the studio space came in around the same time, so people weren't there on the days I could be in the studio. For the most part, I roped my kids in to help.

It is a shame that this wasn't more of a community activity, as it would have been a fun thing to do and I would have liked to see peoples' different approaches to the task. It would have

also given some element of ownership of the work to local people. I needed to be a bit more prepared - If I had given more notice of the call out for volunteers, I would have known about the change of Common Room times earlier and could have got this element of the installation ready earlier. A good thing to learn for next time!



Figs 22 & 23: 'Pastelised' Façades (installation detail) (Meynell, H., 2020)

My aim was to reconstruct the high street within an installation that people could walk around and touch whilst listening to the soundscape. The 'pastelisation' of the facades of all the shops of Leyton High Road comprised over 180 photographs. Using colour transformations, site specific becomes could be anywhere.



Fig 24: Looking at the High Street Alterations (Meynell, H., 2020)

By walking slowly, like Erling Kagge in his book about walking, "I became more aware of my surroundings, and my perceptions were altered. Everything was different to what I would have experienced if I had been walking at a normal pace."⁹ I had some hope that the people

⁹ Kagge, E., (2018, 2019 translation), *Walking: One Step at a Time*, Viking, Great Britain, p77.

walking around the installation might have a similar experience, even within the studio space itself.

Building the Installation

The communal space at Arbeit Studios, with its ex-supermarket proportions, is huge for a solo show. The decision to use scaffolding was made to help me to control and dominate the space, raise some question marks with people walking past as to whether the site was undergoing redevelopment, as well as to provide the framework for the installation elements.

I made contact with the National Construction College (in nearby Leytonstone) in the hope that they could sponsor my use of Scaffold. In the end this proved not to be possible, but I enjoyed going to their site and regret not sound recording (or photographing) in their training space. In the end I found a local scaffolder to do the job and paid the fee we negotiated.

The fact that the residency provides a small amount of money for materials was crucial to my use of scaffold. The money enabled me to be ambitious with my installation and meant I had a budget to buy the things I needed when I couldn't source them for free, for example, tarpaulins. This, in the end, enabled me to create a better, more professional, installation.



Fig 25: Leyton High Road (Reconstructed), Installation View (Meynell, H., 2020)

The window installation was much quicker to build around the scaffold, using a combination of layer upon layer of tracings, a large picture of lions (the most expensive thing in the Leyton Discount Store), rope, dust sheets and tarpaulins. The allusion to the king of the (urban) jungle using something that local people would recognise as having been on sale down the road for months was intentional. In paint name terms, this is called 'Lion's Slumber'.



Fig 26: King of the Jungle, Installation Detail (Meynell, H., 2020)



Fig 27: Lions' Slumber, Installation Detail (Meynell, H., 2020)

This part of the installation was more ambiguous regarding its meaning. This was intentional. Not everything has to be explained. I would have liked more time to refine the installation ahead of opening the exhibition and have learnt that every aspect of a large space that you intend to install in needs to be planned and tested. This didn't happen, so I was fortunate that I was happy with how it came (quickly) together. More installation helpers will be required for next time as its dangerous to rely on luck alone!

I called the exhibition *Alterations* as a nod to the Fashion Hub that comprises the studios and also to the redevelopment of the area.

Artist's Statement (for *Alterations* Exhibition)

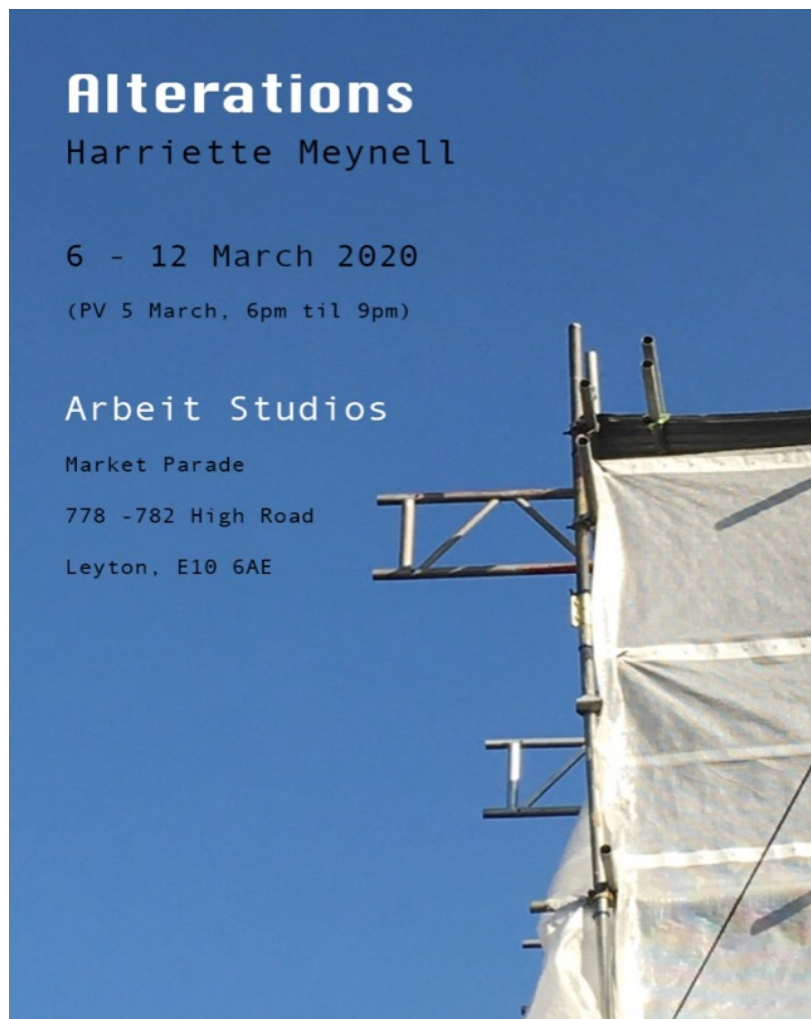


Fig 28: Alterations Exhibition Poster (Meynell, H., 2020)

To conclude the six-week Arts in the Environment residency at Arbeit Studios I (re)constructed Leyton High Road - from the bus garage to the E10/E17 boundary with the Lea Bridge Road - within a site-specific sound installation that gathered together the voices of local shopkeepers.

Colour is associated with redevelopment and gentrification. Paint has names such as Glass Houses and Royal Mews Gold. A general painting-over occurs, with a pastel aesthetic. The installation invited the viewer to listen, look and touch what is lost, perhaps, when this process happens. The voices talk of community, the sad and funny times, and time spent in the immediate area where twenty pence fuses, henna trays and toy lions are on sale.

Scaffold is at the front line of the alterations. When the tarpaulins come down a new and different façade comes into being. The installation used scaffolding as the frame for the installation and brought the prospect of redevelopment into the Arbeit Studios themselves. A physical embodiment of the changes happening to so many London high streets.

Conclusion

“In economic terms, the private or public ownership of land and property determines the overall shape of the city”.¹⁰



Fig 29: Leyton High Road After a Storm (Meynell, H., 2020)

My work is often well-researched and by having access to a studio in the area and talking to local people I think I produced a thoughtful, creative insight into an issue that is affecting high streets all over London. The soundscape and associated installation raised issues about what is lost or gained when redevelopment of an established community occurs. It left the viewer to come to their own opinion, rather than being more overtly political.

Whilst my final work diverged from my initial proposal, I still think it was true to the spirit of it. I worked with local people in a productive way within the time limitations of the residency. Lessons have however been learnt in terms of lead times required for recruiting volunteers.

The exhibition got good feedback “very smart and to the point”, “meaningful contribution”, “wonderful stuff...will recommend to all my friends”. It also resembled, for the most part, my intentions. I’m glad I was bold in terms of scale as the space would have potentially dwarfed a smaller installation. I learnt so much about putting on a solo show! Whilst I have previously curated and been in group shows, going solo is very different. There are so many things I can take away from this experience - from the need for marketing and self-promotion, managing

¹⁰ Madanipour, A., (2003), *Public and Private Spaces of the City*, Routledge: UK, p3.

time and helpers, the need for an artists' blurb and a comments book, show documentation – to name a few.

The installation itself did raise some accessibility issues in my mind as the tracings were placed at eye level. Consequently wheelchair users would not be able to touch and look at them. This was an issue I hadn't considered at the installation planning stage and should have. I intend to photograph each tracing and put online in a public archive, but I didn't have time to do this ahead of the exhibition (and link to a QR code for those that needed it).

The cash point interventions didn't develop into anything major and raised a few ethical issues along the way. On reflection, I feel that this may have been a missed opportunity to work with local community to do joint works. There was only so much I could do in the time I had available. Perhaps the council could commission a permanent work for the site or get local schools or community groups to make something site specific?

I really felt that the residency helped me to develop my practice and facilitate its continuing relevance outside of the art school context by developing my approach to the modern *dérive*. I also demonstrated to myself that I can develop site-specific work in a relatively short time frame. There is more work I want to do in the area, specifically the railway arches, so it has been an incredibly rich creative experience for me. Without the structure of art college and the tutorial system it can be hard to make new work when the call of normal life – work, money, children – fight for priority. This residency has allowed me to see that I can manage the perpetual 'juggle' to find time to make new work, and so it gives me confidence for the future.

As London becomes a more unequal, exclusive place there is much to fuel my *dérives*. Sixty years on from the Situationists, by looking closely at the cracks, boundaries, facades and thresholds of the city, I have the opportunity to be more critical of the capitalist spectacle, consistent with some of their initial aims. Walter Benjamin wrote about the magic of the threshold: "somethings shrill as they are about to cross a threshold"¹¹. My work represents my shout as I cross from one place to another, but this time I did it more subtlety and with pastel colours.

Thank You

I would like to thank all the shopkeepers that contributed to the project and their generosity of time and openness to my questions. I have laughed with, and cried at, some of the stories they shared. So thank you Mohammad, Salma, May, Shabbir, Mohamed, Muhmmad, Vince, Gideon, Jordan, Danny and Serdar (for putting me in touch).

Thanks also to Waltham Forest Council and London College of Fashion for awarding me the residency and the opportunity to make work about the area.



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¹¹ Teyssot, G., (2013), *A Topology of Everyday Constellations*, MIT Press: USA, p88.