

A TEENAGE TAKEOVER OF LIBRARIES



TONY
WHITE

Telford, Cannock & Worcester

Where Strangers Meet: Art and the Public Realm

Foreword/Preface by Jo Beall

‘I’m not saying I told you so but rappers have been reporting from the front for years.’¹

Why is the British Council interested in the public realm? ‘The public realm can be simply defined as a place where strangers meet’. So says the eminent urbanist, Richard Sennett.² If this is the case then the British Council, a cultural relations organisation that brings people together from different cultures, countries and continents, works squarely in the public realm. For around eighty years, through promoting the English language, the Arts and educational links, the Council has fulfilled its Royal Charter mandate to ‘promote cultural relationships and the understanding of different cultures between people and peoples of the United Kingdom and other countries’,³ bringing strangers together from all corners of the globe to encounter each other. While formal or mainstream diplomacy primarily involves bilateral relations between national governments, the pursuit of cultural relations happens largely among people – in and through educational institutions, cultural organisations, communities and cities.

Unlike the private realm, such as the family where we know each other well and close up, the public realm is characterised by incomplete knowledge and, significantly, by place:

‘Traditionally, this place could be defined in terms of physical ground, which is why discussions of the public realm have been... linked to cities; the public realm could be identified by the squares, major streets, theatres, cafés, lecture halls, government assemblies, or stock exchanges where strangers would be likely to meet. Today, communications technologies have radically altered the sense of place; the public realm can be found in cyberspace as much as physically on the ground.’⁴

While much of the literature on the public realm focuses on politics and citizenship, class and social identity,⁵ the so-called ‘performative school’ offers a more cultural approach, derived from anthropology, focusing on ‘how people express themselves to strangers’.⁶ Taking this as our starting point our interest was in how arts professionals and performers, policy makers, and citizens, connect through the arts in different public realms.

Cities exhibit a critical mass of social, educational and cultural organisations, concentrations of actual and virtual communities, public spaces, and physical and digital connections. As such, they present a unique opportunity to use the power of arts, culture, education and the creative industries to power city and regional economies, catalyse urban renewal and to promote and share our cultural assets. The British Council has a presence in five cities in the UK and over 180 cities around the world, with its work extending far beyond this to several hundred cities and their rural hinterlands. From this base we are working to support cities in the UK and abroad to be internationally inspired and globally connected.

By using our knowledge, experience and connections we can support cities to achieve their international ambitions, working in partnership to create more livable, inclusive and vibrant urban spaces and places and to improve the quality of life for their citizens through exchange of knowledge, people, ideas, insight, culture and experiences. Our cultural relations approach is built on a spirit of

mutuality and co-creation, which inform this collection and how we engage with art and the public realm.

Most would agree that a good city is one where people's basic needs are met, where public services are delivered affordably and efficiently, where the economy thrives, the environment is protected and where public spaces are not only safe, accessible and affordable but also interesting and inspiring – alive places in which people can engage with each other and where creativity can flourish. Contemporary urban planners adhere to the view that beautiful cities are more liveable cities and culture-led development has become *de rigueur* for urban planners in many places around the world. Within the arts the concepts of public art and public space are intertwined and as Geoffrey Crossick writes in *Understanding the value of arts and culture*, the cultural force of the city and its built environment plays a significant role in this. Yet as Crossick acknowledges, the tangible role that the arts play has been largely untested.⁷

This is a contested area with some seeing the harnessing of the arts to promote creative cities and urban economies as the instrumentalisation of culture.⁸ Conventional public art can also be viewed as exclusionary, foregrounding the interests of elites over ordinary urban dwellers and artist-led gentrification.⁹ The conversation surrounding cultural value is engaging with such challenges and the need to develop appropriate means of engagement and participation in the arts. Cities, with their vast and growing populations, their density and networks of public services, spaces and institutions are central to this wider discussion.

Underpinning our approach and captured in the spirit of this collection is that cities are about people and the character of a city itself and expressions of its attractiveness and liveability is generated as much by those who live in it as by its built environment and infrastructure, its governing body or political leadership. Cities are the sum expression of all their people, civil societies and the institutions that define the experience of being in the city.

Where there is an inconsistency between political rhetoric and local reality then city diplomacy efforts will likely be undermined. We cannot project an image of a city as the 'greatest place on earth to live' if the reality is only that for some of our citizens.¹⁰

This collection focuses on what happens to both identity formation and place making when people engage in the public realm through the arts. Its starting point is to recognise artists less as individual producers of *objet d'art* and more as collaborators, participants or producers of situations, shifting the focus from 'production to reception, and emphasises the importance of a direct, apparently unmediated engagement with particular audience groups'.¹¹ It explores facilitating participation in the arts in everyday and extraordinary spaces and shares ideas and experience of the public realm internationally.

The collection shows public artists grappling with often complex, social dynamics and relationships as they play themselves out in and through public space. Because art operates beyond the rational and the functional, it often challenges urban planners who by definition are Cartesian in their approach. Yet planners do recognise that cities are social spaces and that social spaces continually change and in the process, that cities are constantly made and remade. Amin and Thrift see the city, 'as everyday process, mobilised by flesh and stone in interaction',¹² growing and morphing around the actions and engagement of ordinary people. This is at the heart of the British Council's cultural relations approach, sharing international experience in the hope of inspiring understanding and opportunity.

Footnotes

- ¹ Ice T, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 7th May, 1992 at the time of the Los Angeles riots. Cited in Edward W. Soja (2000) *Postmetropolis, Critical studies of cities and regions*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, p. 374
- ² Richard Sennett (2016) 'The Public Realm', *Quant*, www.richardsennett.com/site/senn/templates/general2.aspx?pageid=16&cc=gb
- ³ British Council (1993) *Royal Charter and Bye-laws*, London: British Council
- ⁴ Richard Sennett, 2016
- ⁵ See for example, Arendt, Hannah, 'Public Rights and Private Interests.' In M. Mooney and F. Stuber, eds., *Small Comforts for Hard Times: Humanists on Public Policy*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1977; Noel O'Sullivan, 'The Concept of the Public Realm', 2010, Routledge; and Douglas Kelbaugh, 'Three Urbanisms and the Public Realm', *Proceedings. 3rd International Space Syntax Symposium Atlanta 2001*, www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/3sss/papers_pdf/14_kelbaugh.pdf; and Richard Sennett, 'Quant: The Public Realm', 2016, www.richardsennett.com/site/senn/templates/general2.aspx?pageid=16&cc=gb
- ⁶ Richard Sennett, 2016
- ⁷ Crossick, Geoffrey and Kasynska, P, (2016) 'Understanding the value of arts and culture', AHRC Cultural Value project
- ⁸ See for example, R. Florida (2002) *The Rise of the Creative Class*, New York: Basic Books and C. Landry (2008) *The Creative City: A Toolkit for Urban Innovators*, London: Earthscan
- ⁹ See for example Miles (2005) 'Interruptions: Testing the rhetoric of culturally led urban development' *Urban Studies*, 43(2) pp. 421-440; J. Peck (2005) 'Struggling with the creative class' *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 29(4), pp. 740-770; and S. Zukin (2010) *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- ¹⁰ Jo Beall and David Adam (2017) *Cities, Prosperity and Influence: The role of city diplomacy in shaping soft power in the 21st century*, London: British Council, p. 23 www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/g229_cities_paper.pdf
- ¹¹ M. Kwon (2004) *One Place After Another: Site-specific Art and Locational Identity*, Massachusetts: MIT Press
- ¹² A. Amin and N. Thrift (2002) *Cities: Reimagining the Urban*, Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 10

Where Strangers Meet

Introduction by Claire Doherty

I am making my way along a train station platform in my home town of Bristol in the west of England. It's early summer, a time in which this harbour city reawakens, its public character more extrovert and social for a few short months before hibernating come October. But this morning, most of those around me are moving with the speed of a ritual commute – already mentally occupied with the day. Though physically moving through the concourse of a railway station, these people are already somewhere else – their knees locked under a desk, their faces buried in a screen. There are very few bodies at leisure – unlike the lingering space of the public square, or, for some, the lingering time of the lunch-hour. This is a public space in which bodies are propelled onwards; this is not a place of looking, agitation or agency, nor unexpected encounter. And then something changes...

In amongst the moving crowd are two stationary figures – in worn, khaki soldiers' uniforms. They are standing by the platform edge, waiting, occasionally catching the eye of a stranger. Incongruous due to the anachronistic nature of their historic costumes, they are all the more startling because of their stillness. They're not drawing attention to themselves through any words or movements. They are not exactly theatrical, but they're performing precisely because they should not be here. They are out of time and out of place.

On approaching them, I am handed a card in silence. It bears the name of a Lance Corporal who died on the first day of the Somme in the First World War – 1 July 1916 – and his age, 17. This is a memorial of sorts, but one that understands the public realm not as a stable site, but as a place and a time in a constant state of becoming; a place in which we are all implicated as actors and in which past, present and future are colliding. This is the progressive sense of place that geographer Doreen Massey once evoked as she described ‘place’ as a collision of events and times, memories, fictions, material culture and meeting points.¹

My encounter that morning in Bristol was later revealed to be one of over two million uncanny encounters of First World War soldiers in public spaces across the UK on 1st July 2016. Though it felt intimate and specific – it was an artwork of immense scale, disbursed through multiples times and places throughout that single day, accumulating online as a mass public encounter and public memorial.

A project by artist Jeremy Deller in collaboration with Rufus Norris, Director of the National Theatre for 14-18NOW, the UK’s arts programme for the First World War centenary, *we’re here because we’re here* became one of the most celebrated public artworks in the UK of recent years (explored in detail by Kate Tyndall in this collection), and it was a catalyst for my interest in working with the British Council on this new collection of essays: *Where Strangers Meet*.

We’re here because we’re here is representative of a diverse network of artistic interventions, projects, gatherings and actions globally that are challenging the way in which we think about ourselves, our pasts and our future potential, by changing our experience of the urban public realm. But even within the 12 months since Deller’s performers infiltrated my consciousness and changed my perception of the temporal limits of public space, the title given by the British Council to this collection – ‘Where Strangers Meet’ – seems all the more provocative, all the more politicized than the phrase used by Richard Sennett in 2009 to describe the anthropological character of public space.²

Within the past year, as a culture of fear has built around the fault-lines of intolerance, strangers have become the silhouetted figures of potential violence lurking in the shadows of public space. Sennett's promotion of the 'unfinished' city plan, which allows for its inhabitants to adapt and change the public realm, seems all the more fragile.

"In a 'post-truth' world," UCLAN's Professor Lynn Froggett suggests in this collection, "the meeting of strangers in civic space demands ever more effort, reaching across gaps in recognition and understanding, and in urban environments beset by division and discrimination the need arises again and again. It impels the citizen to take a critical and self-reflexive perspective on their relations with civil society and the body politic. One of the key services that art can perform in urban environments is to change the conditions under which 'strangers meet' so that we can know each other better and imagine other ways to live together."

Where Strangers Meet considers the recent artistic, technological and political shifts determining emergent new forms of cultural experience in the public realm and in turn, what is at stake in the emergent forms of our cities' cultures. The voices included in this collection speak from disparate locations across the globe, distinguished from one another by their own set of conditions, and in some cases, distinct political positions. There are, however, some significant shared concerns which emerge globally. These include:

- The encroachment of privatisation on public space and the implications for freedom of movement or cultural expression and new cultural forms;
- The risks of 'artwashing' urban development, thereby disguising social implications and speeding the rate of gentrification at the expense of urgent community needs;³

- The growth of a culture of fear which threatens to infringe civil liberties, stalling the potential for individuals to freely adapt public spaces for personal or collective cultural activities, whether that be through exclusions due to political or environmental upheaval or the imposition of state forces of control;
- The rapid development of mobile technology and significant changes to the way in which people are authoring, co-creating and participating in culture and the emergence of simulated experiences and their ramifications for our understanding of what 'public' space might be and how it is constructed;
- A tension between self-initiated, self-directed cultural activity and organised programmatic approaches to city-wide cultural programmes for economic growth.

The collection embraces a broad definition of 'art' in the public realm which encompasses unexpected and unannounced artistic interventions, immersive, dispersed and networked performances and simulated experienced, direct actions and collective, grass-roots resistance through imaginative cultural activities. The collection gives insight into the concerns of architects and planners, but focuses less on form and design, than on the social, political and environmental implications of those creative practices in public spaces. It recognises residents, visitors, commuters and passers-by and new arrivals as active respondents – protagonists in, rather than just witnesses to, the stories unfolding in the public realm.

The meaning of 'public realm' itself is stretched and redefined through these essays by contributors who are concerned less with the theoretical discourse around the terms 'public space' and 'public realm' (see Habermas, Arendt, Mouffe and Sennett) than with the lived experience of publicness. There are clearly defined cultural differences of course in the conditions of public space across these distinct localities: for example, the provisional nature of public realm

from Mexico City to Rio to Cairo and Lagos contrasts starkly from one other, each with its own particular set of political and social conditions, ritualised public practices, architectures and topographies; furthermore the formal character of interior public space evolving through the privatised urban development explored by architect Diba Salam in Dubai contrasts significantly to that described by Karolin Tampere in her consideration of Oslo's harbour area and the work of artist collective Futurefarmers or Dave Haslam's exploration of the club scenes of Manchester, Liverpool and Birmingham.

What does emerge are a common set of tactics that use degrees of subversion and collective action as a means to work as artists and cultural producers in the gaps between planning and lived experience. In his description of two consecutive forms of exclusion which emerged in Cairene public space following the momentous events of the spring of 2011, for example, Omar Nagati describes the revolutionary reclamation of public space by the public which led to exclusion through fragmentation, and the securitisation of public space by state control. "Art intervention in public space", he suggests, "work[s] through the cracks of the system, both geographically and politically, using design as a negotiating tool, and subversive tactics to mediate the different forms of exclusion resultant from the periods of flux and of securitisation." This responsive and agile mode of operating by artists, designers and creative practitioners is a common thread to emerge particularly where a city is in flux.

As this collection unfolded in 2017, a 7.1 magnitude earthquake hit Mexico City, rendering contributor Gabriella Gomez-Mont's words all the more resonant, as she spoke of cities who are in the process of imagining themselves out loud. Yet equally, whilst some are becoming acutely attuned to the need to adapt to environmental shifts and changes, so for others the public realm is increasingly mediated and filtered; this is a disbursed and connected public, largely occupying a virtual public space. Rather than explore specifically the internet as a form of public space, however, three writers have considered the implications of creative technology on our experience of physical spaces.

Professors Lynn Froggett and Jill Stein explore how ‘play’ through digital interaction in this shifting landscape holds out the promise of integration and connection. Stein surveys the digital platforms for collectively authoring spaces, such as location-based and location-specific mobile ambient storytelling; location-based mobile games; augmented reality experiences; and social location tagging/sharing, all of which, she suggests, “blur the lines between the digital and physical public realms by engaging city dwellers with a persistent layer of ambient information.”

Froggett asks: “What is the impact on the public consciousness of this repetitive simulation, widespread engagement in flow states... and the ‘Disneyesque’ aesthetic of much game design? How does it affect human interaction in public space?”

Both authors look at critical, creative practices which are emerging as a form of resistance to a simulated, anodyne public realm to enable what Froggett refers to as a kind of ‘deep play’ whereby critical reflection and individual agency is triggered, rather than repressed. Furthermore, Tony White offers an insight into a live-streamed takeover of libraries by young people in the West Midlands of the UK as a means of considering the library as a public place free from judgement and catalyst for co-created content and unregulated behaviour. This chimes with Dave Haslam’s assertion of the need for self-organised, uncontrolled spaces. “The fact is,” he suggests, “great ideas come from the margins.”

There is no shortage of future forecasting against which to set these reflections on arts and the public realm, but as William Gibson suggested, “the future is here, it’s just not very evenly distributed.”

Froggett suggests, “The capacity to affect and be affected by the needs and claims of others – who are not of one’s friendship group, community or kin – is a neglected aspect of civic life. Affect flows in public space, as it does in private lives, informing how we act into the public realm as embodied and emotional subjects.”

In a recent research inquiry into the civic role of arts organisations, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation identified common characteristics and operating principles shared by arts organisations committed to a strong civic role, namely they are rooted in local needs; develop community agency and build capability and social capital; as well as championing artistic quality and diversity and provide challenge.⁴ Such principles are shared by the artistic projects gathered here which work upon the public realm, modelling new civic acts of tolerance, of resolution, resistance and challenge.

This collection tracks starkly different approaches to addressing the inequities of the present – through direct action, through collaborative exchange and by modelling potential new behaviours or processes. In his study of Utopia, Richard Noble suggested that, ‘for artworks to be utopian, they need to offer two things which seem to pull in rather different directions: on one hand a vision or intimation of a better place than the here and now we inhabit; and on the other some insight into what Ernst Bloch terms the “darkness, so near”, the contradictions and limitations that drive our will to escape the here and now in the first place’.

Former Queens Museum Director, Laura Raicovich spoke, when spearheading a new vision for the museum in 2017, of the importance of the civic role cultural institutions play with reference to the museum’s Immigrant Movement International, a community space in Queens that provides free educational, health and legal services. IM is a partnership between the museum and Cuban artist Tania Bruguera, who is interviewed by Gal-dem editor, Liv Little for the collection. Bruguera describes her notion of *arte util* (useful art) as art which is “the elaboration of a proposal that does not yet exist in the real world and because it is made with the hope and belief that something may be done better, even when the conditions for it to happen may not be there yet. Art is the space in which you behave as if conditions existed for making things you want to happen, happen, and as if everyone agreed with what we suggest, although it may not be like that yet:

art is living the future in the present. Art is also making people believe, although we know we may have not much more than the belief itself. Art is to start practicing the future.”⁵

The approaches considered in this collection can be seen to embody this contradictory pull: between the dream of an ideal society and the circumstances of the world in which we live. Some, such as Tania Bruguera’s *Arte Util* and the work of *Futurefarmers* here explored by Karolin Tampere, draw upon the aesthetic strategy of ‘modelling’, as a process through which ideals are tested as types of micro-utopia, whilst others are more assertively direct actions. This difference is often determined by the ways in which the artworks have emerged: some are the result of commissioning processes, outreach programmes or as part of larger-scale urban developments, others are self-initiated and/or the result of collective action.

A consideration of these provisional, unfolding set of works and movements reveals the potential of art in public to expose and respond to the encroachment of corporate interests on public space, to the diminishing opportunities for social cohesion and to the invisibility of the displaced and dispossessed in public life. The significant risk, however, as outlined in the recent discourse on ‘artwashing’ and critiques of the ‘creative city’⁶ is “the deliberate use of arts and culture to secure future profitable gain rather than social inclusion or commentary.”

But what emerges from this collection is a more subtle set of arguments for the involvement of artists and artistic practices in the development of our cities through collaborative action, resistance, creative invention and by offering productive alternatives through the occupation of the centre to reassert the periphery. *Futurefarmers*’ proposition for a public bakehouse in Oslo for example operates as the means by which radical approaches in food production enter the space of corporate urban redevelopment.



Rhodes must fall © Schalk van Zuydam

Alongside this utopic modelling of potential futures are the equally resonant issues of grappling with a city's contested past. It is worth remembering that Jeremy Deller's soldier performers disruption of the temporal limits of public space in Bristol last year also occurred in a centre promenade in Bristol overlooked by a statue of slave-owner Edward Colston – a site of consistent and increasingly urgent debate in a city built on the slave trade. Historian David Olusoga explores the implications of public monuments as sites of contested histories through the protest movement for the removal of the Cecil Rhodes statue at the University of Cape Town and the subsequent violent rallies which erupted around the confederate statue in Charlottesville this August.

The act of commemoration has always been closely aligned to strategies of storytelling, by which a particular history of the past is sanctioned by those in the present to bring about a particular future. As Boris Groys suggests, 'The future is ever newly planned – the permanent change of cultural trends and fashions makes any promise of a stable future for an artwork or a political project improbable. And the past is also permanently rewritten – names and

events appear, disappear, reappear, and disappear again. The present has ceased to be a point of transition from the past to the future, becoming instead a site of the permanent rewriting of both past and future – of constant proliferations of historical narratives beyond any individual grasp or control.”

As Deller’s significant work of art in the public realm indicated on 1 July 2016, the potential of art in the public realm is to assist us with rewriting and reimagining how we live together in the future, but essentially by revisiting the past with new eyes, lifted from our screens, to feel the materiality of being in the physical environment and to look the stranger in the eye.

Footnotes

- ¹ Doreen Massey, ‘Landscape as Provocation: Reflections on Moving Mountains’, 2006 republished and downloadable at oro.open.ac.uk/7227/1/Journal_of_material_culture_pdf_version.pdf
- ² Richard Sennett, ‘Quant: The Public Realm’, available to read and download at www.richardsennett.com/site/senn/templates/general2
- ³ See journalist Jack Shenker’s recent article in *The Guardian* who characterised the threat of privatisation as the “insidious creep of pseudo-public space” where the control of ‘acceptable behaviour’ ranges from covert policing and surveillance to the less obvious ‘planning-out’ of free movement
- ⁴ Gulbenkian Foundation, *Rethinking Relationships*, downloadable from civicleartsinquiry.gulbenkian.org.uk
- ⁵ Tania Bruguera, ‘Reflexions on Arte Útil (Useful Art)’, available to read or download at www.taniabruquera.com
- ⁶ See Oli Mould, ‘Why culture competitions and ‘artwashing’ drive urban inequality’, *Open Democracy*, Sept 2017. Download at www.opendemocracy.net/uk/oli-mould/why-culture-competitions-and-artwashing-drive-urban-inequality and Alexander Nazaryan, ‘The ‘Artwashing’ Of America: The Battle For The Soul Of Los Angeles Against Gentrification’, read at www.newsweek.com/2017/06/02/los-angeles-gentrification-california-developers-art-galleries-la-art-scene-608558.html

A Teenage Takeover of Libraries

Text by Tony White

‘Are they trying to attack us, d’you think,’ Gareth asked, ‘or the library itself?’

‘Perhaps both,’ said the cat, calmly. ‘Either way, I think we ought to go upstairs and warn the others before they break down the doors.’¹

The provision and functioning of public libraries in the UK is a statutory duty for local authorities that is enshrined in law by the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964, the key points of which are that local authorities should ‘Provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all people that would like to use it’, ‘Lend books and other printed material free of charge for those who live, work or study in the area’, and ‘Promote the service’; with compliance overseen by the Secretary of State for Culture.²

There had of course been numerous public libraries in the UK prior to 1964, building upon legislation dating back to the Public Libraries Act 1850. There had also been a ‘public library movement’³ in the centuries preceding that, with so called ‘endowed libraries’, and libraries ‘attached to mechanics’ institutes and literary and philosophical societies, or subscription libraries’.⁴ But it was under the terms of the 1850 Act, subject to certain conditions (and despite concerns that creating such spaces might foment dissent as well as education), that local authorities were first enabled to raise money through taxation that could be spent on public library buildings and staff salaries; although not, initially, books.

These developments were augmented in the late 19th century by a wave of library building funded by private philanthropy, hence the great number of libraries named after Andrew Carnegie (1835–1919),

who funded the construction of some 660 public libraries in the UK and Ireland and many more in Europe and the United States of America, and to a lesser extent Henry Tate (1819–1899), who, in addition to the gallery now known as Tate Britain, funded the building of a number of public libraries across South London.

Subsequent legislation created further periods of significant expansion and building, especially following World Wars I and II and from the late 1950s onwards, broadening the range of provision so that, for example, ‘Children’s services were ever-more important, while larger libraries offered facilities such as local studies and record libraries, and later computers.’⁵

However, in spite of such successes and in the wake of the global economic crash of 2007–2008, public libraries in the UK have been one of the more visible targets for austerity-driven cuts in UK public expenditure. The Future Libraries report published in 2011 by the Local Government Group and the former Museums, Libraries and Archives Council provides a useful survey of thinking at that time, not least when it erroneously describes public library provision as an ‘elective’ service⁶ (rather than a statutory duty), speaks of ‘modernising libraries’⁷ and rationalising them, of their ‘becoming more effective and sustainable’,⁸ citing a range of ‘recipes’ and ‘ingredients’ to achieve reform and change in order to save money. Such ideas and policy imperatives have helped shape dramatic changes to the public library network across the country, but few could argue that massive library closures are changes for the better.

At time of writing hundreds of public libraries have been closed down with still others at risk of closure, or in the process of being transformed to within an inch of their functioning life. Some authorities are experimenting with book-vending machines, and others with ‘click and collect’ services or siting their loan collections in unstaffed or non-library premises. Even where individual libraries may have survived, many qualified staff have been laid off in favour of volunteers. Nationally the number of libraries staffed by volunteers is

increasing dramatically. Indeed, it has been suggested that this shift towards the voluntary sector is the ‘main plank of government policy towards libraries’.⁹ Where there were 4,482 public libraries in the UK in 2009–10, by CIPFA’s last count there were 3,850, and the rate of closures has been accelerating year on year.¹⁰

Ian Anstice of *Public Libraries News*, who collates and publishes details of many such closures, notes that:

The overall word for libraries [that] are no longer directly operated by the council is heavily politicised. Local councils prefer to use the positive-sounding words ‘divested’ or ‘community library’ while campaigners prefer to use more negative words such as ‘abandoned’, ‘DIY’ or ‘volunteer-run’. The catch-all word that is used by *Public Libraries News* is ‘withdrawn from direct council control’ or ‘withdrawn’ for short.¹¹

In one of the most notorious examples of ‘reform and change’, Lambeth Council has pursued a policy of asset transfer – as outlined in their *Culture 2020* report of 2015 – that manipulates public health imperatives to justify the repurposing of library buildings (including a purpose-built Carnegie Library) into healthy living centres: gyms with bookshelves.

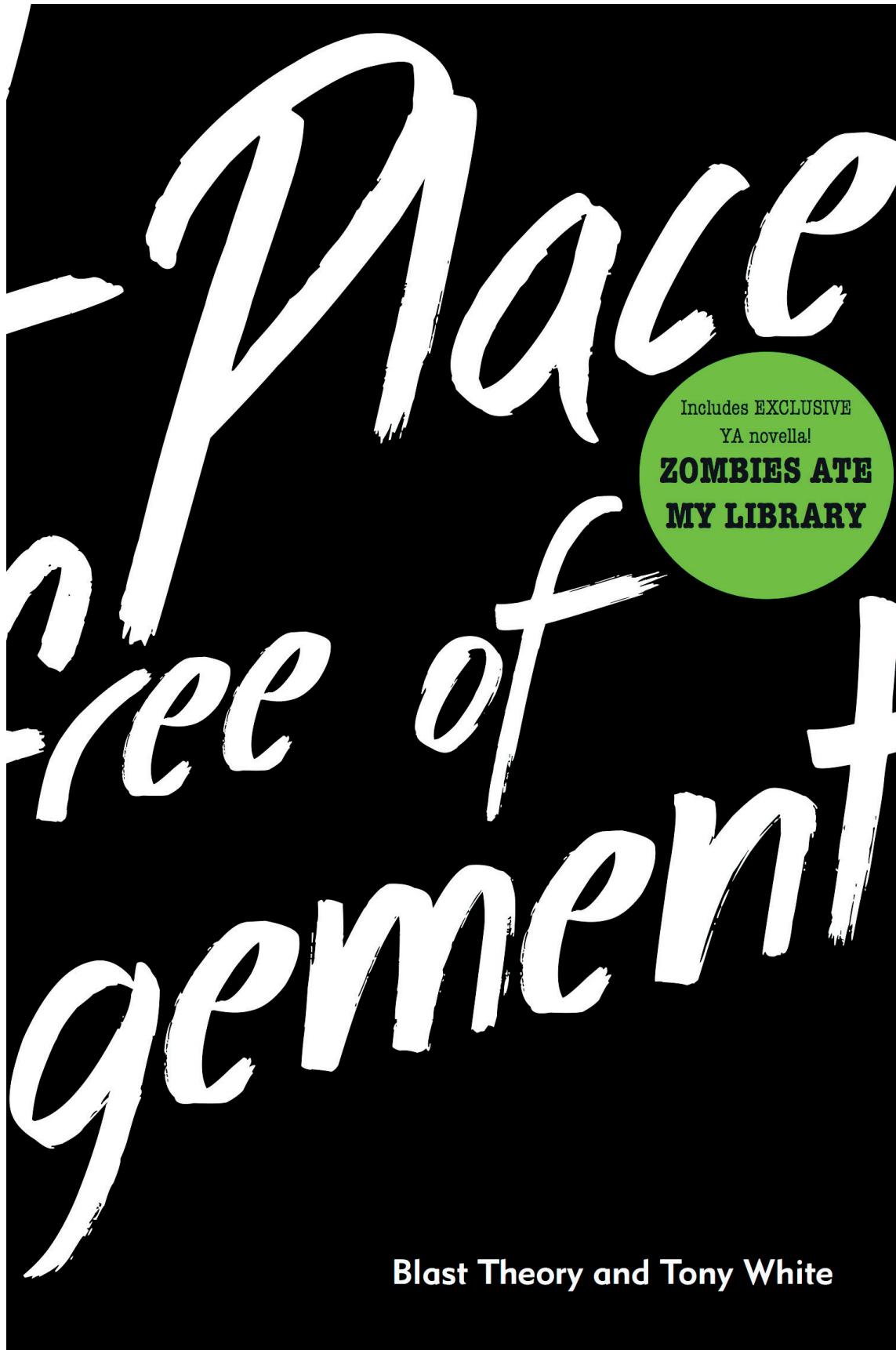
As might be expected in the face of such drastic cuts to public services, numerous local and national campaign groups have arisen, voicing their opposition with demonstrations, petitions, on social and other media, and in council meetings, as well as in some cases taking more direct action. In one of the most high-profile examples, library users occupied the Carnegie Library in the London Borough of Lambeth, on the day that it was due to be closed down¹². The occupation was maintained for nine days, and I was proud to be one of 220 authors who signed a letter to the press¹³ in support of it. I signed because I thought I had a pretty good idea of the vital work that libraries do. I wanted them to continue doing this work, and to

be cherished for it. Yet here were people having to step in to try to protect a fundamental civic amenity from its apparently disinterested guardians; wasn't this the role of the Secretary of State? Never mind the 19th century fears about public libraries *fomenting* unrest, it now seemed that speaking up for their very existence had become an act of dissent. I already knew how important libraries had been to me in my own life. Our local library was a vital part of my childhood in Farnham, Surrey, just as Hackney Library had been to me a generation later, when I was a young parent in London. The letter protesting the closure of the Carnegie and other Lambeth libraries noted that 'closing libraries hurts the youngest and oldest, the weakest and most vulnerable [...] The Carnegie library has endured for 110 years – why should we be the generation that fails to pass it on?'¹⁴ It would emerge later that it was costing Lambeth Council more to keep the Carnegie Library securely closed than it would have done to leave it open, staffed and fully functioning as before.¹⁵

It was against this nationwide backdrop of sweeping cuts and closures that I collaborated with the multi-award-winning artists' group Blast Theory, and with young people and librarians in the West Midlands, to create an artwork in and about public libraries called *A Place Free Of Judgement*.

The title of the project – coined by Blast Theory volunteer, University of Surrey student Mairead Garland, during an early site visit – offers a way into what I believe are some of the broader societal benefits of public libraries: that they offer a universal public space that is open to all, and free to anyone that chooses to use it. To paraphrase Richard Stallman's formulation,¹⁶ libraries are free as in free speech *and* as in free beer. Free, that is, in the sense both of being *gratis* (free of charge) and *libre* (having freedom).¹⁷

For many people, the local public library is about more than simply borrowing books. It may also be a place to read the newspapers, to do homework, to meet people at a knitting circle or a reading



Front cover of *A Place Free of Judgement*

group, to borrow toys, or simply to sit in the warm. The fundamental importance of a readily accessible public space that costs nothing to use cannot be overestimated.

In the words of John Palfrey, libraries function as essential equalizing institutions in our society. For as long as a library exists in most communities, staffed with trained librarians, it remains true that individuals' access to our shared culture is not dictated by however much money they have. For many citizens, libraries are the one place where the information they need to be engaged in civic life is truly available for free.¹⁸

It is too easy to assume that libraries have not responded to, or are no longer needed in, the digital age. Or that the internet has changed behaviours to such an extent that we don't need to visit a library to access information: why go to a library when every café offers free Wi-Fi, or you can simply look everything up from your home? Such assumptions are not borne out in practice, where in 2016, 14% of UK households did not have an internet connection.¹⁹ And while public library visits are down in figures released in April 2017 as part of Carnegie UK Trust's *Shining a Light* report,²⁰ the figures also show that '1 in 2 people across the UK and Ireland continue to use libraries'.²¹ Furthermore, it is not yet clear how any reduction in use relates to the significant numerical reduction in the number of libraries, or to current volatilities created by staffing, opening hours and location changes.

The Leadership for Libraries Task Force set up by the UK Government's Department for Culture, Media and Sport (which at the time of writing is conducting a consultation on its draft report *Libraries Deliver: Ambition for Public Libraries in England 2016–2021*) suggests that digital literacy is currently one of the seven key purposes of the public libraries network in the UK, together with reading and literacy, health and wellbeing, economic growth, culture and creativity, communities and learning.²² The draft report suggests that libraries already offer 'improved digital skills, reduced digital exclusion, increased usage of government services online [and] access to



high-speed broadband.²³ Ambitions for the next five years include that digital literacy is ‘recognised as a core skill’ and that libraries be ‘seen as spaces where the community comes together to co-create and make things’.²⁴

Billed as ‘a teenage takeover of libraries’, *A Place Free Of Judgement* used the networked and digital infrastructural capacity of public libraries precisely to ‘co-create’ and to broadcast a new kind of live artwork. On 29th October 2016, over the course of nine hours from 3:00pm to midnight, young people took control of their local libraries in Telford, Cannock and Worcester. They set out to re-imagine libraries, storytelling and their place in the world, performing live to a worldwide audience via an interactive live-stream that broadcast non-stop from each library in turn.

Publicised locally and nationally through a print, press and online campaign with questions posed on social media ('Did a library change your life?'), *A Place Free Of Judgement* attracted online audiences from the West Midlands and far beyond.

Audiences logging in on the night might find themselves in the middle of a game of hide and seek taking place between the shelf stacks of a darkened library, or being told about infamous library sackings in antiquity. In Telford and Wrekin's flagship new-build Telford Southwater Library (built in partnership with the University of Wolverhampton) people ran up and down the escalators and played records, even though the building was still open to the public. As the performance progressed and the live-stream passed to the next library, the young people seemed to grow in confidence. In Cannock there was a ceremonial handover of the keys to the building, followed by shout-outs to library campaigners around the country. There were expressions of solidarity and a sharing of URLs and Twitter handles. In Worcester there was ukulele playing and singing, and tall tales about increasingly outlandish family members. It was by turns awkward and assured, absurd and affecting, and always flowing onwards.

But this live-stream was also interactive, and the online audience was continually and directly addressed and challenged. Questions were posed, which developed through the night in parallel with the stories that were unfolding. The audience could message in their responses via a text-based chat interface, and those responses were discussed and enjoyed, and challenged again. The best of them were transcribed onto cards that were then hidden in books on the shelf stacks, for future library users to find.

My own contribution to the project had included unexpectedly writing a novella called *Zombies Ate My Library*, and as well as my reading an excerpt from the novella in live events at the libraries, the story was also broadcast in its entirety through a series of short, pre-recorded readings that were interspersed throughout the nine-hour live-stream.

I saw *Zombies Ate My Library* as an opportunity to tell a story that could focus and refract the larger themes and ideas emerging in the artwork, as well as reflecting the context of ‘swingeing cuts’²⁵ in which it was being produced; drawing out possible resonances between this teenage takeover and, say, the occupation of Carnegie Library. In particular the novella remixes the bureaucratic and euphemistic policy documents that Lewisham and Lambeth Councils have used to justify their library closures, transforming these into a satirical message of resistance.

Zombies Ate My Library was launched in book form several months later, in February 2017, when project partners, participants and a public audience gathered back in Telford’s Southwater Library for a knowledge-sharing day about the project.

During an animated and positive Q&A session, one of the audience asked a deceptively simple question: ‘Couldn’t we just use the title *A Place Free Of Judgement* for everything we do with young people from now on?’ The question was taken as a compliment and a kind of affirmation; testament perhaps to the apparently casually seamless quality of the live-streamed event itself. Perhaps this could be a way for libraries to take something away from the project and to continue the good work?

Well, maybe. But it is important to note that the success of *A Place Free Of Judgement* was not a product of what it was called, but of the approach, and of the longer-term partnerships and collaborations that produced it. There had also been a collective willingness to take risks, to trust both experienced artists and young people, and to push the technological capacity of the participating libraries as far as it could go, exploring how existing digital infrastructure could be used to create a distributed creative space alongside the more day-to-day digital offering of networked computers, a well-functioning website, e-book and audiobook lending, etc. Putting young people in control of interactive, live-streaming technology enabled us to subvert expectation



and to extend the libraries' physical public space, connecting young people, libraries and audiences in a new way, and testing the qualities of engagement that this might bring.

It is also worth noting that the title didn't only refer to the 'finished work' (i.e. the live-streamed performance that took place on 29th October), but to all of the prior process, the workshops etc. that preceded and produced it. *A Place Free Of Judgement* is an evocative title, and during the development phase it provided a great talking point, but it was not a 'magic banner' in and of itself. The intense qualities of participation, transformation and creativity that we had all seen and experienced on the night were continuous with, and a product of, the two years of discussion and collaboration that preceded them, including the six months of intensive workshops that Blast Theory and I devised in order to prepare the young people both collectively and individually to deliver a non-stop nine-hour performance to camera.

Initially, Blast Theory had been commissioned by Arts Connect (the Bridge organisation for the West Midlands, funded by Arts Council England) to take part in a creative planning process with members of the Association of Senior Children's and Education Librarians (ASCEL). Out of this, Blast Theory did a further consultation with a group of libraries in the West Midlands who had got together to try to find creative ways to engage young people in libraries.

Asked to come up with some creative ideas and solutions, Blast Theory ran some exercises with librarians and library staff, and came up with the idea of a teenage takeover that might shift perceptions of libraries and their possibilities. It was at this point that I was formally invited to join the project, working primarily with Ju Row Farr of Blast Theory. I had worked with Blast Theory before,²⁶ and as an author I am always looking for ways to collaborate beyond the traditional limits of the book publishing world, and to use technology in new ways to go where readers and audiences are. I mainly produce works of fiction, the consumption of which is obviously not constrained within normative



spaces such as museums or galleries in the way that the work of a visual artist might be, so I don't see libraries per se as an unusual setting for an artwork. Furthermore, I don't see books simply as vessels containing literary content that is destined for private consumption, but am interested in how books and writing perform and are performed in the world, in public. Blast Theory are leaders in using interactivity, mobile technology and augmented reality to create new kinds of artistic experiences. For me, technology and collaboration are also a necessary means to augment the physical square footage of a book trade that with public library and bookshop closures continues to shrink. For all that these public spaces are supposedly protected by law, public libraries have never been more contested and threatened in the UK than they are today. It seemed important to spend time in libraries, not as part of some dispassionate fact-finding mission, but in a spirit of friendship and solidarity, and to find new ways to animate and draw attention to these threatened public spaces.



Speaking at the knowledge-sharing day in Telford, Sue Goodwin of Arts Connect talked about the genesis of the project, describing how Arts Connect had themselves been looking for ‘a more unexpected encounter,’ so had inverted the usual expectations of prospective project partners by asking the library services to present to the artists, rather than the other way around. ASCEL shared Arts Connect’s ambition, and had been looking to develop a creative planning process that could result in a ‘truly regional’ project that would raise the profile of library services and communities.

‘We wanted,’ said Goodwin, ‘to empower library staff to become creative producers of ambitious artistic work.’

This echoes an emerging trend, though one that is not without controversy. For example, in October 2016, Brian Ashley, Arts Council England’s Director, Libraries, wrote that for the first time libraries would be eligible to apply to all of the Arts Council’s funding programmes, noting that ‘Libraries already deliver work as the result of Arts Council investment’.²⁷ In March 2017 the Arts Council announced 30 recipients of a new ‘Libraries Opportunities For Everyone Innovation Fund’.²⁸ Distributing some £3.9m, the fund sets out to support innovative projects and to tackle disadvantage, to ‘fund new activities in libraries and reach people all over the country who might not usually use their local library service.’²⁹ Press coverage of the awards was more critical, however, with authors including Patrick Gayle and Francesca Simon describing the scheme – perhaps unfairly – as “a sop, a smokescreen and a whitewash” that does nothing to help the fundamental crisis facing the sector.³⁰ In other words, innovation funds are all very well, but even £3.9m is a drop in the ocean compared to the £25m funding that the public libraries network has lost in just the past year, the impacts of which were evident to me during the making of *A Place Free Of Judgement*. It was genuinely heartbreaking, for example, to turn up to do an author event at a public library where many staff had been made redundant the day before, or where a regular and long-standing Saturday writing group was now at risk because the paid staff who were qualified to work with young people were no longer employed on

Saturdays. This more pastoral role is a vital aspect of librarians' work, but one that I hadn't fully considered until I started work on *A Place Free Of Judgement*.

Roosa Herranen was one of the young people who took part in *A Place Free Of Judgement* at Worcester St John's Library. Speaking at the knowledge-exchange day in Telford a few months later, she gave some insight into what the project had been like for its younger participants, describing libraries as 'a familiar place. We all have pre-existing ideas of libraries. We have an idea in our heads of what a library's going to be like: a quiet space for studying, it's to borrow books, to have meetings in conference rooms, maybe, but it's definitely not what these young people made it.' She continued: 'When we weren't in front of the camera we were watching the others on the computer and it was just amazing to see what everyone had come up with.'

Further rich insights are captured in Dr Sue Challis's *A Place Free Of Judgement* Evaluation Report, which was commissioned by Arts Connect as part of the project. Challis records anonymised feedback from many of the young people, as well as library staff and audiences, and observers who attended every stage of the project, whether public-facing or not. One young participant tells how:

I went along to the first workshop, honestly thinking it'd be awful, but I loved it! What struck me the most was the freedom to be who we were [...] I learnt so much, from technical camera work, to creative writing skills, to performance and public speaking. My favourite part of the project was the unity of the group. It gave us time to come together and make something wonderful. I also felt such a sense of belonging and that I was a part of something much bigger than just us messing around in the library.³¹

In the participant survey, one young person described feeling 'an important part of planning, considering issues that we

encountered, and helped to improve them'³², while another reported that 'I enjoyed working with the professional camera so much that I am considering this to be an area to move into in my working life.'³³ Another, however, disliked 'not always having a clear idea what the project was about.'³⁴

Challis's evaluation also captured changing views of libraries among the participants through simple 'before and after' questionnaire postcards. She tells how 'Answers to the question "What happens in the public library?" became more detailed, broadened and exciting by project end,' and cites one example:

[Before] Members of the public come and read and take out books. Activities are put on for the elderly and children.

[After] Reading, talking, computerising, chess clubs, scrabble, listening to music, human interaction. Dreaming, researching, living... Utter and complete madness.

Library staff, too, observed a greater sense of ownership developing:

By the end of the project we noticed the young people were much more comfortable with the library. For example; on the first day they only accepted hot drinks when we offered them, but by the third and fourth workshops they were making themselves drinks and also making the staff drinks without being prompted. It seems like a small thing, but it was very satisfying to see them just wandering into the kitchen and making a drink, not standing on ceremony.

Another member of library staff said that at first they had found it difficult to let control of the library go to the young people. I was amazed by and excited at their confidence in taking responsibility for the library at the end of the project and I definitely saw how they had developed and grown into young leaders. This was a very powerful experience for me.



Back in Worcester on the night of 29th October 2017, the live-streamed performance ended with two of the participants – Jared and Roosa – turning off the lights and locking the doors of St John’s library behind them, before taking the cameras (and thus the online audience) on a taxi ride back to their home. Once inside, they read aloud the last two instalments of *Zombies Ate My Library*, as much to each other as to the online audience, before deciding, finally, to do the last chapter again but this time set to music. This shift from a public to a private space, which echoed the act of bringing a book home from the library, seemed a fantastic *coup de theatre*, and was compounded by their open and heartfelt singing of my story to Jared’s impromptu ukulele accompaniment. Not only had the young people taken over the libraries, but here, as had happened continually throughout the work, they had also taken over the story. These fleeting moments were profoundly moving to watch. Here was a bold gesture that seemed to encapsulate and celebrate the transformations that

the project had made possible. After that, the ending was abrupt, and it left me feeling slightly bereft. I wanted nothing more than to rewind it like a DVD and watch this magic again, but I couldn't. And then it really was all over. There was not even quite enough time for Jared and Roosa to finish saying thank you and goodbye before the live-stream was cut at midnight, and the credits began to roll.

Footnotes

- ¹ Tony White, *Zombies Ate My Library, A Place Free Of Judgement*. Portslade: Blast Theory, p.86
- ¹ 'Briefing on Public Libraries & Museums Act 1964: CILIP's short briefing on the law that makes public libraries a statutory service.' London: CILIP, January 2013 (Last updated at 14:56, 16/02/2017). www.cilip.org.uk/cilip/advocacy-awards-and-projects/advocacy-and-campaigns/public-libraries/briefings-and-resources-0
- ³ Thomas Kelly, *History of Public Libraries in Great Britain 1845–1965*. London: The Library Association. p.v.
- ⁴ Thomas Kelly, *ibid.* p.3
- ⁵ Elaine Harwood (author), Paul Stamper (editor), *The English Public Library 1945–85: Introductions to Heritage Assets*. London: Historic England, 2013
- ⁶ Local Government Group, *Future Libraries: Change, Options and How to Get There*, London: Local Government Group. p.2
- ⁷ Local Government Group, *ibid.* p.2
- ⁸ Local Government Group, *ibid.* p.6
- ⁹ Certainly such a shift 'is reflected in the new CIPFA figures [for 2015–16]: though paid library staff fell by 5.3% from 18,028 to 17,064, volunteer numbers rose by 7.5% to 44,501. Danuta Kean, 'UK library budgets fall by £25m in a year,' *The Guardian*, 8 December 2016. www.theguardian.com/books/2016/dec/08/uk-library-budgets-fall-by-25m-in-a-year
- ¹⁰ Ian Anstice, 'Numbers,' *Public Libraries News*. www.publiclibrariesnews.com/ (Accessed: 3 May 2018)
- ¹¹ Ian Anstice, 'List of Withdrawn Libraries,' *Public Libraries News*. www.publiclibrariesnews.com/about-public-libraries-news/news-topics
- ¹² Toby Litt, 'Why we'll continue our fight to save Lambeth's Carnegie Library,' *The Guardian*, 8 April 2016. www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2016/apr/08/why-we-continue-our-fight-to-save-lambeth-carnegie-library
- ¹³ Various, 'A Letter Supporting Carnegie Library Occupiers,' *The Bookseller*, 6 April 2016. www.thebookseller.com/blogs/letter-supporting-carnegie-library-occupiers-326048
- ¹⁴ Various, 'A Letter Supporting Carnegie Library Occupiers,' *The Bookseller*, 6 April 2016. www.thebookseller.com/blogs/letter-supporting-carnegie-library-occupiers-326048
- ¹⁵ Peter Walker, 'Council closed libraries to cut costs, then spent more to guard them,' *The Guardian*, 22 May 2016. www.theguardian.com/books/2016/may/22/lambeth-council-closed-libraries-security-guards
- ¹⁶ Free software philosophy: 'Thus, "free software" is a matter of liberty, not price. To understand the concept, you should think of "free" as in "free speech," not as in "free beer."' Richard Stallman, at www.gnu.org/philosophy/free-sw.html
- ¹⁷ 'Gratis versus Libre,' en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gratis_versus_libre
- ¹⁸ John Palfrey, *BiblioTech: Why Libraries Matter More Than Ever in the Age of Google*. New York: Basic Books, p.3
- ¹⁹ 'Digital Inclusion' dashboard. www.gov.uk/performance/digital-inclusion
- ²⁰ 'Overall, library use in England has seen a decline of 4 percentage points from 50% to 46% since 2011 and all UK nations have experienced seen a steady decline in the number of people using the library "frequently."' Carnegie UK Trust, *Call for action as new study reveals drop in frequency of library use*, 10 April 2017. www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/news/call-for-action-as-new-study-reveals-drop-in-frequency-of-library-use/

²¹ Carnegie UK Trust, *ibid*

²² Libraries Taskforce, 'Libraries Deliver: Ambition for Public Libraries in England 2016-2021 (consultation draft)'; www.gov.uk/government/consultations/libraries-deliver-ambition-for-public-libraries-in-england-2016-2021/libraries-deliver-ambition-for-public-libraries-in-england-2016-2021

²³ Libraries Taskforce, *ibid*

²⁴ Libraries Taskforce, *ibid*

²⁵ Danuta Kean, *op. cit*

²⁶ In 2010 I wrote *Ivy4evr with Blast Theory*; an interactive SMS-based drama for young people commissioned by Channel 4 Education for broadcast on mobile phones. In 2015, I was script editor and story consultant on their crowd-funded *Karen* app, a co-commission with National Theatre of Wales and *The Space*.

²⁷ Brian Ashley, 'A new chapter of opportunities for libraries with the Arts Council', *Libraries Taskforce Blog*, 5 October 2016. librariestaskforce.blog.gov.uk/2016/10/05/a-new-chapter-of-opportunities-for-libraries-with-the-arts-council/ (Accessed 3 May 2017)

²⁸ Arts Council England, 'Literacy, coding and soft play: opportunities for everyone in our life-changing libraries', 22 March 2017. www.artscouncil.org.uk/news/literacy-coding-and-soft-play-opportunities-everyone-our-life-changing-libraries (Accessed 3 May 2017)

²⁹ Arts Council England, *ibid*

³⁰ Danuta Kean, 'Authors condemn £4m library fund as a "sop" and a "whitewash"', *The Guardian*, 23 March 2017. www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/23/authors-condemn-4m-library-fund-as-a-sop-and-a-whitewash (Accessed 3 May 2017)

³¹ APFOJ Participant quoted in *Dr Sue Challis, A Place Free Of Judgement Evaluation Report*, Birmingham: Arts Connect, 2017. p.3

³² *Dr Sue Challis, ibid. p.103*

³³ *Dr Sue Challis, ibid. p.11*

³⁴ *Dr Sue Challis, ibid. p.13*

³⁵ *Dr Sue Challis, ibid. p.14*

³⁶ *Dr Sue Challis, ibid. p.14*

³⁷ *Dr Sue Challis, ibid. p.24*

References

A Place Free Of Judgement by *Blast Theory* and *Tony White* was developed with ASCEL West Midlands and Arts Connect. It was made in collaboration with young people and librarians in Telford and Wrekin, Worcestershire, and Staffordshire, and created in partnership with young people and librarians in Solihull, Ludlow and Dudley, and the University of Worcester. The project was made with support from Arts Council England Lottery Funding, Arts Connect the Bridge organisation for the West Midlands, and the University of Worcester.

Tony White's novella *Zombies Ate My Library* is published exclusively by *Blast Theory* in a limited edition, 112pp, B-format paperback, *A Place Free Of Judgement* by *Blast Theory* and *Tony White*, (ISBN 978-0-995-6965-0-1), available direct from *Blast Theory* www.blasttheory.co.uk/shop/
Zombies Ate My Library was shortlisted for the *Saboteur Awards 2017* in the *Best Novella* Category



Tony White

Tony White's latest novel is *The Fountain in the Forest*, published by Faber and Faber. He is the author of five previous novels including *Foxy-T* and *Shackleton's Man Goes South*, as well as numerous short stories published in journals, exhibition catalogues, and anthologies. White was creative entrepreneur in residence in the French department of King's College London, and has been writer in residence at London's Science Museum and the UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies. He recently collaborated with artists Blast Theory on the libraries live-streaming project *A Place Free of Judgement*, and until 2018 chaired the board of London's award-winning arts radio station Resonance 104.4fm.

Follow Tony on Twitter @tony_white_



Claire Doherty (Editor)

Claire Doherty is the Director of Arnolfini, Bristol.

Previously, Claire Doherty was the founding Director of Situations. Over the past decade, Situations emerged as one of the UK's most innovative and pioneering public art producers, commissioning and producing temporary and long-term public arts projects, creating public art strategies and visions for city-wide initiatives and leading publishing and research initiatives to improve the conditions for, and skills to produce, new forms of public art worldwide. Claire has developed an international reputation as a leading thinker in new approaches to public art policy and planning, and is dedicated to engaging those for whom the arts might have seemed irrelevant or inaccessible through transformative art and cultural experiences; advocating for the social value of the arts, and finding ways to catalyse positive change in specific places.

Claire was awarded a Paul Hamlyn Foundation Breakthrough Award for outstanding cultural entrepreneurs, 2009, and appointed MBE for Services to the Arts in New Years Honours List 2016.

The British Council is the UK's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities. We create friendly knowledge and understanding between the people of the UK and other countries. We do this by making a positive contribution to the UK and the countries we work with – changing lives by creating opportunities, building connections and engendering trust.

We work with over 100 countries across the world in the fields of arts and culture, English language, education and civil society.

Each year we reach over 20 million people face-to-face and more than 500 million people online, via broadcasts and publications.

Founded in 1934, we are a UK charity governed by Royal Charter and a UK public body.



© British Council 2018
The British Council is the United Kingdom's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities.

Where Strangers Meet

An international collection of essays on arts in the public realm.

The urbanist Richard Sennett has written that ‘the public realm can simply be defined as a place where strangers meet’. As the number of us living in cities rises, the pressures on the shared spaces of a city will increase; the places in which our future relationships to one another are negotiated. This is particularly resonant for the British Council, an international organisation that brings people together from different cultures, countries and continents through arts, education, science and the English language. Building on its multifocal work in cities, the British Council commissioned a collection of essays to explore different perspectives on how artistic and cultural experiences affect individual and collective participation and action in the public realm.

For 80 years the British Council has worked in cities in over 100 countries worldwide. The British Council is now responding through research and programmes to the changing urban dynamics affecting citizens and institutions globally, including the impact of globalisation and technological and political change. Work in cities also forms part of our response to some of the world’s current challenges including migration and security. This collection is intended to strengthen our global offer to collaborators and audiences by demonstrating how the power of the arts and creative exchange can be harnessed to make cities more open, dynamic, inclusive and fit for the future.

www.britishcouncil.org