



TESTT

EXPERIMENTING, INSPIRING, CHANGING

Dr Hazel Donkin • Durham University

Dr Martyn Hudson • Northumbria University

Lily Arnold • Durham University

TESTT: Experimenting, Inspiring, Changing

Dr Hazel Donkin · Durham University

Dr Martyn Hudson · Northumbria University

Lily Arnold · Durham University

Acknowledgements

As a research team we would like to thank Nick Malyan, Carlo Viglianisi and the studio-holders, artists and students who gave us time and supported us throughout this research project.

All photographs by Susan Mortimer, courtesy of the artist

Copyright Susan Mortimer

Design by Lily Arnold

Contents

Introduction	4
Executive Summary	8
1. Gaps in Provision	14
2. Social Impacts	18
3. External relations	22
4. Studio-holders: Practice and Purpose	24
5. Interactions in the Space	28
6. Artist Development	34
7. What makes TESTT Space Different?	38
8. Challenges in the Space	42
9. TESTTing Students	48
10. What we did (Methodology)	52
11. What we want to Understand (Aims)	54
12. Recommendations	56
References	60

Introduction



Empty Shop and a small research team comprised of staff from Northumbria and Durham Universities began to develop plans for a project in the summer of 2017. This culminated in a research period in the first half of 2018. The research interest in this area had developed from prior research with galleries and exhibition spaces such as the NewBridge Project, Allenheads Contemporary Arts, Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums, Music Action International and others. These research interests had taken up concepts of spatial experimentation and the materiality of buildings and further looked at experimental artistic and curatorial practices within those contexts and the social impacts and effects that were embedded in those practices. In this research, as previously, we assumed an ethnographic approach largely informed by what we call ‘messy ethnography’: an experimental, intimate and embedded approach which we think complements the experimentation within arts spaces, galleries and studios. In practical terms this meant a series of semi-structured interviews which we thought of as expansive and conversational, a series of short surveys, and an embedded experience of the spaces and studios as habitats and sites of experimental arts practice.

What we wanted to understand

We wanted to understand the history and the development of the TESTT Space, a set of studios and gallery spaces in central Durham. Previously a Job Centre the site was taken over by Empty Shop, a local cultural and regeneration agency led by Nick Malyan and Carlo Viglianisi as an arts space. We wanted to understand, through our interviews and ethnography, the specific experiential passage of artists and curators through the space and the ways in which they both built and used TESTT. Further, we wanted to test out whether the TESTT model was mobile, had more general applicability and significance

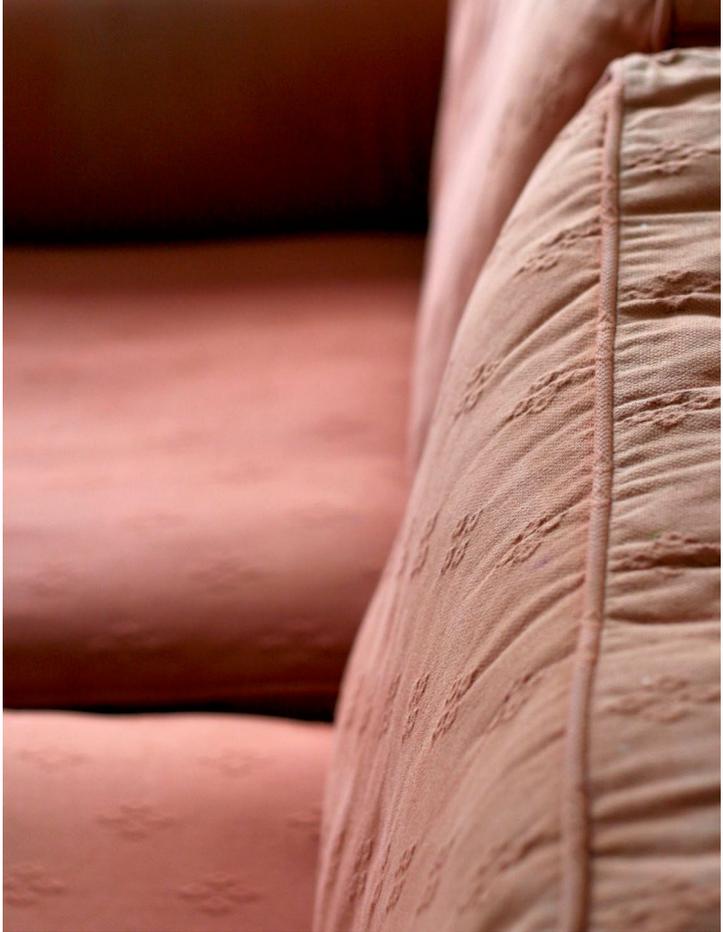
and what future iterations it might have – bearing in mind that it is a temporary space situated in a unique conflux of networks, tendencies, organisations and material spaces. We saw our research as an archaeology of the site itself: mapping TESTT as a temporary formation before it dispersed and dissipated and potentially re-emerged elsewhere in Durham and beyond. It is also the case that the TESTT space could become more materially situated and extended in the site itself but in a different iteration from its original architectural model and we wanted to both examine and facilitate this.

What is the importance of TESTT Space? For the studio artists, for Durham, for the University, for the region, nationally?

We felt that it was imperative to somehow assess the significance of the TESTT Space and model from multiple perspectives including those of the artists, of community members, of the University and other organisations. We wanted to somehow understand the nature of TESTT and its specific ways of thinking and its unique history in order to address regional and national questions about social impacts and cultural value. We could only do this from a grassroots ethnographic perspective which refracted the origins of the TESTT Space itself in the programme and vision of the Empty Shop organisation. Our findings, conclusions and recommendations are to be found later but we ended where we began in the research with a conviction that the TESTT model and the distinctive history of the space is of decisive importance for thinking about arts practice and the social world beyond.

Why does the thinking central to the Space (and to Empty Shop) have traction currently in the sector?

The significance of the distinctive Space and model of TESTT lies in the spatial and temporal location of that Space. What we mean by this is that the geographical and cultural/historical location of the site is unique. The history which brought it into being was a series of events, disruptions, conversations, doings, which facilitated the entrance of a unique experimental space. It thus provides a model for others hoping to replicate its success and avoid its limitations as well as documenting the arrival, endurance and termination of a test-bed which has had significant social, curatorial and artistic impacts. This notion of thinking is important: even in serendipitous, often chaotic and disruptive histories of creativity the capacity to think and to think through is seriously underestimated in arts organisations. TESTT is a thinking practice and a social brain that can inform, entertain, advise, disrupt, experiment and craft new vistas of spatial utopia.



Executive Summary



Introduction

TESTT Space is a space of experimentation: of making art and, in turn, making our community and our social world. There is a multitude of practices within it and beyond it. It is a site of craft, fabrication, testing. It rests upon the unique artistic use of, and making within, studios and new and distinctive curatorial practices. It is a space of play and of interaction and solidarity: of having fun, making friends and artistically building a new social space. It is a space of creativity which for some is about being entrepreneurial and making a living. For others it is a space to pursue a dedicated, committed and autonomous artistic journey albeit in a space of interaction and support. It is a space of exhibition, visitation and making and as a space of play has hosted film, music, social events and social interaction generally. It also has a diversity in its inhabitants as well as in its events. There are students who are making and programming, artists and makers, regeneration specialists, photographers and film-makers. Artistic themes and making in the studios range from reflections on the deep time of antiquity to new affordances of fabrics to new modellings of light-structures – making which has had international effects and persisting significance.

The materiality of a temporary space means that the injunction to document, capture and record it is even more urgent. Part of the archaeology of material spaces is ensuring that, once passed, maps and photographs remain of a site which has assumed importance in arts practice and in the life of a community. This becomes more urgent as we think of the site as a test-bed for radical practice and the nature of art in our cities and communities. The aesthetics of the space and the documentation of things that have happened there do not just become artefacts of nostalgia but ways of witnessing to the central and social impact of art in our communities and in the development of our ethic as artists. Cultural value is enshrined in that history and site and it needs to be documented in order to ensure the social memory of arts practice as a resource for future generations of artists and historians. Where we have new art produced and new models of curation tested so we have all the more compulsion to document them properly. The artefact of the material space and the interactions that have taken place within, upon, outside it have a value just as much as the artefacts of art as objects.

This means also that the building acts as an agonistic and antagonistic civic space. The temporary encampment of artists then postulates a new civic space, a new vista of utopia which tests out art and models of social and aesthetic forms (some of which are taken forwards, some abandoned). The notion of TESTT as civic space is significant and many of the conversations, interactions, exhibitions would have been impossible without its existence and the material fabric of the building. In many ways this new social world of TESTT was itself built out of detritus: the decaying buildings and infrastructures of Job Centres and council offices no longer fit for purpose. Indeed the repurposing of material spaces is one of the central rationales of Empty Shop itself and its propulsion of new civic and aesthetic spaces in the city: the many iterations of empty shops.

At the same time TESTT as a temporary camp has had some endurance and history in this iteration and also stands geographically in a conflux of universities, organisations, networks. At the heart of this has been the core management and infrastructure of Empty Shop: in the city perhaps both a harmonic and dissonant voice in terms of its own programme of playfulness in art and music, regeneration, community involvement, social justice and civic action. ES has relational agency and deals with a complex field of relations competently and with a huge amount of trust and respect invested in them: largely because of their history of work in the 'field'. This has meant in many ways the organic development from below

of social, artistic, musical programmes within the city but a programme which is in alliance with the organic spatial development of premises, venues and locations of artistic and musical production. They are a definitive model for co-production with multiple agencies: co-working and co-creating at a micro and at a macro level. This has meant the building of coalitions (at once revolving, dispersing, persisting) with local authorities, voluntary sector organisations, universities, trade unions, community members, artists, academics and it has also ensured the permeability of the TESTT Space: that it does not simply exist as a building but also as a mobile concept and model. Models of access and openness have been central to this and the dispersal or termination of TESTT therefore survives the end of its first material iteration. The TESTT model is itself permeable. But it is also the case that it may survive in this site in a new material and cultural form including the development of new studio spaces and as a new governance site for cultural regeneration and consultancy.

TESTT has allowed both the retention of artists in the city and the propulsion of artists into the world. It has offered different ways of engaging in the complex lives of artists and curators and allowing them to test aesthetics and try out new social models. It has thought up its own network and as a thinking practice has developed its own politics, civics and imagined a set of new futures.

What we are doing in our research

We want to understand the ‘social impacts’ of the social, artistic, curatorial history of TESTT.

We want to understand the internal interactions and the external interactions of TESTT.

We want to uncover the materiality of TESTT and the affordances of its Space.

We want to help ES re-envison all the potential futures of the unique TESTT Space and model and offer a new case for support for future iterations of the studios and gallery.

We want to delineate what an archive of TESTT would be in terms of its social memory in the community and document its utopian and experimental spaces, offering a kind of ‘rescue’ archaeology before it turns into something else.

We want to help validate the necessity of contemporary artistic and curatorial practice to Durham City and the region beyond.



Spaces

TESTT is permeable: practice moves beyond its material borders.

The Space works in this current iteration as a test-bed.

The Space and its impacts need to be archived even as the Space continues in this version.

The infrastructure support/management/context are exemplary and inspiring to artists and curators.

Practices

Practice is multiple and fluid.

Artists interact and connect with one another and the world outside.

Practice is permeable and moves beyond the material fabric of the Space.

Artists are achieving international recognition: part of this is the context and infrastructure of TESTT.

Futures

We believe in future versions of TESTT.

The new iterations will provide different test-beds.

TESTT is a history/archive, a Space and a model of management, curatorial and artistic practice.

Future TESTTs should be fluid and permeable: thinking about temporariness and permanency and what we mean by meaningful duration is necessary.

The new TESTT should take the best of co-production techniques and re-invent them in the best TESTT tradition.

TESTT needs to be re-visioned in its distinctive place in a conflux of networks, histories, organisations and decide on its future: this should be a collective thinking.



1

Gaps in Provision in Durham



There is a vacuum in Durham City both in terms of the provision of contemporary arts activity and also in terms of cultural regeneration from below. No-one is there to play in this vacuum but Empty Shop and the partnerships it has created and will create through TESTT. There is much contemporary art in the City and many practitioners but they are often de-visibilityed by a lack of networks, exhibition opportunities and social interactions. Many artists work at home and in home studios and this has an impact on art practice as a civic activity.

Gaps lie in the local, affordable studio spaces in the City and the lack of a 'community' of contemporary artists aside from informal friendship networks. There is no art scene and no art schools and there are no spaces for contemporary arts practice and conceptual work. The County Council have supported work and things do happen in schools but there is no overall oversight on this and there is a lack of cohesiveness and connection.

There are no formal artists' network and no space, material and metaphorical, for 'creatives' and those audiences that do exist are generally practitioners themselves even when we understand that there is an appetite for contemporary work in the city. Indeed the challenges are multiple: 'officialdom', finance, workloads, available spaces, issues with council and universities, lack of networks and galleries. So what is the point of practice? As one respondent notes:

It's quite simple, it makes me happy! I get enjoyment from it I just love the whole buzz about it. You know it's as simple as that, it's actually to fill the space between morning and night, doing something that you really enjoy day after day after day sometimes six months at a time.

This 'vacuum' is either a vortex which swallows everything up and in which the 'contemporary' disappears or a space in which we can enter and operate it. TESTT has offered a space within that vacuum for the emergence of new forms of interaction:

So there was a group of us and we all sat in the communal gallery, which is now a gallery space, at the time it was blue office walls, filled with printers and obviously now it's been completed transformed into a very professional exhibition space, well 2 actually, there's an emerging artist and established space. So we all sat in a group and we were basically told from the get-go 'Durham needs this', Durham needs this space, Durham needs a contemporary art space.

The development of a new contemporary arts space with some permanence was a continuing theme of the research but there were also challenges to this and a reluctance to follow or develop a kind of official route for this leading to professionalisation and institutional stasis. These kinds of models might well have led ES and TESTT away from their original ethics and vision.





2

Social Impacts



‘Since the turn of the century, there has been increasingly frequent talk of art’s having “returned to politics”. Numerous exhibitions and conferences have been put on that re-assert art’s capacity to resist forms of economic, political and ideological domination. At the same time, this new faith in the political capacity of art has taken on many forms, which are very often divergent, if not conflicting. Some artists make big statues out of media and advertising icons to make us conscious of the power they have over our perception. Others silently bury invisible monuments dedicated to last century’s crimes. Still others endeavour to show us the biases contained in mainstream representations of subaltern identities, or to sharpen our perception of images using photographs about characters whose identity is fleeting and enigmatic. Some artists, using false identities, crash the meetings of big bosses and politicians to make them look foolish; others design banners and masks for street demonstrations against the powers that be. Some use the space of the museum to demonstrate the functioning of new ecological machines, others lay out small stones or erect signs in disempowered suburbs with the aim of re-creating the environment and engendering new social relations. One artist pays migrant workers to dig their own graves in order to point to the violence of exploitation, while another plays the role of supermarket assistant as a way of mending the social bond’ (Ranciere 2010:134).

Social impacts are incredibly hard to measure at the same time as questions of cultural value are so necessary to address in current funding climates. Examining the 'metrics' of audience-building and measurable impacts, on confidence and mental health for example, also entail the development of rigorous new systems and scales of measurement. We often think of this in terms of numerical/quantitative measured outputs and softer, qualitative data on outcomes for individuals and communities that are measured differently. The research addressed this by exploring how the artists thought about the multiple impacts of their work. Here we hear them speaking for themselves about their impactful work.

Arts Education

So most of the schools we work in are 'outstanding' schools in deprived areas, so its children that don't get the opportunity to do this sort of thing at home, they have very limited experience of art work and the workshops that we develop tend to try and embed the art work, well for the schools' sake into the curriculum but into the wider social context or into the wider importance of whatever it is they're looking at the time rather than it being elite art work for somebody else, it's like how does this fit in with everyday life, or how does it fit in with them. So we work in quite a lot of schools in Houghton and Thornhill and Gateshead.

Engaging Communities and Building Audiences

Whilst I would like to think that having organised these two exhibitions will have improved the profile of contemporary visual art in Durham and the area, it is actual visitor numbers and their comparison with similar projects which tell the actual tale – TESTT should have access to these.

Building Arts Practice as Social Change

One of my key aims as a curator in any gallery or city is to raise the profile of LGBTQ+ and women artists. Both shows I curated at TESTT involved several LGBTQ+ artists and a gender-balanced line-up, hoping to bring queer and feminist issues to the forefront of cultural events. In doing this, I hope that wider audiences will become more appreciative of these issues, of young and emerging artists, and of contemporary art as a whole.

Artistic Engagement with Vulnerable Communities

Yeah, I recently done a commission with a psychiatric ward in Perthshire, that was amazing, that was really interesting, it was one of the best projects I think I ever done. So it was an all-male ward, something again I'd never done before and ventured into, it's really high security, I was really apprehensive and nervous but the people and all the men there were just lovely. So many different, I had no idea why they were there but just really different, complex characters, hugely fascinating, so that was another project I done. It was two large-scale paintings there with three other artists, so we had like an opening at the end and all the staff could come and where patients could come along so they were hugely excited at something that they'd, you know other people to communicate with on the ward so I'd really love to do more work like that for hospitals and things, I think it's hugely important to have art around in those kind of places.

Participation or Co-Production and Social and Cultural Impact

I think ... it's a tough one ... I think the first one is mine is more process-led rather than it being about an outcome. I think it has that participatory kind of element to it because a lot of my work involves a lot of mark-making and layering which ends up being in a lot of layered abstract shapes. With the combination of screen print and painting, those kind of techniques that come together is what can bring the work together in a show is you get that range of disciplines and people who practice those disciplines coming together for that appreciation I guess. The work itself in terms of its cultural impact I guess it's more of holding a mirror up to the world, I think it's about seeing that kind of ... everyone's story to tell and how people leave a mark and how that trace is repeated, someone might come and have a different story to tell and how these marks and stories and layers can overlap and how that in itself creates something new. So I feel like people can associate in that sense with ... it's something you can't directly relate to which I like, there's normally a lot of people standing looking, they look for things, I think they try to look for some kind of representational elements and they end up appreciating the surface quality itself. But I feel like it has maybe some kind of subjective connection in that sense, in terms of making a mark, someone else making a mark and its capturing that time.

3

External Relations





There are many 'like-minded spirits' in the region: The Steam Machine Brew Tap, Pop Records, New Writing North, LGBT Queerpunk Scene, for example. Partnerships have also been built with Durham County Council, Culture Durham, County Durham Cultural Partnership, schools (Durham 6th Form), and colleges (New College). There has been a set of residencies. TESTT Space is now a cog in the cultural life of Durham in terms of contemporary art (in the midst of Lumiere, Ushaw, Gala, the University) and this is due to the longevity and legacy of ES in the city. It is a distinct cog and it is already embedded and has momentum. ES are well-connected but the 'art world' is just beginning to recognise them as agents in a complex field. The external relations of TESTT can be explored in three ways. Firstly, in the relation of TESTT to outside communities of practice and the art and culture that TESTT facilitates in the city and beyond. Secondly, in their horizontal relations to like-minded projects and partners that they are in alliance and coalition with and with mutual peer support. Thirdly, in TESTT's relation to major cultural agents in the region, infrastructure organisations and regional governance authorities. Many of these relations are in the private, public and governmental sector and with semi-autonomous agencies like Creative Factory.

4

Studio-holders: Practice and Purpose



TESST Space demonstrates eclecticism and diversity in its exhibitions and arts practice. Its residents are industrious and make things happen in the city. Artists and curators use the Space to make/think/experiment. Workshops have been successful and should be built on as future strands of work within the Space. It is a Space where experimentation and ‘faffing’ (noted by one respondent as important) is allowed. The artists are working, exhibiting, applying to and winning regional and national competitions and selling. There is a lot of prestige present here and talent with lots of esteem indicators. The quality of practice is outstanding and most artists are keen to show their work and particularly in group shows. In terms of social value the work has been shown in hospitals, schools and universities (including a key partnership with Ustinov College, Durham). This all bears witness to the transformation of the old Job Centre as a material space into something distinctive with a huge sense of cultural value and demonstrable impact. The Space and its model brings together university research, students, artists, community

in spaces (like the arts space in Ustinov). The work of one respondent highlights empty spaces of decay and this can stand as an interesting metaphor for the renewal of urban spaces and repurposing them as arts spaces for social change. Making in this space is a ‘radical gesture’ (as a respondent notes) against the corporate, the official and the banal. One interviewee deliberately associates his work with TESTT Space due to his belief in its cultural value and another believes his membership of TESTT will be decisive for funding – to be part of something bigger than an individual artist. The studios are experimental spaces: creativity is about work, trying stuff out, taking risks. Creativity is not a given – it is about time and effort. The studios offer freedoms to explore. It is a creative space. Ambition is no good without opportunity and the space, metaphorical and material, to realise that.

The importance of a material 'thinking' space

It was interesting because I didn't think a studio space was all that important. Because it might sound crazy but I often work throughout the night and very intensively when I feel like it. So it is nice to have workspace in the house where I live. I realised that sometimes you do need to switch of from the practical and to free yourself from what you are doing physically to give you a space in your mind and then I realised that having a studio space is important to the artists. So the same thing happened when I came back to Durham. I initially tried to paint some artwork at home but sometimes at home it is too comfortable, I may just make a cup of coffee now, watch television. And I really realise at the same time that the community is important, other people working in the same space.

Space of playful interaction and mess

I've got a big room in my house that used to be the kids' playroom and I kicked them out of the playroom and told them it was now my art studio and they weren't allowed in it and now they've got it back. So I just used to work from home. But I found I used to fuff if I was working from home and do the washing and the cooking and the cleaning, not very effective. And I'm messy.

I used to live up in Gilesgate, 12 – 13 years ago and there was a very nice Italian wine shop next to us that was Carlo's fathers and their very first Empty Shop exhibition was after he moved out of their premises and they had an Empty Shop and they threw this Empty Shop party, he must have been an art student at that time... and we lived next door and I said 'ooh, let's go along and see what's happening', and we went along, had a glass of wine, had art chats and then just been involved with Empty Shop since then so I used to go down to the bar, see whatever music things were on, involved with various other art things that they did.

Space as material location of practice

Practically like I said it started when Nick and Carlo opened their very first gallery space and I had a show there and then when they got Empty Shop I had, as soon as it opened they were very nice to me and they let me have studio space there and then when this came up, 'cos I'd been asking them about studio space because there isn't I had a choice, there were three possible locations there was a unit up at Gilesgate which was I don't know if you know it's the old army barracks and it used to be a fever hospital and then Dragonville there was like a storage unit, one of the industrial units, which is pretty much the same size as this and so and then there was this and this was the one that I thought would be the best one to be in 'cos of the community around it and metaphorical you said? I tell you, what else could I do? You know if you have to do it you do it, it's not something and particularly when you're as old as I am, it's not something that you would have put your life to in that sense it you didn't need to 'cos it's such a peculiar business.

The affordances of studio Space

But yeah personally I think it's a space, well I've got workshops back at home and stuff where we make stuff so think is a thinking space and also you know just to kind of a bit of socialising as well, you know if other artists are in, if other studio holders are in we'll go out for a coffee or lunch and stuff so it's kind of building that network so I think it's something we're all kind of struggling with here it's like how we, I mean I think it's like a mixture of people who have to use this space to earn a living so therefore it's a bit more functional and a bit more important rather than other people who just drift down here in order to do a bit of work and I don't have a lot of experience of other studios so I don't kinda know how that works there's not a lot of making space here but that could happen but that's not necessary. But you know we want this to work 'cos we want to take that concept pick it up when this space eventually comes down and deposit it somewhere else so that building that network is taking time but I think it's happening we're all kind of ready to get together again to see who it's working for and who it isn't but just by being associated with the group members here I think it's been generally beneficial you know to everybody you know we're all starting to become friends, it's starting to build. You know so I think, maybe the thing that we're guilty of is we thought it would all happen overnight and it hasn't, it's taken time and we've had it a year and a bit now and it's like how we move it forward?

Space as Utopia and as thinking

I was, I mean this is the thing when you have one of these spaces, with the space itself being so experimental, you're going to have a range of disciplines within that, you're not going to have a group of painters (laughs), you're not going to have a group of sculptors, you're going to have that mixed media of work. But I feel like the space itself, the curating space or the idea of TESTT Space, as much as yes there is that professional sense of curating a successful exhibition and they were communicating with each other and all that, I feel like the main priority was showing talent, it was about showing that there are people in Durham practising contemporary art throughout whatever discipline, but that was shown. High quality work and the comments that were made on the night (at the opening), the feedback was brilliant, absolutely brilliant. But having the space itself was for me was not just a practical space to make work, it was a thinking space, it was crucial for me at that

time to have a space because I'd struggled so far to get to try and get a space where I could do the work I was wanting to produce, so whether that was unrealistic goals or limits in terms of what I could afford again ... Nick and Carlo, they arranged a set price for what could, they were always willing to help with that. In my personal circumstances we arranged that my rent could be, not necessarily dropped, but it could be shortened so that it was affordable for me, they accommodated every need that I had and in return I was giving them any specialist knowledge that I knew about anything. But the space itself for me was crucial as my work was developing I needed to make sure that I had a space that could allow me to do so, so my work went from maybe A1 size canvasses to 4 metre rolls of canvasses around the space and that's what I needed, a space where I could do that but also stand back.

5

Interactions in the Space

C
l
Clark.
a
r
k

TESST Space is a conversational space – artists can bounce off one another. Respondents felt that the group show was a hugely positive experience. There is a distinctiveness to the TESTT community (as contrasted to the distinctiveness offered by NewBridge for example).

Relationships are maintained with ex-studio holders (shows/social media network) all of whom (those interviewed) enjoyed their work in the Space and have a nostalgia for it.

The Space demonstrates exchange, collaboration, skill-sharing, knowledge-exchange and co-production and there are numerous social events outside of Space.

There is a lot of informal chatting and there are always two chairs in each studio.

There is a great deal of infrastructure support from ES.

Relationships take time to develop and there are informal friendship networks but people use the Space in different ways and for different reasons and all of this is welcome and acceptable.

There is some sharing of knowledge of NE galleries, contacts, exhibition opportunities and jobs and this is often useful for disconnected artists often working privately. The informal and the serendipitous then become decisive for artistic pathways and careers.

There is a ‘tumbling mix’ of practice. Practice post-education is often difficult and there is a great deal of energy that comes from a community of artists.

There is a really important soft infrastructure, network, community of knowledge and shared equipment.

The Space is the facilitator of organic practice and interaction (rather than the mechanical interactions of more ‘official’ spaces).

Students can engage with artists and connect to the community as in the Ustinov exhibition which itself was beyond the material fabric of the TESTT Space.

For students it is a safe haven, a small family, good for mental health, allows students to be part of the community and can be another different way of relating to the university experience.

The artists have taken responsibility for the space. There is a sense of common ownership. We can think of TESTT Space as a kind of commons.



Learning from others in the Space

I was so fortunate that as soon as I started at the studio space we have the group show and it became so important for me and for the other artists and the exhibition opened up the door for me and that was an amazing opportunity to learn about others practice. Including the work of M. that I show here (at Ustinov) and his work is international and ES created this opportunity not just for me but also for the students here for them to share that experience that artists are doing. It's a big step forwards for me.

Using the Space differently and distinctively

On and off yeah, but not really ... when you're at home it really is ... I find it hard at home, I experiment, I read at home, I fiddle about at home but no, I need ... and really the other reason I wanted to come here was because I knew I would be with other creative people. If I'm frank about it that hasn't always worked out that way because obviously everyone's lives are different, everyone's demands are different, so we don't see each other necessarily you know, when I was coming in here all the time occasionally I saw somebody, but it's not quite as regular as I thought it was going to be or as hussly-bussly as I thought but that's because other people are doing other things, they might have other projects on, and I know some of them have, like M., he's often away...with doing his big light pieces, he's had a lot of projects in Switzerland and all over so he's a busy guy. But it doesn't stop me wanting my studio space, I still enjoy being here.

A permeable Space

I want to give an opportunity to up and coming artists and giving them confidence to exist with established artists as well as students. Also I was hoping that students would gain something from looking at...creating something so art becomes closer to you. Not just look and ponder but 'you' can become an artist....therefore I was pleasantly surprised that two groups of artists came together, encouraging as many students as was possible to take part and in addition to that research is a really important part of the college daily life so in order to support this research I hope art can play a role as well, connect to research and to the community, so presenting the research and the art together this become a different dialogue. Individually difficult to understand but 'together' something else.

TESTT as thinking Space and Space of interaction and play

Personally what I take from it is I want to be part of ... it's a solitary thing if you're sitting by yourself, not engaging with people, so that's why I like the teaching, that's why I like the art shows particularly because you get to meet contemporaries and this is another way to have contemporaries, it doesn't matter what art you're doing, you're all doing something that contributes to the same (Carlo pops his head in to say hello). Yes, to have contemporaries doing the same sort of thing as you rather than being a solo artist sitting by myself. It's the network of finding out what is going on, what other people are doing, it's a social aspect of ... I guess it's because, it's my job, it's what I do all day, I don't have another job, so in the absence of colleagues I guess this is the closest thing I've got to that. To bounce ideas off, find out what's happening.

Space as knowledge-exchange

Yes, even if that opportunity had arisen I probably wasn't even at the stage I wanted to divert from what I thought I was doing, but seeing other people's works is lovely and seeing what they produce, you know. The variation is amazing and then having the opportunity to take part in the exhibition they had here. I'd left by then but they still had invited me because it was work I had produced while I was here and that was a lovely experience and some of the other girls, you know we offered information to each other, and I'd heard of some funding that was available and told the girls here, and although I didn't get through, D. did, you know the girl who I shared the room with and so you know had six months funded experience doing something. And you know things like that happened and we still kind of keep in touch that way, yeah.



Spaces of friendship and solidarity

I think with all artists space where they rent it's generally quite similar 'cos people come here to work, and they're quite focused and they're full of ideas and you kinda don't want to interrupt that train of thought and I'm quite respectful of that so I don't tend to be knocking on people's doors, but if people are having a cup of tea or it seems like a natural break I'll speak then but I've been to the pub with a few people a couple of times but I reckon that quite a lot of the studio holders here have quite a lot of other commitments, families or different jobs so people are just in and out so I wouldn't say that everyone meets up for a cup of tea in the afternoon because everyone is just different and busy lifestyles or work at different times, some people are morning people some people are evening people. Sometimes I am in here quite a lot just myself, it doesn't really bother me 'cos I just put my music on but then I think in winter it did a little bit 'cos I'd just arrived and it was so dark and cold and that obviously stopped people coming in but 'cos I'm just next door I can just pop in. But people always say hi when you come in, they're friendly.

TESTT as spatial transformation

It is because it's also about the transformation of spaces, which is why I've got that real connection with Nick and Carlo, it's just you know a concert hall when you start rigging at 8 o'clock in the morning, it's cold and unfriendly and it's throughout these hours of art is a slow transition into something incredible. All this gears in the truck and then you come in you plug it all in you rig it all and then for a few hours...

Building a diverse community of practice in TESTT

I've met a few people in the studios, but I haven't been into all the studios yet so I think it's good to be part of a ... (indistinct word) ... space because there's sculpture, light installation, watercolour painters, students, so I guess you get to meet a diverse range of people and see a diverse range of work. In terms of my stuff fitting in, I don't really know.

Building Space as prefiguration of new social worlds

Well the first thing I guess from the first time everyone met, all the studio holders, there was a meeting, once the space was being built and we all sat round and had tea and biscuits, everyone exchanged numbers, we set up a Facebook group, messaging, so straight away I was friends with people that I didn't even know, so I was in a group chat with people I didn't even know. From there because everyone was a keyholder it was like 'Is anyone in today', things like that, even if you were working quite independently there was always a knock on the door with a cup of tea or someone would poke their head in and every studio you went into there was always 2 chairs (laughs), there was always room for that one person to come in and whether it was to talk about how your work's going well, or how your work is really not working which is probably the most valuable conversation to have because it was about resolving and opinions, you get to understand people as artists and as people themselves in that sense so it became a very close knit community in terms of the studio holders, which was my favourite part.

Inspiring new generations of artists through TESTT

Again it was learning that was key to me in the work experience, just getting to know people, getting to know their stories, what they do, where they came from, what they're interested in and connecting with that. It's really important because, you know, I wanna learn and I wanna do that all the way through because...you need to keep on doing something in order to progress and I wanna progress and I wanna make new things not only in the art kind of department but just as a person...getting to know new people was so great, they were so nice, they were lovely and you know they're all so different in their art styles, there's watercolour artists and then textile people, there's M. with the light stuff, it's so different and everyone is unique and everyone joins together and they just welcome you. It's a family, even if you're an outsider, like me, I was a complete outsider, knew no-one (Year 10 student).

6

Artist Development



Artist development is a central part of the TESTT memory and aspiration. The TESTT peer network is key. We know that friendships and networks are built here for solidarity and the development of practice. This is part of TESTT being a magnet for creatives. Respondents felt that TESTT offered them a sense of a 'white cube' experience in terms of the material Space of the gallery. One respondent talked about this as needing a 'Space where magic happens'. It is a space where thought processes are unrestricted and which facilitates and initiates risk-taking. Being part of a community has positive impacts on practice but it also offers a 'messy' Space of making and exhibition. The studios afford bigger, different and more experimental work – and potentially bigger commissions – and this is more unrestricted than having a studio at home along with its different interactions. As one respondent notes:

I don't think there are very many... well I don't know whether there are any other organisations that are involved with art work, providing a space where people who are creative can put on their ideas without it needing to be expensive or formal ... Durham and the north east in general lack these sort of spaces.

Curatorial Development in Space

TESTT offered significant logistical and marketing support during the development of both exhibitions, coordinating and covering the cost of transporting works both to and from Newcastle for the two shows, as well as printing posters and vinyl for the wall. They also helped with the collaborative effort of promoting the exhibitions across social media, using a residency on the NECVAN instagram account to help particularly with the first.

In return, I developed and realised both shows from scratch, organising the artists and curating and installing the work myself. I also helped to promote knowledge of TESTT across arts communities in Newcastle to try and increase the scope of the space's projects.



Space as unique developer of artists

I worked as a cleaner and would nick wood from the skip they had, and painted on it. I asked Nick if he would be interested in putting them up as an art show in the TESTT space... They offered me cups of tea and coffee, and helped me set up the room. This meant drilling and putting my bits of wood on the wall. I offered them help as much as I could... It's more a personal impact I suppose. It was very nice seeing some of my work on a wall somewhere. I haven't done anything since because I went to uni, but it was just fun.

Facilitating new journeys into practice

I'm pretty new to being artist, I mean I feel quite confident to call myself an artist now but it's only been really since I retired from work. I started doing what I always loved and what I always meant to do when I was younger but I didn't really get to take it through to its final stages of becoming an 'artist'. And then I just began painting, I thought, 'right! I'm retired now I'm going to start painting' which I did and then my styles are kinda...I think it's fairly unique to me, people say they recognise my work. It's very vibrant and I like a lot of colour and things and my son used to go to Empty Shop and so I had the opportunity to hold an exhibition there, it didn't ever come off because I never got round to it because this space was being developed at the same time. So, I had shown my work and they said they liked it and I said to them I would be interested in a studio space if one came about. So when this began I was contacted and given the opportunity to have a studio space which I did, that was really it, and I'm painting still now, I've got paint on my hands now but it's not from art it's from decorating haha.

Artist developing as thinking space in the TESTT Space

I never really know what I'm going to do, I haven't got a plan, I sometimes think that's a bad thing, but I sometimes just start putting paint on the paper and I just see where it takes me. And I rarely throw, I rarely, I sometimes paint over them! I don't waste it I just get it and put more paint on and take more off and add more and throw a bit at it until I'm satisfied and so I very rarely waste anything and I quite like them! Haha god! I like my work you know, sometimes I kind of wonder if anyone else, if this is new work what do you think you know, but as long as I'm happy with it, that's alright by me.

Constructing new solidarities of artists

I'm proud to be part of it, it's a family I mean I like to think of it as a family, but as the family arose it just becomes a huge supportive network you know. Like Nick'll ring me up and be like M. I need this and I'll be like right I'll come down and do this as a group and as individuals we can make an awful lot of things happen and then how we connect with what's going on in our city here and what's going on wider, and that's always a difficult one.



Space as 'Ideas Lab'

Ah well, the support I feel is a given really 'cos Nick and Carlo are very busy, they're very involved with various projects, they know how it all works, so if I felt ... you know ... how would I go about applying for a grant or how would I go about ... saying 'I think I'd like to exhibit, what do you think?' and I feel that they would listen to me and they might say 'well, we'd need to do a joint exhibition' but ... and they would discuss it with me. I would feel able to talk about it with them, you know, it's a real luxury having them on tap, to bounce ideas off and they do, they would take it seriously and they would consider it and they would give me reasons as to why they could or couldn't but it would all be useful for me whereas when you're on your own you've got to network whereas here because of Nick and Carlo you feel you've got an in-built network straight away because of their involvement with so many things and their experience.

Leadership as facilitation

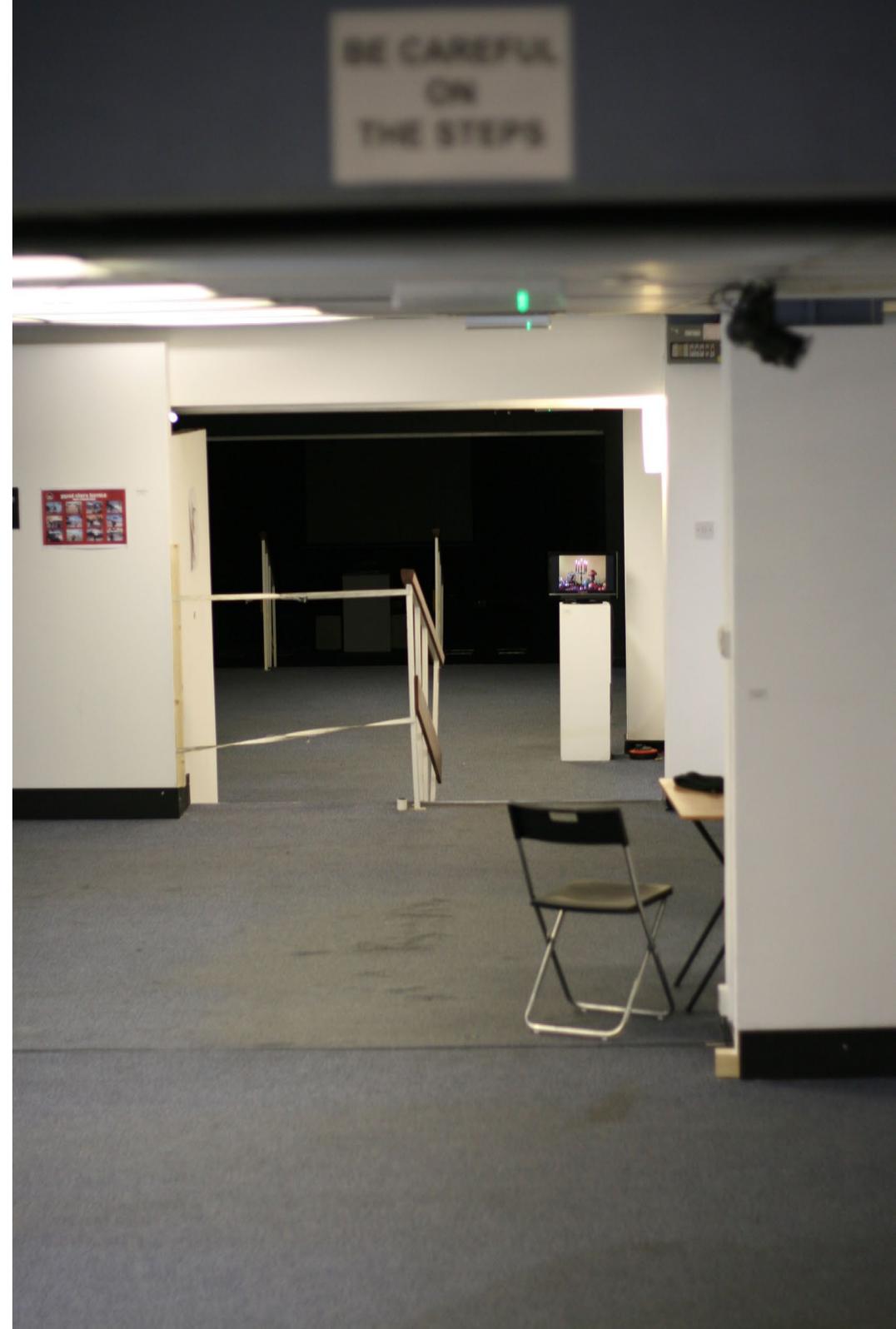
So, when I approached Nick and Carlo about getting a space and we assessed which space was best for me That's another thing I wanted to comment on, I wasn't given a space, I was asked what I wanted, I was asked what I wanted, from an organisation that I was trying to get a studio from, what did my work need, what did I need, they accommodated my needs which was great, they're a credit to themselves in that sense.

Creating Utopia, sites of risk and mess

It is, absolutely, the group of everyone up there. It's Empty Shop's aim is that you do the best you can. I feel like for me, especially for me it was about taking risks was in essence why all of that came about, it was about taking risks and having someone to push you a bit into those risks. And emotional support, they're great at that ha ha, they are phenomenal. As artists I think we tend to be an eccentric type don't we (laughs) but they are there for people, it's not just about the art which is a quality that I feel humbles them I guess in a way.

7

**What makes
TESTT Space
different?**



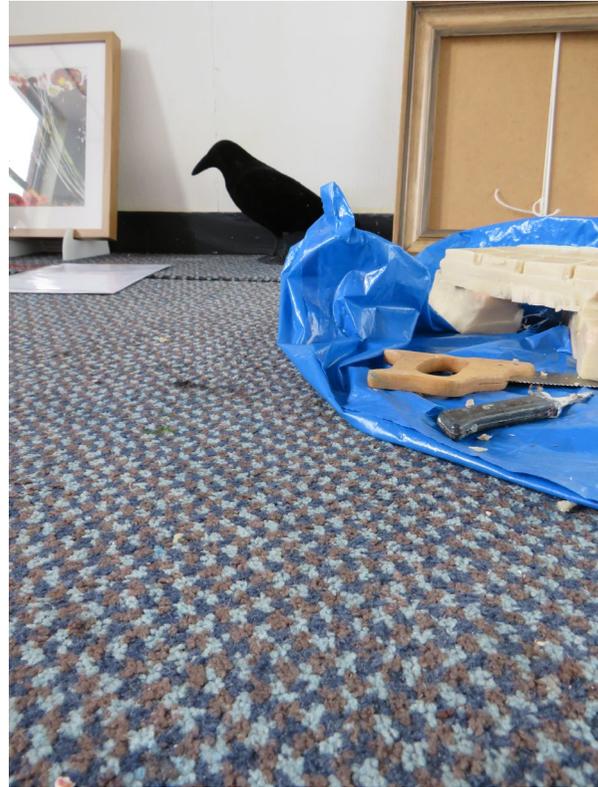
The TESTT Space is based on principles of inclusion such as generational exchange, community involvement and interaction and the development of artists from diverse social backgrounds. It is part of the wider DIY infrastructure of the Empty Shop model and is entirely artist-focused ('What do you need?'). It acts as a huge support mechanism for artists and curators and respondents spoke of it in positive terms as a family or friendship network. It has an extremely positive vibe and is very informal at the same time as it is dedicated to doing things well.

All of this is in large part because of Nick and Carlo and the concepts associated with them by respondents: drive, commitment, integrity, authenticity, embedded, accumulated cultural capital, encouraging, inspiring, openness to what people do and to what people can offer, trusted, can introduce artists to a wide spectrum of people, selfless, visionaries, they can make things happen, spontaneity, personalities, have walked the walk but not talked the talk. 'Nick and Carlo complement one another perfectly', they are receptive, nurturing – they galvanise talent. All the above is from the respondents.

Beyond the core management team is a supportive collective of knowledge and experience. The Space is friendly, safe and flexible with an eclectic mix of artists. TESTT's distinctiveness lies not in the Space/Building/Bricks but in the built community. TESTT is therefore mobile. The community are the foundations of TESTT as a 'moveable feast'. The collective all love art passionately and TESTT demonstrates art as a viable and visible career. TESTT is a definition of creativity. It's about doing it, being creative, not having a plan or product. It has traction because of this – it is a backlash against quantifiability. Exploration and fluidity are part of a process-led approach to cultural regeneration and making as well as building audiences for contemporary art in the city and beyond.

Space as positivity

What ES is doing is incredible and fantastic, people like Nick and Carlo, very humble and very friendly, without them this it is very difficult for artists to have an artist's community, you would not be able to believe in yourself. These are difficult times and this is why we need to support artists in our communities...Even that ES space keeps having different exhibitions, different people to visit, different dynamics to the area, even a 'grey area' visiting that part of the town, I started talking even to people on the street. Even beyond that space, in the entire community, giving a positive vibe...I really did notice that I specifically realised both the artists making, we all need to show our work and having the space to do that is so important for keeping us motivated and keeping us going. So I really wish Durham would consider a gallery for contemporary not commercial art. Contemporary art is talking about now and making a change in our lives...So I hope that your research will help the university and the council to create a contemporary space and can I emphasise not commercial but contemporary.



Space as material affordance and possibility

I guess the physical space is invaluable because to be able to get this size space for creating in. So it's let me take on bigger commissions than I would have been able to do at home, so I've done some that are almost the size of this table...they're watercolours 2 and a half metre by a metre and a half watercolours, that massive roll of paper in the corner, that's all watercolour paper, it's a roll of really thick watercolour paper.

Space of mess and play

Well what I call myself is a dirty artist, I splash paint, I throw it, I spray paint, my kitchen is getting ruined (laughter).

And the shed's cordoned off so I thought if I came here I'd be able to do all that, but I couldn't afford a room of my own so I had to share, but I didn't really know what room I was going to get so I was in a very small room and my, the lady who I shared with, D., who you might meet, she's a lovely, but neat artist, that didn't matter 'cos she was really nice. I tried hanging curtains up.

Spaces of actually ‘doing’ stuff

I think I sent Carlo an e-mail on the Sunday about four-o-clock saying you know fancy an exhibition? Never met Carlo before, and within an hour he just said yes, let's do it. And I was just like ah right 'cos I expected this kind of formal process of application forms and all that lot and that just didn't exist with Nick and Carlo. And I think I did have an evening with them and that evening was just like what do you fancy doing? Is the space big enough? It was just positive and a real kind of opener with me to work with that type of person. I'm not, I don't do officialdom, so there was a process there immediately with Nick and Carlo to just do it, and we did it and a couple of months later and I think there was that kind of having to create work and we showed the piece I created for Lumiere and that was really the kind of beginning of that kind of feeling quite passionate about what I was doing, and that first kind of opportunity of working with Nick and Carlo and I just kind of fell in love with these guys immediately and what they were doing and they were so encouraging and I was like wow.

Breaking boundaries in the Space, making new worlds

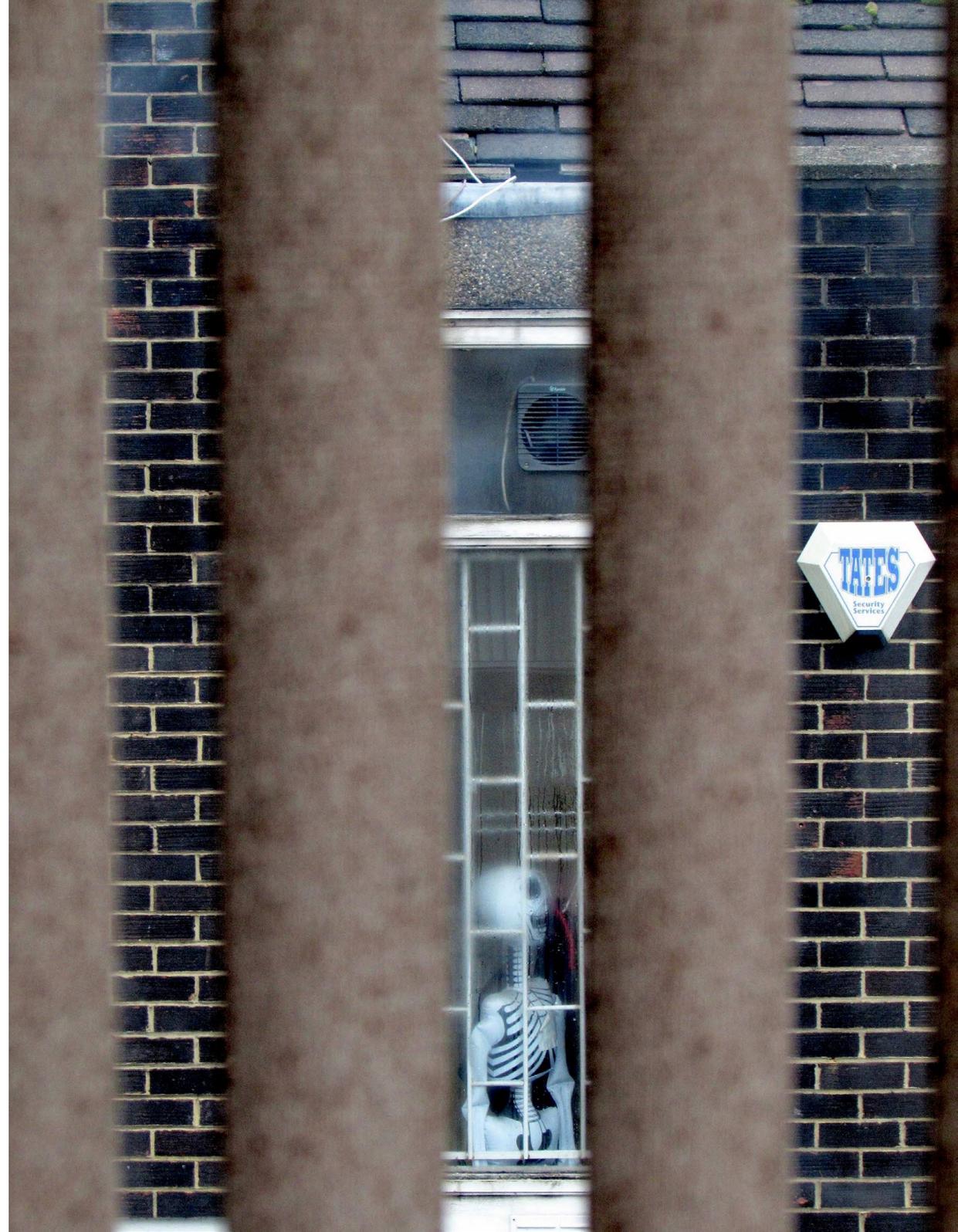
'Cos you know they're prepared to talk to people just like I do. You know I often ring up. Nick can I come and he's like yep and I'm like Nick this is how I feel or what I want to do, what do you think? And that kind of feedback from someone you respect is crucial you know we do that lot and they often say 'what do you think of this', 'can we make it work'? And it's always lovely to say yes to that, it's that I'm not sure anybody would want to take that process into a level of officialdom at all. You've got to cross thresholds, there are rules and regulations to abide to you know whenever we're working in the public realm there's a whole load of public safety issues and all that, but you know you accept that cos its bloody common sense cos you get some stupid things happen but most of the time, you know with an umbrella organisation like Artichoke with all the kinds of facilities and contacts and professional people in there so you can take it to that level where you can actually, you know working in London in 2016 wasn't easy cos you want a piece of art there?!

Space and ‘relational agency’: Carlo and Nick as agents of change

I think here they're very open, very supportive, very good at introducing artists to different people in the community and different people that are coming in and out, like Carlo and Nick are always great at saying 'by the way this is so and so, they're from this department' so I think they're very good at connecting people together, especially someone that's new and I don't know anyone here so that's just a great asset for me, they had their opening last week and I met so many different people and they could see who I was 'by the way this is so-and-so' and so that's really great for a new person to come and meet so many people. Just simply having a warm nice space to come to that's safe, and that's comfortable and friendly and you know you don't feel – if I was working in my spare bedroom – you don't feel disconnected or alone so I think just in terms of coming to a space that is solely yours but you can interact with other artists when and if you feel like it is a great opportunity.

8

Challenges in the Space



A number of challenges are encountered in the Space. Most of these are due to the material limitations of the physical building: a building which also offers a set of affordances, experiences and possibilities. In this section we let the artists and curators speak for themselves about their aspirations.

There are significant issues around access. This is both physical and metaphorical. On the one hand there are issues around keys, entering the building, and mobility to the higher floors which signal problems of inclusion and exclusion. On the other there is a metaphorical problem of access in that the building is essentially invisible as a material and cultural entity. Its public 'face' is a buzzer. In the same sense it is 'outside' an arts circuit and is almost non-existent in terms of visitability outside of public events. This makes it very unlike any other 'public-facing' gallery.

Because you have to ring a buzzer and somebody has to be in. We're actually quite lucky, we can hear the buzzer but no-one else can even hear it...but I've had people ring up and say 'oh hi, there's a couple of people come to look at a painting' and I'm like 'I didn't know they were coming', you know, when you say you've got a studio people assume it's somewhere they can just drop in or peer through the window and I think the exhibitions suffer for that because it feels inaccessible, you've got that dark entrance downstairs, and then you've got to buzz. It's not very publically accessible, unless you know it here and you know you can definitely get in. As a workspace, carrying stuff up and down the stairs is not very practical either, particularly big ones with glass in, they're really heavy. Although I'm quite happy here.

Challenges also lie in the very useful dissonance and dissensus that TESTT offers to the City and to the cultural region. Its DIY model has accrued significant trust and respect and contaminating this with 'officialdom' and the 'local authority' of government has challenges. The borders between TESTT and other authorities, networks, organisations is permeable and TESTT constantly reaches out to them but to maintain integrity and ensure resistance to banality it needs to retain its sense as an independent camp. This can create tensions.

I saw Nick on where are we now, Thursday, yeah Tuesday night and he just looked absolutely wrecked you know, they both, there's just so much going on particularly with what's going on at Redhills as well and it's like they're going through the same process that I've been through you know it's like if you Google kind of being burnt out is actually one of the five very top things is actually you've got to start concentrating on what you want but you've actually got to have the ability to say no and I think that's actually a very kind of interesting lesson for us all really cos we shouldn't be taking on everything 'cos we've got to kind of define who we are and where we're going, but also you know what are the level we are at in the bigger picture and it's interesting that Nick and Carlo are doing that and I'm going through that as well it's a big of kinda self-help therapy group with Nick and Carlo, usually over beer or just kind of kicking stuff around.

There are issues and challenges in the use of the Space and the different ways that artists use both studios and gallery – this means overcoming the idea of TESTT as an 'empty Space' and making it a more public, challenging, antagonistic civic space: a new 'demos' in the City.

The problem slightly I think is that its full of very busy people who aren't here very much, and different people keep different hours so I've got children so me and S. are both pretty much in here, if we're here, between half 9 and half 2 and there are a lot of people who have jobs who are never here during those times, they're evenings and weekends, and students are obviously only here for 9 weeks, times 3, so sometimes you feel like it's a bit of an empty space.

We should not underestimate the problems in the materiality of the building itself – and of course this is something that is recognised and part of the history/archive of TESTT. Indeed there may be nostalgia about this if the Space ever disappears:

No, but then what's the alternative? Where is a better alternative gonna come from? And is the council going to make that available? That's the question they need to answer really. Yes, this has many pitfalls, the lift doesn't work, any work you bring in and take out you gotta carry up 4 flights of stairs, and for all those reasons it's not ideal, but it's better than nothing and nothing is what we had prior to this so if the council are saying this isn't really the answer then what is the answer? And that's the conversation that needs to be had isn't it? So I'd be unwilling to give this up in the face of there being nothing else, that would be a retrograde step. These rooms lend themselves to studios because everyone has windows, I have inhabited a studio in Sunderland before now where it was a garage really, a glorified garage with no window, no ventilation, you know and that didn't work for me because I was driving all the way over there and in the end I didn't wanna be there so it just didn't work. Coming in here, all right I've gotta climb 4 flights of stairs but it's better than a gym membership.



There are also significant issues and challenges (and possibilities) in the very temporariness of the TESST Space and worries for the future:

(On temporariness of Space) Yes it is unfortunately. Well I really hope that there is something that carries on at the end of this that provides the same kind of art community with gallery space options. Because we're such a diverse range of people I suspect everyone has quite different needs from the space

Future developments of the TESTT Space offer new ways of thinking about what has been achieved at this point and this is enmeshed in the problem of contemporary art in the City and the region:

In order for TESTT space to develop, I think there needs to be more of a development of the profile of contemporary visual art in Durham so that it is not just restricted to those 'in the know'. At the same time, this should not cheapen the quality of art that TESTT is dealing with down to simple community projects and local artists. The art on show, or in the studios, needs to be contemporary and challenging to be truly engaging, even if it is difficult to envisage working at first. Greater communication with Durham University in trying to engage students and young people with contemporary visual art (given the lack of degree programming for fine art there) would probably be a good start, although this should be integrated with the local community outside of the university so that it is not isolated and exclusive.

This may mean that the model of TESTT needs to be changed or even abandoned and this is a serious question about the future of arts in the city and working as DIY co-production set-up in the cultural context and challenges of the region:

I would love to see them expand more and make the TESTT space bigger if they could, but do to that they would need money. I have nothing but praise for them, they are the most committed artists I have met, more importantly they believe in the north east, and really want to see the whole area develop, which needs to happen, and is starting to, but it is because of people like Nick and Carlo that it is beginning to happen and will continue to.

What is central is that there is a huge amount of trust in the vision and leadership of TESTT. The ES infrastructure has initiated so many possibilities and transformations that the cultural map of the City has itself changed. There is a degree of modesty about this but there is also a sense that there should be a higher profile and reach of TESTT and what it has achieved and continues to achieve – and this offers challenges both to the TESTT model and the future of ES itself:

I am not sure because that would be Nick and Carlo's visions, and I would trust them to know where things needed to be steered to, if it was me I'd just say, all the empty buildings, open them up, let people, creative people go in and get on with whatever they're getting on with and sort of leave it at that and make sure that there is always some empty space which there is always is if you think about all the buildings that the university have that are falling into disrepair or like the old swimming baths? You know it's such a small city, you cannot afford to do that, so have that, but I know that Nick and Carlo will have an actual better understanding of how things need to go forward.

Nick and Carlo are a godsend, they have so much drive and commitment to what they do, they're just really kind, genuine people and that's what you look for and I almost rented a hugely expensive space through the council and I'm just so glad I didn't. Here I've been able to network and with Nick and Carlo being so genuine and honest and also flexible, if I decided that I didn't like it for whatever reason, they would be quite happy to say 'that's fine, it's life' so I think they get artists' perspective very well and are hugely supportive of everyone that's working in the building and also are appreciative of other peoples' commitments, if you're not here its fine.

It is clear that this version of TESTT will come to an end at some point or change into something else and potentially that could be sooner rather than later and there has to be a degree of preparedness for this. Yet the resources and the will are there to be able to inaugurate that next TESTT world but perhaps with a new network and a new wider leadership and advisory team:

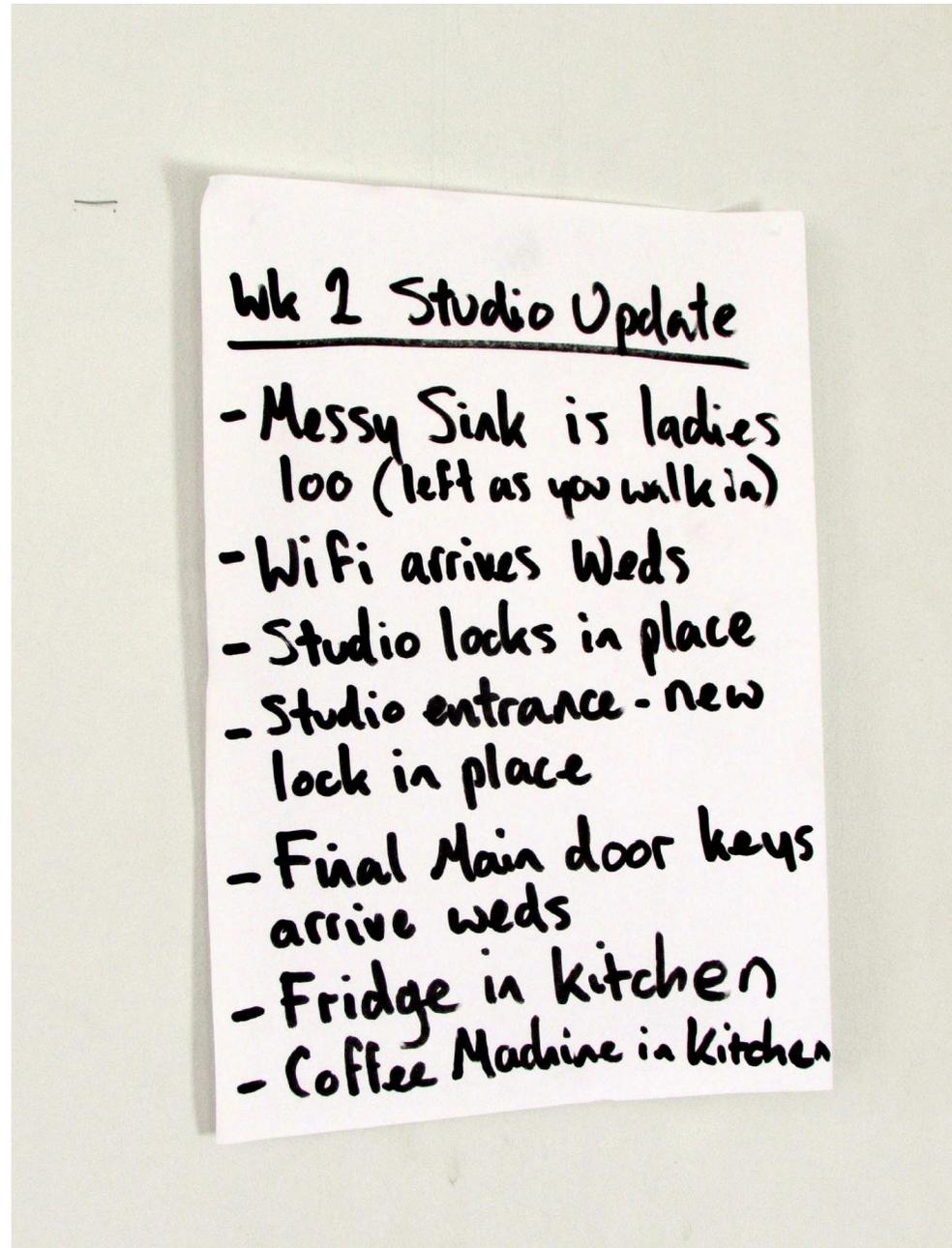
You know what building would you take over? How would you engage with everything that is the philosophy of TESTT Space and Empty Shop? It would be a difficult one I think, but I think it would work. 'Cos you know one day someone might come to us and say this space is coming to an end, how are we gonna move this space forward personally for Nick and Carlo. It's good it is, it's called TESTT for a reason I think, and I think it's a TESTT for us all here because we're all on so many different, you know if we were all trying to earn our own living from this space then it would be full every day and some people aren't.

The distinctiveness and necessity of TESTT remains strong and there is a great deal of encouragement to continue and develop:

I think it's hugely important to have it here because the spaces are filled, there's a waiting list and nothing else exists like this here. Other space is either really expensive or closed off from the main city footfall. I think it's invaluable and Durham definitely needs something like this or something bigger or something with more spaces or it would be great to have these spaces and then more of a ground floor exhibiting, lovely big dreamy window glass face where people would actually know that artists exist here and we could work privately in our studios and also exhibit or do workshops in a space that is even more interactive which I'm sure people running this would love as well.

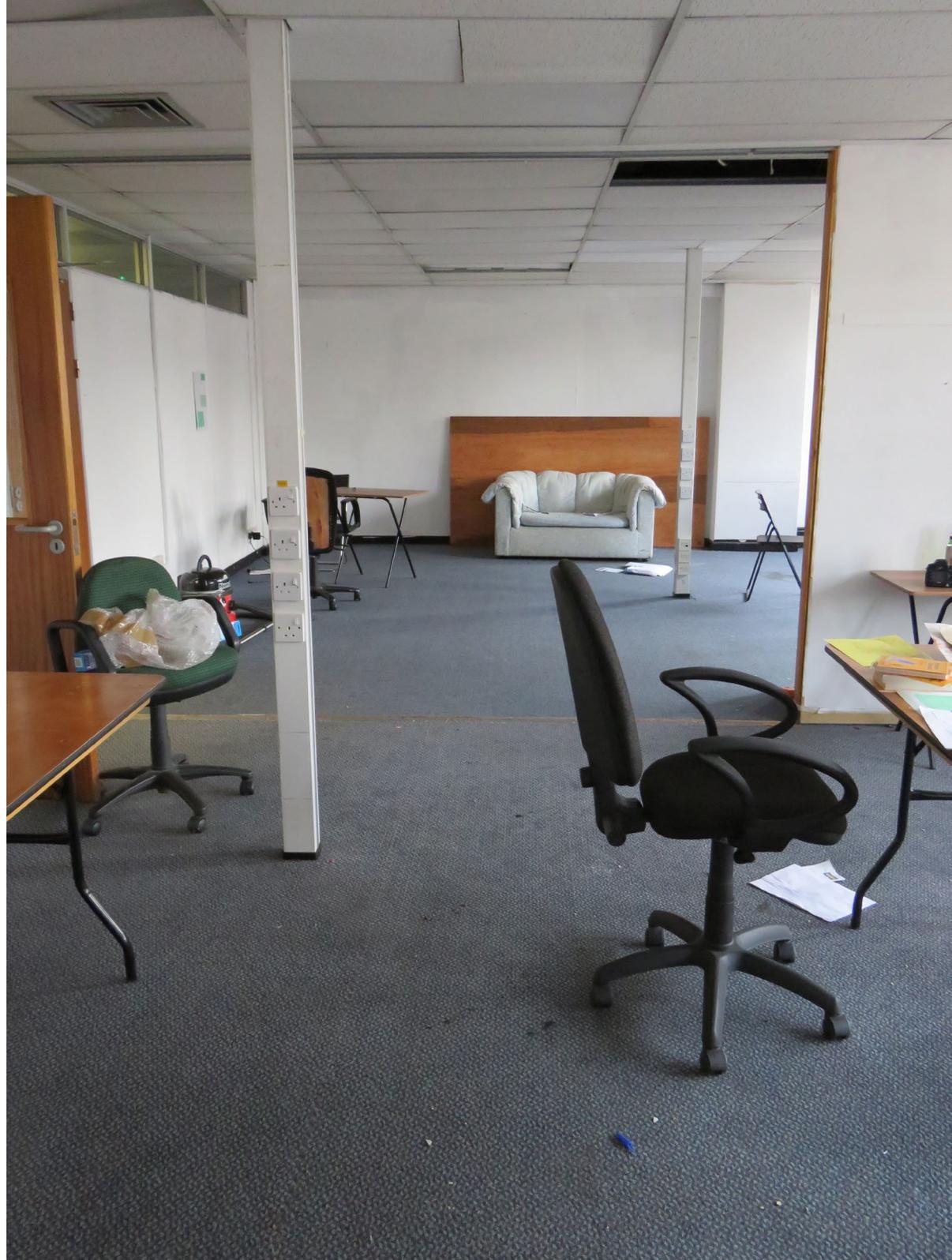
Well I think the most important thing is to say if it didn't have this it would have nothing. In terms of a place that impacts directly to the public there is nothing, there is nothing. I think anything that is related to any kind of contemporary art is an educational system, there is no free standing contemporary galleries, I mean the DLI was probably one of the only things that exhibited that kind of contemporary art work.

The challenges are in many ways what makes the Space a playful and experimental Space in which to practice and future versions of TESTT will come with other challenges. Only by TESTT thinking through its futures can we both make sense of that challenging past and be better prepared for the challenges that the future will offer. Hesitating between past, present and future the temporary camp of TESTT offers so many lessons for thinking about materiality, networks and the possibilities of experimental practice.



9

TESTTing Students



Empty Shop is a provider of spaces that attempt to exist outside of the tensions between the local and university communities in Durham. In an interview for a student newspaper the directors discussed how their previous venue, Empty Shop HQ, had attracted an almost equal number of both students and local residents as audience members (The Palatinate, 2017). This alternative ground as a site for interaction and collaboration between the two communities in Durham is rare and has been the catalyst for Empty Shop's partnership with the University's Culture Durham team since 2016. When TESTT began to take shape, a large office space in the old Job Centre was set aside with the purpose of becoming a student studio. This studio was developed in collaboration with Culture Durham as another shared space which brings student and resident creatives together, under the same roof.

As part a work placement module within the Education Department, a student from Durham University worked with Nick and Carlo over the course of nine months to establish this student studio space. By the end of the academic year over twenty students were involved.

An alternative space for students

As students you are encouraged to think there is this distinction between University buildings, University life and the rest, and why not, the university will provide you with everything you'll need so you won't go out and seek.

The student studio provided a much needed sense of separation from university spaces and it was important to the studio members that it existed outside the constraints and barriers of an educational institution.

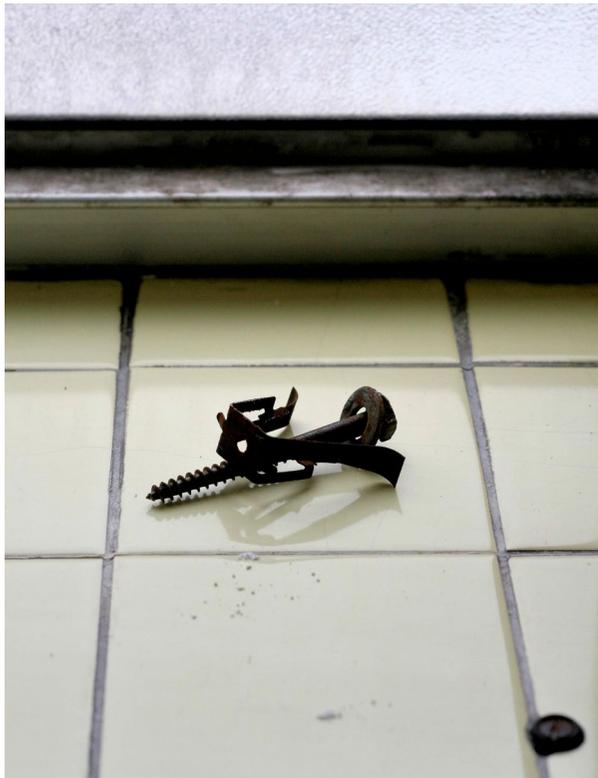
TESTT Space has provided us with a fantastic opportunity which I can't say is comparable with anything you've ever experienced in University I guess, it's something different.

This space was constructed to encourage a different relationship between the student members and the city in which they live. The studio was more than just a facility provided as a resource for university students, it was a site of interaction, mutual support and advice.

Beyond the student identity

I actually felt like I was part of the community and not just coming to 'consume' Durham.

It is through the provision of this alternative space that the student studio members' identities were legitimised as something beyond just simply 'student'. This site of play and experimentation extended beyond art practice and allowed its members to resist the narrow and constricting identity of a 'good student'.



Conversation and Community

In an interview with student studio members, one participant discusses an ongoing conversation he is having with another studio member. The time they spend in the studio never really overlaps, in fact they have maybe only met in person once or twice, but they have been sharing notes with each other. This stream of disjointed conversation, which almost reads like poetry, is just piling up in a corner of the studio space.

I enjoyed that as time went on, I and other students put up work and works in progress on the walls of the studios. It was nice to see what others were working on

The space developed into a site of conversation, not only verbal, but something more. These conversations are literally stuck to the walls of the studio, hanging down from the office ceiling tiles, or spilled onto the floor.

The academic year ended with one of the student studio members organising a four day long intense art experiment called a 'lock-in'. This event was kick started with a workshop attended by both students and local artists, run by North East based artist Toby P. Lloyd. It explored the complex relationships between work, play and relaxation. In a discussion about the 'lock-in' one student stated:

We opened ourselves up quite ruthlessly, I think doing something creative is very personal and I think I've opened up my personal space to everyone and so have you and we did not judge each other, we embraced each other, and it's just been, the whole process.

This is true of the whole student studio, the existence of this site carved out space for these intense bonds to form. But there were limitations.

This newly formed network of student artists struggled to extend outside of the student studio to include the local artists. Opportunities for students and local artists to interact were constrained by a few factors, including a tendency for some students to stay within the confines of their own studio space and not really expanding their use of TESTT beyond the facilities provided for them. But some students did break through this barrier:

I really don't want you to underestimate how much this has meant to students who felt quite trapped by the University and the University town. It's not just a space to do art, it's a space to meet local artists and get involved with the events, you know we've been volunteers, at cultural festivals and it's just been great on many many levels.



Exhibition openings were especially a space for gatherings of both student and local artists, providing a shared sense of membership.

The original office space which once housed the student studio has now been remoulded into a set of private studio rooms. In response to the sometimes reclusive nature of the first student intake, the studio has been moved to space which is purposefully open. The physical barrier between the students and the rest of the space has been removed. There's no hiding now! This reflexive transformation of space is testament to the fluidity and adaptive nature of TESTT.



10

What we did (Methodology)



‘Doing is designing for these people – not systematic hypotheses, or structures of thought or orderly procedures; but potting-shed hit-and-miss, sorry I blew the roof off but you know how it is darling, craft-work’ (Frayling 1993/1994: 2)

We consider our work to be a kind of ‘Messy ethnography’ (Lewis, Hudson and Painter 2018). We think of our research as embedded, intimate research and committed to social change. Our research is an act of both listening and informing. It is a work of co-production – working with studio-holders, curators, artists and facilitators using a range of triangulated qualitative research methods. These include structured interviews, auto-ethnography, ethnography of spaces, arts-led research, art as research, research as art and as ‘craft-work’ (Frayling 1993/1994).

Between 7/3/18 – 9/5/18 we conducted our ethnographic and qualitative research with TESTT: a gallery and studio Space in central Durham.

Interviewed 11 studio holders

Interviewed Nick and Carlo

Interviewed Lily Arnold

Interviewed K.B.
(Year 10 School Student)

Received 5 questionnaires from
student studio holders

Received 2 questionnaires from
producers/curators

11

**What we want
to understand
(Aims)**



We want to understand the 'social impacts' of the social, artistic, curatorial nature of TESTT.

We want to understand the internal interactions and the external interactions of TESTT.

We want to uncover the materiality of TESTT and the affordances of its Space.

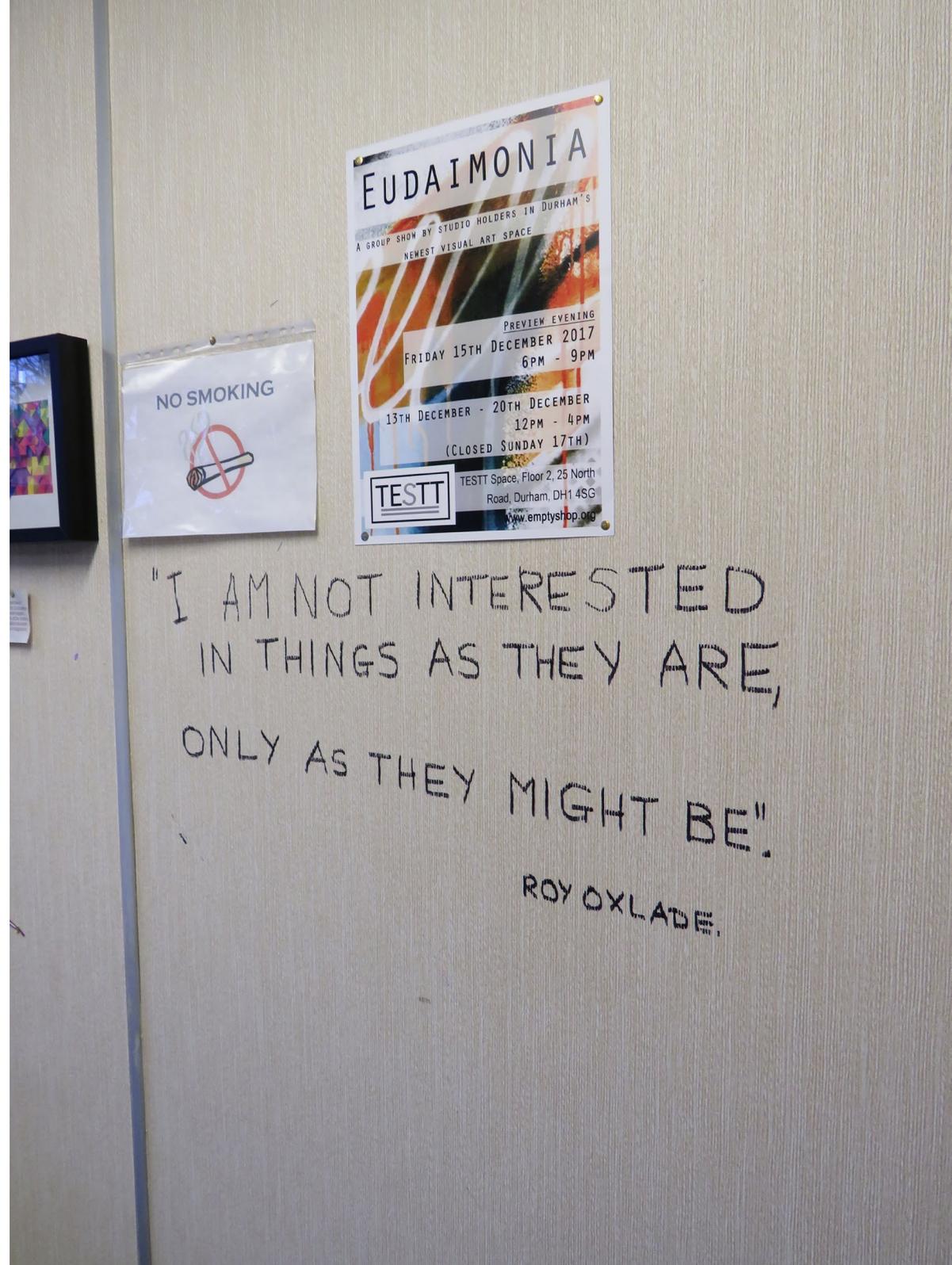
We want to help ES re-envision all the potential futures of the unique TESTT Space and model and offer a new case for support for future iterations of the studios and gallery.

We want to delineate what an archive of TESTT would be in terms of its social memory in the community and document its utopian and experimental spaces, offering a kind of 'rescue' archaeology before it disappears.

We want to help validate the necessity of contemporary artistic and curatorial practice to Durham City and the region beyond.

12

Recommendations



Respondents recommended that the Space grow and that the TESTT model achieve greater momentum. There was a sense that, through modesty, the Space and its potential was underplayed. The developing public profile of the Space was necessary. This meant for some an increase in the number of studios and an increased use of the studios by the holders. As one respondent noted: the 'Space feels a bit empty sometimes'. One noted the 'critical mass' of the TESTT Space and model and indicated ways in which it could be built upon.

There was a sense that the strength of TESTT was its fluidity and its nature as a multi-purpose Space including gallery and studio spaces. This fluidity needed to be maintained but there was further scope for an artist's library and potentially an archive space which acted as the enduring memory of the TESTT model (this could also be web-based). There was a notion of rethinking the communal spaces and rather than use the kitchen have a dedicated place of interaction for conversation and collaboration. These spaces often emerge organically but there is reason to think more about this.

Access was perceived as a source of pressure and difficulty. Access to the building is not inclusive and is restrictive in terms of both the scale of work and the sense of visitation. Artists wanted a 'show' in the space at all times: a persisting and rolling curatorial model. This presents issues around the 'fourth wall' of the building because for all intents and purposes the gallery/studios are invisible except at exhibition openings. This means a programme of invigilation and rethinking and revisioning the issue of visibility of TESTT from the perspective of the street and the community. The restriction of visibility and visitation is a major problem in this iteration of TESTT.

The artists have been profiled well but this could be increased both online and in physical presence. This could develop from a new student-led and volunteer-led programme of open studios and events and thinking about the use of TESTT as a civic space of interaction, exhibition and visitation: breaking the 'fourth wall' of the gallery (which in most other galleries is a window – here it is not visible at all). This might be aided by new versions of social media and a mail list and there are good models of this in our sector. Reaching people physically and technologically builds audiences but it also builds coalitions and co-productions between TESTT and other individuals and organisations.

There was a will to develop a more workshop-based model of programming within the fabric of the building. This might include internal workshops for artists (skill sharing on funding, how to do applications, exhibition proposals, talk about practice) or initiating workshops with the community and specific partners. We should aim to bring people into Dark room and 'making' workshops. This might include forging clearer and more sustained links with regional artist networks and thinking about different

models for organisational development. It also entails rethinking where you are in the physical and cultural geography of the region (including Sunderland as one artist noted). Also noted is the potential, in terms of arts education, to continue to inform practice with strong links to schools and colleges such as Durham 6th form.

There is a huge amount of support for ES and the TESTT model. One respondent said that there is a need and a want for a strong regional propulsion of TESTT – TESTT 'has form'. At the same time the fluidity of the DIY model is one of the best things about the project and wider organisation and the integrity of this must be protected.

The gallery and studio spaces continue to evolve and some spaces have been turned into more accessible studios. The Empty Shop HQ has now closed and work is now refocused on TESTT Space itself as a site of cultural governance and regeneration. ES will also be involved in thinking about the wider applicability of their model throughout the region in consultancy and a much more mobile notion of TESTT and its legacy and archive.



13. References

- Cotterill, S., Hudson, M., Lloyd, K., Outterside, J., Peterson, J., Coburn, J., Thomas, U., Tiplady, L., Robinson, P. and Heslop, P. (2016) 'Co-curate: Working with Schools and Communities to Add Value to Open Collections', *Journal of Interactive Media in Education*, X(X): X: 1-9, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/jime.414>.
- Crawshaw, J., Rowe, F. and Hudson, M.(2015) 'Translations in Practice: the multiple roles of the researcher in arts-based knowledge exchange', *Journal of Arts and Communities*, 7(1): 101-115.
- Frayling, C.(1993/1994) 'Research in Art and Design,' *Royal College of Art Research Papers*, 1(1): 1-5.
- Hudson, M., Cotterill, S. and Webster, G.(2015) Notes on Co-production: Experimental methods and spaces in the Humanities, Co-Curate North East/AHRC at https://co-curate.ncl.ac.uk/uploads/Notes_on_Co-production_Hudson_et_al.pdf.
- Ingold, T. (2016) 'Lighting up the atmosphere', in Bille, M. and Sorensen, T.F. (Eds) *Elements of architecture: Assembling archaeology, atmosphere and the performance of building spaces*, *Archaeological Orientations*, London: Routledge, 163-176.
- Jacobsen, H.H., Drake, M.S. and Petersen, A.(Eds)(2014) *Imaginative Methodologies in the Social Sciences: Creativity, Poetics and Rhetoric in Social Research*, London: Routledge.
- Law, J.(2004) *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research*, London: Routledge.
- Law, J. (2007) 'Making a Mess with Method', in Outhwaite, W. and Turner, S.P. (Eds) *The Sage Handbook of Social Science Methodology*, London: Sage, 595-606.
- Law, J. (2009) 'Assembling the World by Survey: Performativity and Politics', *Cultural Sociology*, 3(2):239-256.
- Law, J. (2007) 'Pinboards and Books: Learning, Materiality and Juxtaposition', in Kritt, D. and Winegar, L.T. (Eds) *Education and Technology: Critical Perspectives, Possible Futures*, Lanham: Maryland, 125-150.
- Lewis, S., Hudson, M. and Painter, J.(2017) 'Revealing a 'Hidden Civil War': A serendipitous methodology', *The Twelfth International Ethnography Symposium 2017: Politics and Ethnography in an Age of Uncertainty*, 31st August-1st September, University of Manchester.
- Lewis, S., Hudson, M. and Painter, J.(2018) 'Revealing a 'Hidden Civil War': A serendipitous methodology', in Plows, A.J.(Ed.) *Messy Ethnographies in Action*, Wilmington: Vernon Press, 13-23.
- Lewis, S. and Russell, A.(2011) 'Being Embedded: A way forward for ethnographic research', *Ethnography*, 12:398-416.
- McGregor, M.Y.(2018) *Encounter 2018: Exploring the Encounter of Human Agency with Nature*, Durham: Ustinov College.
- Rancière, J.(2010) *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steven Corcoran, London: Continuum.
- The Palatinate (2017) 'Carlo Vigiliansi and Nick Malyan: the brains behind Empty Shop', Retrieved from <https://www.palatinat.org.uk/carlo-vigiliansi-and-nick-malyan-the-brains-behind-empty-shop/>
- Van Heur, B. (2009) 'Imagining the Spatialities of music production: The co-constitution of creative clusters and networks', in Edensor, T. et al (Eds) *Spaces of Vernacular Creativity: Rethinking the Cultural Economy*, Taylor and Francis: Ebook, 106-115.

TESTT: Experimenting, Inspiring, Changing // emptyshop.org // testtculture.wordpress.com

Twitter:
[@EmptyShop](https://twitter.com/EmptyShop)
[@testspace](https://twitter.com/testspace)

Instagram:
[@emptyshop](https://www.instagram.com/emptyshop)