

British Art Show 9

Pauline de Souza

‘British Art Show 9’, various venues in Aberdeen (10 July – 10 October 2021), Wolverhampton (22 January – 10 April 2022), Manchester (27 May – 4 September) and Plymouth (8 October – 23 December 2022)

Normally the British Art Show takes place every five years but Covid-19 put an end to this pattern. Yet this was not the only situation that caused disruption to this well-established exhibition. Other unforeseen problems also occurred, adding to the complex mounting of British Art Show 9 (BAS9) around the United Kingdom. In this ninth edition, Aberdeen, Wolverhampton, Manchester and Plymouth became the host cities for this major exhibition that consisted of work by forty-seven artists produced between 2015–2022.¹ A new approach to BAS9 was proposed by the curators, Irene Aristizábal and Hammad Nasar. Instead of all the artists showing work in every city, each city would have a revised iteration and a new commission supported by the Art Fund. Previously, each host city would show all the same artworks that had been selected for the British Art Show tour.

BAS9 did not follow the usual thematic directive that results in a blockbuster exhibition. What we were presented with was a series of research topics (‘healing’, ‘care and reparative history’, ‘tactics for togetherness’ and ‘imagining new futures’), that had been formulated during studio visits and in talks with curators and various organisations in the host cities. The curators also decided to give more authority in the decision-making progress to Hayward Gallery Touring’s assistant curators. Giving them more involvement extended the curators’ commitment to politics, identity and agency that formed the foundation of the research topics. This was confirmed in an interview with the two assistant curators, Antonia Shaw and Charlotte Baker: ‘We have been integral to the project, feeding into every aspect of the exhibition, from attending many of the 230 studio visits, to the artist selection, refining the curatorial framework, contributing to the catalogue and interpretation and devising

¹ The artists in the *British Art Show 9* were Hurvin Anderson, Michael Armitage, Simeon Barclay, Oliver Beer, Zach Blas, Kathrin Bohm, Maeve Brennan, James Bridle, Helen Cammock, Than Hussein Clark, Cooking Sections, Jamie Crew, Oona Docherty, Sean Edwards, Mandy El-Sayegh, Mark Essen, Gaika, Beatrice Gibson, Andy Holden, Joey Holder, Marguerite Humeau, Lawrence Lek, Ghislaine Leung, Paul Maheke, Elaine Mitchner, Oscar Murillo, Grace Ndiritu, Uriel Orlow, Hardeep Pandhal, Hetain Patel, Florence Peake, Heather Phillipson, Joanna Piotrowska, Abigail Reynolds, Margaret Salmon, Hrair Sarkissian, Katie Schwab, Tai Shani, Marianna Simnett, Victoria Sin, Hanna Tuulikki, Caroline Walker, Alberta Whittle and Rehana Zaman

exhibition layouts.² Assistant curators have not previously written for British Art Show catalogues, and both Shaw's and Baker's voices were intermingled with Aristizábal's and Nasar's in 'Field Notes' in the BAS9 catalogue.³

At the first press conference in Aberdeen, Nasar stated that each city was to be allocated a particular framework. Aberdeen was to focus on care, nature and the development of alternative earth/economic systems to cohabit with nature and the human presence. Wolverhampton had 'living with difference'; Manchester was meant to look at the social contract and the industrial city and be thinking about technology; while Plymouth had 'care', 'healing and reparative history' that would incorporate issues of migration of bodies, plants, ideas and other objects. The BAS9 website was produced to act as an online fifth platform.⁴ It was possible for some artworks to be slotted into sections in different cities, along with newly commissioned work for the individual cities.

So, with the background scene set, and after visiting all the cities involved in BAS9, including attending three press conferences, I decided to approach this review in a different way. I am not going to start with the first showing of BAS9 in Aberdeen or with the last showing in Plymouth. Instead, I want to start with Wolverhampton, because this is where some of the problems started. The first was the workload for the assistant curators, who had to deal with the new commissions and the first iteration of BAS9. By the time it arrived in Wolverhampton in January 2022 after it had closed in Aberdeen in October 2021, the two assistant curators were both leaving for new positions and this was to be their last project for Hayward Gallery Touring. In an interview with them in September 2021, they had stated: 'Space is allowed for partners, artists, curators and all members of our Hayward Gallery Touring team to not only express their opinions and ideas, but ensure ideas are listened to'.⁵ Yet, it is apparent that the complications of storing and transporting artworks, working with additional artists for different showings and maintaining the BAS9 website were not taken fully into consideration.

Lawrence Lek's dynamic film *Aidol* (2019) picks up on the problems of not listening. Diva, a fading superstar, fails to heed the warnings of her new artificial intelligence songwriter. Diva is exposed to the fickleness of fans who listen to her music, but who are only half listening as they seek out the next best thing they can worship. This was one of the most impressive films in BAS9. The use of the game engine software Unity combined with its 3D rendering programme, and then the motion-capturing cameras incorporating fighting figures into the film, demonstrates the skill of the artist who understands their craft. The use of colour and a musical score written by Lek, along with the other processes of the film, completely draws the

² Charlotte Baker and Antonia Shaw, in an interview with the author, 15 September 2021

³ See Irene Aristizábal, Charlotte Baker, Hammad Nasar and Antonia Shaw, 'Field Notes', in the *British Art Show 9* catalogue, Hayward Gallery Publishing, 2021

⁴ Hammad Nasar, speaking at the British Art Show 9 press conference in Aberdeen in 2021

⁵ Charlotte Baker and Antonia Shaw, in an interview with the author, 15 September 2021

viewer into this world where fame and capitalism are discretely revealed in a negative light. The installation of this work in Aberdeen was exceptional. The construction of geometric triangular shapes extending from the walls and tonal lighting echoed the black and white numerical coding that appears in the film. Fortunately, *Aidol* was installed in the same manner in Wolverhampton. The work highlights the fear of artificial intelligence systems replacing human labour; it engages with the development of economic technological growth and its relationship to capitalism as ‘Bios’ fight with ‘Synths’ at the eSports Olympics sponsored by the Farsight Corporation, who have replaced all political regimes to become a controlling force in the universe. But resistance is key, and artificial intelligence and humans create underground networks to challenge Farsight systems, both aspiring to knowledge and beauty to rethink what life could be. The installation in both Aberdeen and in Wolverhampton prompted the viewer to identify with the idea of underground resistance. The relationship between ‘Bios’ and ‘Synths’ could develop into a unified comprehension of existence.



Paul Maheke, *We took a Sip from the Devil's Cup*, 2020, installation view (left), British Art Show 9, Aberdeen Art Gallery, with the work of Hetain Patel on the right, photo courtesy of Mike Davidson

Paul Maheke's *We took a Sip from the Devil's Cup* (2020) is inspired by the *Xenogenesis* trilogy of science fiction novels by Octavia E Butler. Moving away from the physical presence of a body, the Ooloi, third gender aliens, leave traces of existence on long black cloths hanging from the ceiling. In front of these black cloths are handblown glass lamps that are meant to hold ancestral memory. Maheke's use of bleach on the black cloths, influenced by the tasseography method, produced an eerie feeling hung as they were one after another at slight angles in the Aberdeen venue. The curatorial plan for this work was also used in Wolverhampton, and it created the same impact, but placing this work next to the paintings

of Hurvin Anderson meant that Anderson's colourful paintings jarred with Maheke's black cloth. Even Anderson's monochrome black, grey and white painting *Comb-thru* (2017) did not work well in the same room as Maheke's work. Anderson's paintings do not have a natural dialogue with Maheke's work, but it could be seen how they were made to fit with the different framework selected for the Wolverhampton iteration. Anderson's *Is it Okay to be Black?* (2016) displays his Jamaican heritage; important historical black figures interact with modernist forms of abstract painting.

Anderson's paintings were shown at The Box in Plymouth for BAS9. In this iteration the paintings were placed between Andy Holden's *Cat-tharsis* (2016–2022) and Marguerite Humeau's *Venus of Frasassi, A 10-year-old female human has ingested a rabbit's brain* (2018). Such a juxtaposition struck this writer as very strange. Humeau's work is weak, but her work can also be connected to Octavia E Butler's science fiction novels. Placed on the floor sideways to Anderson's paintings, it was easy to miss. I am assuming the positioning of the artworks by these three artists was in order to highlight the 'power of the object', but if that is the case it is a tenuous connection. Humeau's work explores shamanistic transcendental possibilities and Holden's tells us the story of his grandmother's collection of ceramic cats that she bequeathed to him. She did not own a cat and might have disliked her collection, and, indeed, disliked real cats. The objects in Anderson's painting are associated with migration. The positioning could equally be an aesthetic one. The whiteness of Humeau's sculpture was placed next to Anderson's monochrome painting *Is it Okay to be Black?*, with its primary use of blue speaking to the blue, black, blue-red and multi-coloured cats placed in a vitrine. Regrettably, this aesthetic approach was not strong enough to justify the placement of the artworks and Holden's lecture about the cat collection could only be heard on headphones, which fragmented his work. The use of headphones is understood; it was a large gallery space with some unremarkable 2016 prints by Michael Armitage, except for the painting *Wayaki Way Wet Nurse* (2016) opposite Holden's work, but in Manchester the sound piece did not work and it was too quiet for comprehending the connection between the pieces.

There seemed to be a continuous misplacement of artworks in Plymouth caused by forcing artworks to fit within the designated research topics. Katie Schwab's *Small Wares* (2021) hung from the Levinsky Gallery ceiling next to Abigail Reynolds's *When Words Are Forgotten* (2018); next to Reynolds's work was a dark installation for Gaika's *Žemel* (2022) and Grace Ndiritu's *Community Cactus* (2020–2021), which was shoved against the wall. Behind Katie Schwab's work was Sean Edwards's text wall painting *Undo Things Done* (2019–2022). Ndiritu's, Schwab's, Reynolds's, Edwards's and Gaika's works were all placed together, presumably because of their connection with community and words. Reynolds's works set out to reveal the problems if knowledge is lost through the disappearance of libraries, a work influenced by a journey she made on the Silk Road. The transparency of the glass is meant to reflect how books affect our understanding of the world and the fragility of books. Edwards's work is a fragmented poem that survived from his *Undo Things Done* Venice Biennale 2019 installation

that was destroyed by the Venice floods. Schwab's art practice focuses on collaborative craft projects that push the importance of women, labour and their design skills. Ndiritu's work engages with collaborative community healing, and Gaika's work is a personal tribute to his uncle who was stabbed, suggesting black heroism and a collective understanding of physical, mental and metaphysical space. So, we have collective healing by making, and the presence and absence of language, where reparative histories define different spaces. Yet, again, there was no natural relationship between the works in the gallery space. Schwab's work cut off the connection between Reynolds's and Edwards's. Schwab's work looked like washed-out fabric hanging next to Ndiritu's, which required people to interact with it – difficult to do when it was placed very close to the wall to make space for Gaika's installation. In Wolverhampton, Reynolds's, Ndiritu's and Gaika's works were given more space, allowing for more engagement. Ndiritu and Gaika were shown in the Wolverhampton Art Gallery, while Reynolds was located in the Wolverhampton Art School. Sean Edwards's work was shown at Home in Manchester.

Ndiritu's ongoing fashion project *COVERSLUT*© was shown at the Castlefield Gallery in Manchester. Following the social contract and industrial city premise for BAS9's presence in Manchester, this project looked at ethical fashion and class warfare. Ndiritu is committed to creating clothing that everyone can afford by paying what they can for each item. One t-shirt saying 'black cock' was placed over a mannequin located in the front window of the gallery. As the gallery's window is public facing, there were some complaints about the use of this phrase – which resulted in email discussions between the Hayward, Castlefield Gallery and Ndiritu about finding a solution to the complaint, and addressing the Castlefield Gallery's concerns about being sued under the Public Decency Order of 1986. This resulted in a compromise, and a bag made by Ndiritu was placed over the mannequin in order to cover the words 'black cock'. The situation was complicated, because Ndiritu's use of double entendre intended to challenge neo-capitalism in the fashion industry, and the bag diminished her use of the provocative phrase. It seems that we are simultaneously living in era where there is a climate of fear of free speech, embodied in the notion of 'cancel culture'.⁶

This was not the only problem for the Manchester showing. Before BAS9 arrived there, artists had pulled out of the exhibition in protest at the treatment of Alistair Hudson, the director of the Whitworth and Manchester City Art Gallery, by the University of Manchester.⁷ It is not known how many artists were originally intended to show in

⁶ Interview with Grace Ndiritu at Manchester Art Gallery in 2022

⁷ Alistair Hudson, the Director of the Whitworth and Manchester Art Gallery in Manchester, was asked to step down by his employers, the University of Manchester, after complaints from the organisation UK Lawyers for Israel (UKLFI) about statements in the Whitworth's showing of Forensic Architecture's *Cloud Studies* project. UKLFI claimed the installation contained a statement in solidarity with Palestine, and that the university may have breached its public sector equality duties by not considering the 'impact of the inflammatory language and representations' on Jewish people in Manchester. The work was removed but later reinstated, and Hudson was reinstated in his position. See Maya Wolfe-Robinson, 'Whitworth gallery director forced out over Palestinian statement', *The Guardian*, 22 February 2022, www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2022/feb/22/whitworth-gallery-director-alistair-hudson-forced-out-over-



Grace Ndiritu, *COVERSLUT*©, 2022, presentation as the artist intended (left) and the modified presentation (right) in the Castlefield Gallery, Manchester, for British Art Show 9, courtesy of the artist

Manchester, yet the intricate communication between artists to pull out created tension and misunderstanding and resulted in only nineteen artists showing their work. Did this reduce the impact of BAS9 in the city? It is difficult to say. The artists whose work was there had more space, and the potential curatorial positioning of works by those artists who had pulled out is not known. Patrick Goddard's new film *Animal Antics* (2021) had first been shown at Aberdeen Art Gallery, then placed at Home in Manchester. Fitting into the research framework for both Aberdeen and Manchester, the film looks at the relationship between a foul-mouthed talking dog, its owner and animals in the zoo, focusing on our relationship with the natural world. The film successfully looks at our absurdist understanding of the Anthropocene.

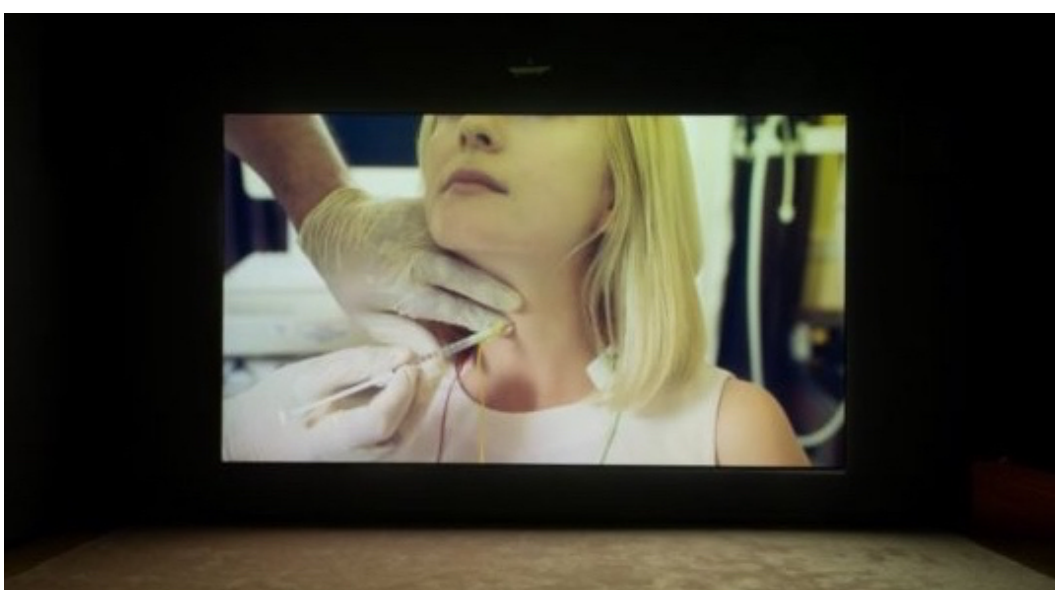
Only two pieces of Simeon Barclay's *Precariously Perched on the Edifice of Ruins* installation (2020–2022) were shown at Manchester City Art Gallery. This work is most powerful as a complete installation, as when it was shown for BAS9 at Aberdeen Art Gallery. The work integrates Rodin's *The Age of Bronze* male statue as caged remnants of neon outlines and painted figures, combining copies of the sculpture that exist in galleries elsewhere in the United Kingdom with club culture in Huddersfield and surrounding areas in the north of England. These works are placed above wooden cabinets acting as plinths, but also as furniture that would house museum objects. The posture of the male figure enables him to be

[palestinian-statement](#) and 'Artists pull out of British Art Show 9 due to tour to Manchester in May', *ArtReview*, 25 February 2022 www.artreview.com/artists-pull-out-of-british-art-show-9-due-to-tour-to-manchester-in-may



Patrick Goddard, film still from *Animal Antics*, 2021, 38 mins, courtesy of the artist

looked at and desired by all genders within club culture. Speakers were placed within the cabinets, omitting a low sound. Marianna Simnett's fascinating but uncomfortable film *The Needle and the Larynx* (2016), shown at Aberdeen and Wolverhampton, plays with the idea of male identity. In the film a woman has male hormones injected into her voice box to make her voice become deeper like a man's. As we watch the needle go in, the doctor explains each step and a voiceover talks about the curiosity of wanting a deeper voice, which derives from a childhood trauma. Jamie Crewe's film *Ashley* (2020), shown at Aberdeen, explores identity and desire. Ashley, who is transgender, escapes to the countryside to explore the sexual abuse, or sexual desire, they have encountered with a straight male. The landscape acts as comfort but also as danger, as the male figure seems to haunt the cottage where Ashley is staying.



Marianna Simnett, *The Needle and the Larynx*, 2016, 15'17", digital HD video with surround sound, installation view, courtesy of the artist and the Arts Council Collection

Elaine Mitchener's *Names 11 (an evocation)* (2019–2021) deals with trauma. The work consisted of stained-glass windows, surrounded by dark green walls, that were difficult to see due to the installation's lighting. Access was not allowed into the space itself, where the names of African slaves and how much they cost were recited from speakers. Mitchener, using Walter Benjamin's philosophical concept, *eingedenken*, whereby memory becomes an act of responsibility, aimed to create a space of liberation and healing. Unfortunately, limited access to the installation and the difficulty of seeing the detail of the stained-glass windows did not create a liberating or healing space. When the work was shown at St Luke's Church in Plymouth the public did have access to the space, but this did not make any difference to the work. It still appeared lackadaisical, especially when placed under the permanent stained-glass window designed by the Portuguese artist Leonor Antunes in 2018. However, enslaved people as objects and the reference to migration fitted well into the research framework for the Plymouth iteration of BAS9.

The concept of healing is manifested in Alberta Whittle's interesting new film *What is a better life (exorcised in the middle)* (2022), commissioned for BAS9 and shown in The Box in Plymouth. The film is constructed as short narratives, and working closing with the curator Nicoletta Lambertucci, Whittle engages with slavery, colonialism and migration by reflecting on the 400th anniversary of the voyage of the Mayflower, topics that the artist has explored in previous works. Working for the first time with designers to create an installation space to host the film, the space was covered in denim, inspired by nautical histories and repair work. Whittle wanted to include objects from The Box's own collection, and in two large vitrines were glass objects rescued from a sunken ship. I am not sure if the vitrines were needed as part of the installation, they could easily be overlooked as they stood against the shadowy walls. The installation was actually in a corridor space that acted as a bridge to connect the two main galleries that were used for BAS9.

Beatrice Gibson's new film *Dreaming Alcestis* (2022) had its first showing in Plymouth and attempts to lead people to the possibility of a better life. *Alcestis*, in the play by Euripides, is a female character willing to die so that her husband, King Admetus, remains alive in order to look after their children. Previously, the Fates had allowed him to live longer than the allocated time of his death. When his time to die arrives, he needs to seek someone who will replace him. His parents refuse, so he turns to his wife. Alcestis never speaks in the play, and at the beginning she is close to death. Gibson's film is significant because it starts by questioning why Euripides kept her silent. Gibson sees Alcestis as a hologram, someone who is apparently solid but not actually real. Globally, now, women are still questioning their enforced silence. Alcestis could be the female figure riding the motorbike at the beginning of the film. Later we see Gibson and her partner sleeping, after Gibson has entered the home with her two daughters. It is not clear if Gibson or her partner are dreaming the female figure on the motorbike or vice versa; the film is made in non-linear sequences to create this

uncertainty. The soundtrack for the film is important because in Euripides's play the chorus are unsure if they should be singing funeral rites for Alcestis since there is no evidence of her death; they perform the lyrical ode where they sing the song of silence about this lack of evidence. The soundtrack of the film is the lyrical ode, but instead of words we have drumming, the sound of the motorbike and mechanical humming, which follows the two paired stanzas of strophe and antistrophe used by the chorus in Euripides's play. Shot in Palermo, which is probably the most multi-ethnic city in Italy and where Gibson lives,⁸ and a region close to North Africa from where migration has been occurring in large numbers, this film could be a warning about the effects of war and corruption and of our responsibility to humanity.

Despite the fact that the BAS9 website was created to act as a fifth gallery site, it was not an online gallery space for the touring programme. Instead, it functioned as a resource tool. The online works had limited time frames before they were removed, making way for other works. It is unfortunate that this decision was made; it would have been useful to keep all the online works on the site to allow users to see works they could not see in the host cities. BAS9 allowed other voices to be heard, but the need for the British Art Show could be questioned, especially in Scotland where the discussion about Scottish independence continues and the existence of Brexit seems to endorse the 'Britishness' of the British Art Show. However, there are some artists in this exhibition who live in more than one country, which does expand the idea of 'Britishness'.

The British Art Show touring to four different cities raises the question 'In what way does the Hayward Gallery Touring British Art Show structure relate to new models of touring for museums and galleries in the United Kingdom?' The British Art Show does partially relate to recent discussions about touring models. In 2004 The Touring Exhibition Group's report 'Mapping the Touring Landscape: A Research Report into the State of the Exhibition Touring Sector' promoted a split venue touring model where an exhibition can be shown simultaneously in several sites in one town or city rather than consecutively, 'for example Hayward Gallery's *British Art Show 6*'.⁹ The aim was to allow smaller venues to be supported by larger organisations, to develop and strengthen professional staff networks, attract further funding and increase audiences. This is something the British Art Show has continued to do. This report was followed by a second, titled 'How to Create and Collaborate: Generating Exhibition Ideas Symposium' in March 2018 and organised by Hayward Gallery Touring, the Touring Exhibition Group and the Art Fund. Focusing on developing networking opportunities for emerging curators in regional galleries and museums, discussions about new ways to make exhibitions and to animate collections with contemporary exhibitions was

⁸ Online interview with Beatrice Gibson, November 2022

⁹ 'Chapter 5.0: Creating New Models For Touring', *Mapping the Touring Landscape: A Research Report into the State of the Exhibition Touring Sector*, Esmée Foundation, 2004, p 11

paramount.¹⁰ After Covid-19, the focus of touring exhibitions has shifted to ‘place making’. The idea of ‘place making’ is meant to be a participatory process for shaping public spaces that harnesses the ideas and assets of the people who use them by maximizing shared values.¹¹

For BAS9, Hayward Gallery Touring utilised the aims of the 2018 symposium and the ideas of ‘place making’ by working directly with the host cities to decide on the curators for BAS9. When selected, Nasar and Aristizábal shared their vision of how the exhibition could connect with both local contexts and global issues. These were the research topics I referred to earlier. Yet, in Aberdeen, Wolverhampton and Manchester this was not enough. BEYOND BAS9 in Aberdeen was a programme created by art collectives, contemporary art organisations, curators and artists to produce networks in the northeast of Scotland. Offsite9 in Wolverhampton was a project managed by the Creative Black Country, a consortium of One Walsall, Sandwell Council of Voluntary Organisations, Wolverhampton Voluntary sector Council and Dudley Council for Voluntary Service, Multistory, Black Country Touring and the Black Country Living Museum. The project highlighted the creative and cultural ecology in the West Midlands. EAT MANCHESTER ARTISTS produced ‘A Modest Show’, a three-month programme highlighting Greater Manchester’s arts ecology. The Hayward Gallery Touring British Art Show structure should be part of existing touring models and alternative touring models should be able to exist at any time without the dependence on the British Art showing coming to their town or city.

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¹⁰ See ‘How to Create and Collaborate: Generating Exhibition Ideas Symposium’, March 2018, www.museumdevelopmentyorkshire.org.uk/event/how-to-create-and-collaborate-generating-exhibition-ideas-symposium

¹¹ For ideas about ‘place making’, see ‘Arts and Place Shaping: Evidence Review’, a report by Wavehill Social and Economic Research, May 2020, www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/placemaking%20wavehill.pdf; and ‘Reimagining where we live: cultural placemaking and the levelling up agenda’, written evidence submitted by CVAN (Contemporary Visual Arts Network) to the DCMS Select Committee’s enquiry into cultural placemaking and the levelling up agenda, February 2020, <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/106264/pdf/>