

Social Housing in Performance







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Social Housing in Performance

The English Council Estate on and off Stage

Katie Beswick

Series Editors
Enoch Brater and Mark Taylor-Batty



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For my drama teachers at Plumstead Manor School, Norma Prior and Shirley Sewell, and for all the arts educators who change our lives.













Contents

Ac	knowledgements	ix
Th	ree places: A preface	xi
Int	roduction: The council estate, definitions and parameters	1
	The council estate and the crisis of social housing	5
	Council estate performance: A taxonomy	18
	Why spatiality? Methodology and theoretical frameworks	20
1	Quotidian performance of the council estate	27
	Karen Matthews: Deviant motherhood on the white	
	working-class estate	39
	Cheryl Cole: Working-class pride, escape from the estate and	
	middle-class identity making	49
	Mark Duggan: Race, black masculinity and resistance on the	
	council estate as hood	58
	The role of artistic performance practice?	69
2	Class and the council estate in mainstream theatre	71
	Rita, Sue and Bob Too/A State Affair: Andrea Dunbar and the	
	'authentic voice'	81
	Port: Working-class exceptionality and the estate as ruin	93
	DenMarked: Beyond realism – hip-hop, the hood and council	
	estate rage	103
	Dominant, residual emergent	112
3	Located on the estate	115
	SLICK: Art and redevelopment, making sense of unresolved	
	tensions	124
	Seizure: The generic estate, empty buildings and timeless beauty	133
	'The Wedding to the Bread': Tricky politics, resident	
	engagement and inauthentic ritual	142
	Critical ambivalence	150





viii Contents

4	Resident artists	153
	Jordan McKenzie's Monsieur Poo-Pourri films: Subversive	
	humour, art theory and the politics of the everyday	160
	Fugitive Images' Estate: A Reverie: Home unmaking,	
	gentrification and yearning on an east London council estate	168
	Jane English's 20b: Demolished estates, domicide and revenge	
	nostalgia	174
	Institutions, the Arts Council and the impossibility of 'grass-roots' $$	180
Cor	Conclusion: Three thoughts	
Not	Notes	
Ref	References	
nd	ndex	











4

Resident artists

I came to realize how easy it is to be seduced by this dominating story; to conflate, without any available evidence to the contrary, these perceived experiences with lived ones and assume tenants have been clamouring to escape.¹

(Roberts 2018: 129)

I mark a theatrical intervention on my own performativity rather than allow the fetishization of my home by someone else. Understanding the currency of representation, this becomes a political point for me \dots On this occasion I become a participant in the staging of my own politics.²

(McCarthy 2010)

We are here.

(Fugitive Images 2015)

The music video for Skepta's MOBO award-winning grime single 'Shutdown' (2015) is set in the concrete courtyard of the iconic Barbican estate, a brutalist development in the City of London. In the context of the video, the Barbican's buildings evoke the aesthetic of an inner-city council estate. Flanked by an army of his baseball-cap-wearing peers, smoking and tapping at mobile phones, on 'Shutdown' Skepta celebrates the spirit of community and resistance that exists in Britain's urban working-class communities. Unlike many of the brutalist estates in London, the Barbican was not built as social housing and, as house prices in inner London have soared, it has become known for housing 'stockbrokers and intellectuals ... [in] an atmosphere of ease and comfort' (Hatherley 2008: 34). It is part of the Barbican complex that includes the Barbican Centre for performing







arts and is adjacent to the Museum of London and the Guildhall School of Music and Drama: elite art institutions that are often (as discussed earlier in this book) understood as inaccessible to the working classes. In this way 'Shutdown' offers a quite complex spatial critique, where the Barbican stands in for the council estate, but, at the same time, is not a council estate, troubling understandings of brutalist estates as hot-houses for crime and violence.

In the run-up to the 2017 general election, Skepta's video was sampled by performance artist Mark McGowan, the 'Artist Taxi Driver'. In his video 'Theresa May's Tory Magic Money Tree', McGowan attacks the austerity measures that have eroded access to public services and cultural institutions ('Your community centre, shut down / Your library, shut down'). By using sections of the 'Shutdown' video, McGowan further emphasizes the critique the original video offers, drawing attention to the sharp divide between life for those living on the Barbican and life for those on council estates whose communities are being literally 'shut down'.³

In another example of grime music offering a critique of dominant estate narratives, at the 2018 Brit Awards, the artist Stomzy called on the Grenfell tower tragedy to deliver a searing message to Prime Minister Theresa May:

Yo, Theresa May where's the money for Grenfell?
What you thought we just forgot about Grenfell?
You criminals, and you got the cheek to call us savages
You should do some jail time, you should pay some damages
We should burn your house down and see if you can manage this
MPs sniff coke we just smoke a bit of cannabis

(Guardian News 2018)

Standing in front of a looming three-tiered structure, in which people dressed in balaclavas sat at regular intervals along each tier, Stormzy opposed the negative stigma associated with council estate residency. He celebrated black British culture and blamed the government, politicians and the media for portraying estate residents as 'savages' while leaving survivors of the Grenfell fire to fend for themselves, despite the millions of pounds of public donations made to assist survivors in the wake of the disaster. As Stephen Crossley (2017) details, words such as 'savage' have a long history in describing the poor working classes and are intimately bound up with the colonial project the British Empire conducted across the globe. Crossley traces the way that racially loaded language used to describe and exoticize those residing in 'the far flung corners of the British Empire' came to be used in the project of







'domestic colonisation' (2017: 17) to describe the conditions of the working poor living in Britain, who were also subject to exploitative practices carried out by the state. Stormzy's summoning of this word connects the racial and class injustices that resulted in the Grenfell disaster (see Hanley 2017b).

Meanwhile, in the recording of the live performance, as the camera pulls back, the structure behind Stormzy resembles the silhouette of an archetypal brutalist estate (presumably this perspective was obvious to the live audience throughout the performance). This effect brings the estate space to the stage in a defiant show of strength, where the threatening estate building, with its balaclava-clad inhabitants, seems to reinforce Stormzy's power: turning the 'threat' of the estate back on the government.

I draw attention to these examples of grime music because this chapter is focussed on the voices of estate residents, and grime (a UK development of hip-hop that also has influences in garage, ragga and jungle music) is a very visible form through which British council estate residents have been able to speak back to dominant estate narratives in the contemporary culture, bringing the voices of those who live on estates to bear on a mainstream discourse that so often overlooks them. I also draw attention to grime because its origins in grass-roots hip-hop culture position it as a very obvious example of what I described in Chapter 1 as an articulation of the global hood, where modes of resistance and survival developed in the marginalized inner cities of North America are appropriated and articulated globally.

As hooks argues, to inhabit the margins is to be located at both a place of oppression and opposition; clinging to the margin can 'nourish one's capacity for resistance' (1990: 150). It is easy to understand the hood, with its association with crime and violence - and its co-option by corporations and media industry - as yet another damaging, stigmatizing conception of the council estate. But, as I mentioned in Chapter 1, I am interested in thinking about how positioning the council estate as part of a global hood allows us to understand ostensibly local, grass-roots work as part of a global network of resistance. Positioning the estate as hood is a means of 'clinging to the margin' and a way of understanding how seemingly local acts can resonate nationally and around the world, drawing attention to the transnational nature of injustices caused by neoliberalism and the way resistance to injustice also resonates transnationally. The global resonances of these local practices are enhanced by the accessible, easy and relatively inexpensive dissemination enabled by social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and Twitter (which also undoubtedly have their own exploitative politics, an articulation of which is beyond the scope of this book). Stormzy's use of the word 'savages' and the wide dissemination of his performance online is one example of how







we might read British hood politics as articulating the 'transnational' nature of injustice in a form that has potential global reach.

Voices from the margin

Amplifying and analysing voices from the margins is both a matter of enriching scholarly and public knowledge about contested places and a matter of survival for those who live in marginalized conditions (Beswick 2016a). David Roberts points out how narratives of council estates that elide resident experience are 'incomplete', enabling 'persistent accusations of [estate's] unsuitability' as homes 'to go unchallenged' (Roberts 2018: 130). This contributes (as we saw in the previous chapter of this book) to the legitimization of regeneration programmes that displace residents, decimate social housing stock and contribute to social cleansing. Nick Couldry (2010), meanwhile, argues that 'there is no short-cut to understanding neoliberalism's consequences for people's daily conditions of voice without listening to the stories people tell us about their lives' (114). Couldry proposes that space is important in the struggle for voice, suggesting that the 'articulation of space' can 'affect the articulation of narrative' (125).

Couldry's emphasis on space resonates with Richardson and Skott-Myhre's assertion that it is works that take place within 'the bounded space of the hood itself' (2012: 19) that have the most potential to resist those dominant, stigmatizing conceptions of marginalized hood spaces. In order to understand how estate residents resist dominant narratives and speak back to power, it is important to think about how work made by artists on the estates where they live feeds into what Richardson and Skott-Myhre call the cultural politics of the hood (see Chapter 1), where resistance might happen because networks of self-production move beyond the dominant discipline of 'the media, the state or the market' (2012: 19).

Residents speak back

The council estate has proven a potent 'bounded' site for performing resistance to the dominant discourse surrounding social housing and the resulting social cleansing of rapidly gentrifying neighbourhoods. The grime examples I mention at the start of this chapter, where the estate is brought to the stage or screen to facilitate a political critique, illustrate one way that the estate site can be used to 'speak back'. Another means of mobilizing estate space is illustrated by on-site campaigns where residents stage resistance







to ongoing regeneration, gentrification and redevelopment projects. For example, the Carpenters estate occupation, part of the Focus E15 campaign launched by a group of young mothers who were served eviction notices from a hostel in Newham, east London, where they were living with their children. The Focus E15 campaigners occupied the disused estate (also in Newham) for a period of just over two weeks during September and October 2014. The occupation, which received significant press attention, highlighted the violence of redevelopment projects that sever people from their homes and local networks. It drew attention to the fact that council housing capable of providing entirely adequate living conditions was left empty so that developers might profit from the site.

When I visited the occupation, I was struck by the way that the campaigners used the space to 'perform' their messages. The estate was altered scenographically, with large handmade banners, adorned with slogans that drew attention to injustices the occupiers were resisting and the violence regeneration projects have visited on those who live in Newham: 'These people need homes, 'it was a lovely community,' social housing not social cleansing.' The building that was under occupation acted as a kind of carefully performed stage too, visitors to the site were shown around the flat where campaigners were living - a well-proportioned family home that retained the cosy interior decoration presumably left over from former residents who had been evicted. We were encouraged to take photographs and share them on social media to draw attention to the habitable conditions of the property. However, when I tried to photograph other flats in the block, which were in poorer condition, I was asked to delete the photographs, which complicated the simple (but nonetheless true) 'these homes are habitable' message the campaigners wished to disseminate. On site, the Focus E15 group were able to maintain a control over the campaign and its messages that might have been difficult elsewhere.

Artists who live on estates also often use estate sites to voice resistance to processes of neoliberal takeover facilitated by regeneration. For example, the academic and artist Lynne McCarthy offered her own artistic response to the 'Market Estate Project' (2010), an initiative in which seventy-five artists were invited to make work on the soon-to-be-demolished Market estate in Islington, north London, where McCarthy was living at the time. In a conference paper documenting her experience of the project, McCarthy described the video-projection installation she had created, shown in her flat. This work documented her domestic life as she prepared to move out from her home. She juxtaposed images of her daily life with a recording of a party scene held by former residents of the property that she had managed to obtain. As McCarthy explains in the quotation at the start of this chapter, the staging of her work was a performative intervention that deliberately







disrupted the politics of space played out by the Market Estate Project, where outsiders were invited to make work about a place where they did not live: this was McCarthy's means of resisting the fetishization of her home.

As these examples illustrate, the use of site can powerfully assist estate residents in asserting their agency and voicing opposition to top-down processes in which they are often powerless to intervene. Although the redevelopment of the Carpenter's estate was not stopped by the Focus E15 campaign, and while McCarthy had to leave her home to make way for the redevelopment of the Market estate, the ability to voice resistance in both these cases importantly draws wider attention to the human costs of regeneration processes – and enables residents to assert some control over the narrative of those processes.

Resistance in the hood: Art and control

Art and creative practices might appear trivial and ultimately futile in the wider context of the housing struggle (and hence are often overlooked in scholarly accounts of council estates), but as Daniel Miller documented in an ethnographic study of a London estate, 'we have to regard apparently trivial activities as deriving from profound concerns' (Miller 1988: 370). As I proposed in the introduction to this book, residents have a profound need to tell their own stories about the spaces where they live. More generally, control over one's life is an important factor in maintaining good physical and mental health - for example, a review of studies into the relationship between work and health concluded that it is those individuals with less control over their jobs, rather than those with more pressurized jobs, who are at increased risk of stress-related heart conditions (see Virtanen et al. 2013). This suggests that it is the level of agency individuals have to exercise control in key areas of their lives which relieves or exacerbates stress - indicating the ways that creative practices staged by residents on estates, who assert displays of control even in spite of their ultimate futility, might be vital for those residents' survival, regardless of any ultimate 'success' in intervening in redevelopment and demolition processes.

In the remainder of this chapter, I offer readings of three estate artworks, made by artists about estates where they have lived: performance and visual artist Jordan McKenzie's *Monsieur Poo-Pourri* series, Fugitive Images' film *Estate: A Reverie* and Jane English's autobiographical solo performance *20b*. These artworks all emerge from the artists' experiences of living on estates in east London, an area that has undergone rapid gentrification since the turn of the twenty-first century, with formerly working-class districts quickly becoming fashionable and expensive cultural 'destinations' targeted by







property developers. Focussing on three works created in this area during and in response to ongoing regeneration offers an insight into the cultural politics that circulate in a particular locale, at a particular historical moment – but resonate beyond. There is an interplay in all these works between the specific circumstances of the places they emerge from and the wider landscape of local, national and global housing crises. I explore the strategies the artists use to disrupt dominant narratives, drawing attention to the ways they opt out of top-down institutional relations and trouble conceptions of the authentic real that run through much estate representation.

Artworks that are brought to estates by outsiders, or brought to outsiders by institutions, as we have seen, can often articulate an ambivalent politics and become complicit in reinforcing dominant ways of knowing estates. Work produced on estates about estates by estate residents is usually directly oppositional in one way or another and although this does not mean the works are not also ambivalent, it is perhaps easier to understand them as resistance and to clearly locate them in a global 'hood' cultural politics.

Below, I have outlined three broad strategies used by resident artists, strategies that articulate a cultural politics of the hood, enabling a 'speaking back' from the bounded estate site. I use these strategies as ways to discuss the works I explore in this chapter. Although I use each strategy to think through a single work, I do not suggest that these strategies do, or can, work in isolation from one another. They are, instead, ways of identifying the resistant qualities of resident-led estate performance and linking them to movements and tactics employed beyond council estate activism. In other words, these strategies are a means of framing and understanding the politics of grass-roots estate artworks in a way that might more clearly link them to a global context. These strategies also resonate with the resistant qualities of works explored elsewhere in this book, such as *DenMarked* and 'The Wedding to the Bread' ceremony.

1. Subversion (Jordan McKenzie)

Subversive practices work deliberately against reductive council estate narratives that circulate in the dominant discourse. They undermine spectator expectations of estates and playfully upend reductive stereotypes of these spaces.

2. Yearning (Fugitive Images)

Resident-led oppositional practices often operate in a register that might be understood as 'yearning': what hooks describes as a 'longing for critical voice', an affective response to oppressive conditions 'that wells in the hearts







and minds of those whom ... narratives have silenced' (1990: 27). Yearning strategies offer deep and deeply thoughtful insights into the everyday life of estates that affords residents a 'critical voice'.

3. Revenge Nostalgia (Jane English)

'Revenge nostalgia' is a term I have adopted from the artist Laura Oldfield Ford. The word 'revenge' emphasizes the emotionally affective political quality of estate artworks, suggesting that nostalgia is not necessarily reductive and can, in fact, offer complex, oppositional depictions of working-class communities that counter dominant and dangerous political narratives that devalue and displace them (see also Beswick 2015).

Jordan McKenzie's *Monsieur Poo-Pourri* films: Subversive humour, art theory and the politics of the everyday

'Monsieur Poo-Pourri' is an aristocrat who has fallen on hard times and finds himself marooned in east London, living in a tower block on a council estate in Bethnal Green. Created by artist Jordan McKenzie, the Poo-Pourri character is a subversive, satirical persona, whom McKenzie performs, both on his estate and elsewhere - including in the streets and at arts festivals - to draw attention to issues of class, space and power. McKenzie himself is an established visual and performance artist, who has been working professionally since the early 1990s, with exhibitions, shows and residences nationally and internationally, and teaching positions at prestigious art institutions including as a drawing instructor at the University of the Arts, London. He is also a council estate resident who lives in a social rented flat on the Approach estate in Bethnal Green. The Poo-Pourri series offers a mediation of life on the estate that overturns the regularly repeated negative narrative tropes we have explored throughout this book, using comedy to imbue the estate with a sense of play and possibility.

The short film *Monsieur Poo-Pourri Takes a Tour of His Estate* (2010), for example, begins as the aristocrat prepares for a day of horse riding. In the film, McKenzie's flat doubles as Poo-Pourri's home and we watch him, dressed in britches and a riding helmet, take a journey through the estate building, navigating corridors and descending the block in a lift. He exits through







the communal doors, traversing the grounds of the estate on a homemade hobby-horse. The film – with its footage of the moving lift and bird's-eye view of the estate grounds – makes spirited use of the vertical possibilities provided by the height of the tower block where the flat is located, as well as affording viewers a sense of the vertiginous unease that comes from living up high. This playful paradox creates an affective representation that conveys a sense of everyday life on a council estate, reflecting geographer Richard Baxter's (2017) findings in his work on the Aylesbury estate, where 'vertical practices' were revealed as both a significant way that residents living in highrise flats come to know their homes – forging a sense of belonging through playful and sensuous engagement with verticality – and a means by which the experience of living at height becomes, at times, uneasy.

Monsieur Poo-Pourri Takes a Tour of His Estate is also a satirical comment on housing and wealth inequality. Poo-Pourri practices his council estate as if it were the estate of the landed gentry: as if the communal space belonged to him alone. As Marquard Smith argues, in Poo-Pourri, 'McKenzie looks to mock the tactless unpleasantness of the aristocracy who, redundant but far from passing away, carry on governing England driven ... by an unremitting contempt for the poor' (Smith 2014: 8). The film also overturns stereotypical images of modernist, high-rise estates as concrete wastelands, highlighting the ample green spaces the Approach estate provides for those who live there, and the possibilities of those spaces for facilitating leisure, exploration and fun.

In *Monsieur Poo-Pourri Travels the World* (2010), another film in the series, Poo-Pourri plans to explore the world by boat, but, finding himself overwhelmed by the prospect of travel, 'its dirt and noise', he decides simply to 'imagine it'. The bathtub in McKenzie's flat becomes Poo-Pourri's boat. Dressed in a long striped nightshirt he sits in the tub, reading a map of the world, which he covers in salt and submerges in the water. The surreal work, as Kemp-Welch notes, is a 'double-edged' critique of poverty and the emancipatory potential of the imagination.

Though he plays the part of a 19th century neurotic, McKenzie is also clearly commenting on the problems of our times. Lying in a dingy bathroom, he dreams of escape – from disempowerment, confinement, and the experiential poverty these bring. But as always with McKenzie the critique is double-edged. For the power of the imagination – it's potential for enchantment – is not only being ridiculed but also celebrated – which is not to say that reality is not disappointing; it is.

(Kemp-Welch 2014: 27)







If the dominant narratives we have seen so far in this book tend towards using sensational aspects of estate life (drug dealing, violence, sexual impropriety, demolition) to fetishize and sustain the status quo, here McKenzie subverts that dynamic, offering a hyper-mundane register that, while seemingly banal, gives way to complex and nuanced representations of space that illuminate the possibilities for finding the sensational in the everyday by practicing space differently. By making works that are obviously 'not real' McKenzie rejects the 'authentic real' register that dominates representations of estate sites. His playful, humorous engagement with mundane spaces is not only a means to ridicule and subvert discourses of power, his estate work also actively facilitates conversations with 'high' art theory that is often understood as belonging to the elite cultural domains that exclude social housing residents.

Estate antics: Minimal traces

Poo-Pourri is part of a wider body of work that McKenzie has made on and about his estate. These works are variously designed to intervene in or comment upon wider power structures and they retain traces of the dialogue with art theory that McKenzie has staged elsewhere. For example, many of his estate works can be understood as emerging from ideas articulated in the minimalist discourse that he has explored in works not connected to his estate, such as 'Andre Dance' (2008) and 'Serra Frottage' (2010).

Minimalism is an art movement that emerged in New York during the 1950s and 1960s and is characterized by the idea that 'art should be its own reality and not be an imitation of some other thing' (Tate N.D.). In other words, minimalist artists did not attempt to present an 'alternative' reality, but instead wanted the viewer to respond to the materials in front of them. Kemp-Welch uses Anna Chave's essay 'Minimalism and the rhetoric of power' to argue that minimalism is an unlikely form in which to deliver any resistant political critique – it was an anti-utopian aesthetic that did not 'challenge the institutional or financial foundations of the art world' (Kemp-Welch 2014: 4). According to Chave, the minimalist movement failed effectively to leverage resistance to the violence of the state during the 1960s and instead came to act as a 'valorization of power' that neglected to offer 'something different' to the status quo in which 'the patriarchal overvaluation of power and control ... can be held to account for all that is politically reprehensible and morally lamentable in the world' (1992: 272).

In his estate works, McKenzie both uses and rejects minimalism's refusal to propose an 'alternative' world – co-opting the basic materials at his disposal to fashion a relentless engagement with everyday materiality that distorts the







status quo so that it becomes something more than real, but never loses its relationship with material reality. The minimalist artist Carl Andre's statement that his art would 'reflect not necessarily politics but the unanalysed politics of my life' can be seen in McKenzie's approach to estate-based art practice. Andre's assertion that 'Matter as matter rather than matter as a symbol is a conscious political position, I think ...' (Chave 1992: 265) appears to inflect McKenzie's artistic engagement with his home, where the basic matter and materials of the estate and the surrounding area are co-opted, in their raw state, and thus happen to *become* political. As Smith notes,

Because of his familiarity with the local and locale, and his estrangement and alienation from it, [McKenzie] is capable of turning our attention to the consequences of our economic system's banalization, downgrading, and in fact assault on the everyday; and on England's citizens.

(Smith 2014: 37)

For example, for 'Border Patrol' (2014–2015) McKenzie positioned himself as a 'guardian of the border' (McKenzie N.D.), collecting objects that had been used as doorstops to wedge open the communal doors to his block of flats. The collection of objects includes folded lengths of cardboard, brightly coloured children's toys and a pen, melted out of shape – they are exhibited either in their raw form or as life-size photographs displayed on white backgrounds (the objects are also available to view on McKenzie's website). 'Border Patrol' uses the 'unanalysed' material politics of the physical estate threshold, troubling dominant discourses of estate residents as a threat to outsiders by positioning outsiders as a threat to the estate. As McKenzie explains,

The back door space in my block of flats is seen as a tense crossing space by my neighbours where the inside meets the outside. Gangs, individuals, addicts and dealers use the corridors and stairwell and in order to gain access use a multitude of found objects as 'door stoppers'.

(McKenzie N.D.)

'Border Patrol' might also be understood as a reference to the politics of immigration that inflect estate space – the title suggests national border protections, referencing the way that the council estate is called upon in rightwing media discourse around welfare benefits, positioned as a contested site on which immigrants are depicted as sinister undesirables whose presence amplifies the intrinsic danger of these places. While 'Border Patrol' does not create a utopian alternative vision of the estate, the incongruous objects,







particularly the brightly coloured toys and plastic containers, do suggest the vibrancy of estate life and certain sense of mystery, intrigue and possibility – although this is again double-edged: the vibrant objects sit alongside the mundane, dirty and industrial (newspaper cuttings, cigarette butts, lumps of cement). As Kemp-Welch argues, McKenzie's work (like the minimalists') critiques the idea of utopia by '[reinforcing] its artificiality' (Kemp-Welch 2014: 12), continually undermining any utopian register that hovers into view.

Other interventions McKenzie has made on his estate include Lock Up Performance Art (LUPA 2011–2013), a series of events for which McKenzie (working in collaboration with artists Kate Mahony and Aaron Williamson) commissioned well-known and emerging live artists to stage performance works in a garage he rented in the car park. As he explained in an interview recorded on a DVD of his practice released by the Live Art Development Agency (LADA), LUPA made use of the materials available on site – it was a small, local event that eventually attracted large audiences from both the 'art world' and the estate itself:

I have a lock-up garage on the estate where I live and we thought it would be interesting to site low-fi performance-based works in the estate. The way that it works is that the buildings surround it, so it sort of becomes like a natural theatre. We used to get the electricity from the local shop opposite. We ran an illegal bar from the car boot. Just charged for hot gin. Which that would then pay for the rent of the space ... I think the first one we did had about six people, and now we can have audiences up to about 200.

(transcribed from LADA 2014)

Despite the work appealing both to art audiences and his neighbours, McKenzie resists framing LADA as an 'outreach' project patronizingly attempting to 'bring' art to the estate. Rather, his neighbours' interest in the work was an unexpected consequence of making use of available materials – a politics emerging from his engagement with matter:

One of the most delightful and amazing things about that was when one of the residents walked up to me and said, 'Can I have a word with you?' And I thought, 'Oh here we go. He's gonna be, he's gonna slam it and say it's terrible', and what he said was that 'We love it. And the council want to build on the green spaces around the estate and we need to use them more in order to be able to defend them. So would LUPA please come and use the allotment, the play area etc. etc.' So in a way we were being used – they were incorporating us into their strategy to be able to







maintain the green spaces that they have. So I thought what an amazing consequence. Which I couldn't foresee.

(transcribed from LADA 2014)

Poo-Pourri too makes use of the physical space and its matter – although it rejects minimalism's anti-imitation emphasis. Poo-Pourri both creates imaginative possibilities for the estate and disrupts them. Here McKenzie fashions a decidedly alternative world – but one that maintains its engagement with material reality. As McKenzie describes, for Poo-Pourri, 'Everything becomes this kind of fantasy terrain, he's looking at a window but he's not looking at a window, or in my case a tower block, he's seeing a castle. A kind of an enchantment of space. So on one level its really banal but I think on another level it really enchants space' (transcribed from LADA 2014). Thus, as I expand below, the Poo-Pourri character engenders the kinds of 'art theory' critiques leveraged by McKenzie's other estate works, with the character giving way to ideas that are far more complex than the simple delivery and stripped-back presentation might first imply.

Subverting the *flâneur*

In Monsieur Poo-Pourri Points at Things (2010), the third film in the series, the aristocrat ventures beyond his estate home, idly roaming the neighbourhood where he lives, pointing at things he comes across (a manual worker cleaning the stairs outside the tube station, a paper cup of Pepsi left on top of a rubbish bin, a poster of the council estate pop star Cheryl Cole, a lamp post, discarded cigarette butts, a pigeon, a copy of the now defunct tabloid newspaper the News of the World) with a silver-tipped wooden cane. In this video McKenzie plays with the idea of the *flâneur*, the idle wanderer, a figure that first emerged in nineteenth-century Paris, where the rapidly developing city made way for a new bourgeois class of (white) man, who could stroll the streets as an uninterrupted observer and write about what he saw. As Elizabeth Wilson notes, the *flâneur* was a response to '[t]he development of a consumer and spectacular society on a scale not previously known, which 'represented opportunities for progress, plenty and a more civilized populace' (1992: 91). McKenzie's playful invocation of the *flâneur* figure in contemporary Bethnal Green serves to highlight some of the criticisms of the *flâneur* that have emerged from feminist and black scholars and raises questions about what it means to walk in city spaces today as well as questions about the classed and gendered nature of privacy that Lisa McKenzie draws attention to in her discussions around the routine invasion of working-class women's privacy by the state (discussed in Chapter 1).







The classed and raced nature of Poo-Pourri's privilege is evident in his deep contrast to his surroundings. An aristocrat in a working-class district, where many of the inhabitants are black and brown skinned, and where the things he 'points' at (the street-cleaner, Cheryl Cole, the News of the World) are often symbolic of working-class life. On one level the pointing works as a humorous intervention that, in the live moment of its action, bemuses and amuses those who witness Poo-Pourri's antics - as with McKenzie's other estate works it exists in a hyper-mundane register that subverts the 'sensational mundane' that pervades representations of working-class spaces and people. Occasional comments from passersby ('What's up there?' someone enquires off-camera, before a young woman looks directly at the lens and asks, 'What are you pointing at?') not only indicate the impossibility of invisibility for this anachronistic aristocratic *flâneur* but also highlight the privilege McKenzie is afforded, as a white man in his 'upper class' costume, to dominate the space and dictate its rules, to raise curiosity but never fear apprehension.

Thus Monsieur Poo-Pourri Points at Things raises questions about who gets to walk idly and freely in public space - questions that are particularly pertinent given the council estate resonances of the Poo-Pourri project and the rapidly gentrifying, working-class, multicultural milieu that McKenzie navigates in his film. As the case of Mark Duggan, which I outlined in Chapter 1, has highlighted, tension between (working-class) black people, particularly young men, and the police are often heightened due to issues of street policing and the targeting of black men for 'stop and search'. The 'stop and search' laws, which enable police to apprehend those they have 'reasonable grounds' to suspect of crime, are at least three times more likely to be used on black people (Home Office 2017), meaning that the ability to walk freely is a raced as well as a classed privilege. The raced implications of walking have become pertinent in contemporary debate, as the figure of the flâneur has re-emerged alongside a renewed interest in walking practices, such as psycho-geography. In 2018, for example, Eclipse Theatre staged a UK tour of a show titled Black Men Walking that illuminates hidden histories by inserting black walkers into the English landscape, foregrounding stories located in spaces and practices from which black narratives have often been obscured. The privilege (middle-class) white people are given to both walk freely and dominate stories of public space is not only national, but resonates with international concerns and politics too - once again revealing the power bounded estate practices have to speak beyond the local. As the writer Teju Cole pointed out in a Facebook post responding to the targeting of black people by law enforcement in the United States, 'Flanerie is for whites' (Cole 2018) - a point movingly evidenced in Garnette Cadogan's essay 'Walking







while black' (2016). McKenzie's Poo-Pourri evokes these tensions while strolling obliviously, commanding the local terrain.

Subversion: Incongruous strategies

In an essay exploring the subversive strategies used by the feminist art collective The Guerrilla Girls, Anna Teresa Demo proposes incongruity as a means through which the collective 'engender a comic politics of subversion' (2000: 134). For Demo, incongruity is a key feature of subversive politics. 'The use of terms, images or ideologies that are incongruous', she explains, 'reorders – even remoralizes – a situation or orientation in a process akin to consciousness-raising' (2000: 134). She illustrates how The Guerrilla Girls scrutinize the 'everyday', making use of the comic frame in order to provide 'a unique vantage point from which to see the inaccuracies of a situation' (134). Demo's articulation of an incongruous subversive strategy is useful for thinking about the way McKenzie's Poo-Pourri series intervenes in estate discourse to facilitate a complex 'reordering' or 'remoralizing' of estate space.

Like the Guerrilla Girls, Poo-Pourri uses incongruous comic tactics – placing the aristocrat in a council block and challenging the audience to make sense of his unlikely behaviour. Poo-Pourri subverts conventional understandings of estate space by drawing attention to its playful potential, undermines the 'authentic real' by 'enchanting' estate space with obviously fictional, contrived scenarios and challenges notions of ownership over 'elite' art by removing art theory debates from the gallery and university and staging them on the estate where he lives.

McKenzie does not work entirely outside of the art market, however. He has staged the Poo-Pourri works at festivals and exhibitions⁴ and relies on commissions and a patchwork of funding, including from LADA and ACE, to realize his practice. The Poo-Pourri film series, however, was made and produced without commission or external funding and circulates beyond the conventional 'art world' as well as within it. The online dissemination of Poo-Pourri on videos on McKenzie's website (where documentation of two of the films from the project sits along with much of his other practice) might be understood as subversion of power, placing ownership of the work outside of the control of dominant art markets. McKenzie's tendency to share his work through videos also troubles notions of spectatorship, often keeping the primary audience (witnesses to the live acts documented in the videos) unclear about his motivations, serving 'to undermine the idealism of performance as a genre committed to the direct power of live action' (Kemp-Welch 2014: 12) by placing the online viewer in a privileged position. These







disruptions of power and destabilizations of dominant discourse – along with McKenzie's refusal to fit any stereotype of social housing resident – evidence the ways estate artists working subversively in their own homes can offer opposition to the versions of the estate dictated by the media, the state and the market: taking control of their own representation while still having fun.

Fugitive Images' *Estate: A Reverie*: Home *un*making, gentrification and yearning on an east London council estate

Estate: A Reverie (2015) is a 'creative documentary' (Mortimer 2014) feature film made by the art collective Fugitive Images, a company founded by residents to produce work in response to changes happening on the Haggerston West and Kingsland estates as they underwent regeneration. The film was funded through a patchwork of organizations, including ACE, who now hold the film as part of their collection. Nonetheless this was a project made from within the community, rather than in response to any commission. It was filmed by artist and director Andrea Luka Zimmerman over a seven-year period as she and her neighbours – who lived on the Haggerston estate in Hackney – prepared to move out to make way for a redevelopment of the site. Zimmerman has said that the film seeks

to capture the genuinely utopian quality of the last few years of the buildings' existence, a period when, because demolition was inevitable, a sense of the possible, of the emergence of new, but of course time-specific, social and organizational relationships developed, a fresh understanding of how the residents might occupy the spaces of the estate.

(Lux N.D.)

Estate is a complexly woven film that layers observational documentary footage with dramatic performance, role play and what Zimmerman describes as 'interventions in public space and with a wider public' (Fugitive Images N.D.). These interventions include the portrait series 'I Am Here', in which huge photographs of residents replaced the orange boards that had been erected externally to cover windows of empty properties. The photos served to remind those passing by that the estate was still inhabited. In the documentary, we see the portraits being mounted in the windows of an externally facing block as Zimmerman explains the rationale behind the project: 'So you know what they said? "Time to go." And then they left flats of







us here. Out of sight, out of mind. Well, we weren't, and we aren't.... So you know what we said? "We are here."

About halfway through the film, there is a scene shot in the home of an ageing disabled resident named Jeff. We watch through an open doorway as Jeff explains to a visiting representative who has come to assess his home – presumably sent by the housing association or local authority – the difficulty he has navigating the flat. He can't get out, he tells her, because he is now using a chair and is unable to make his way down the steps that lead up to his front door. He has lived in the flat for thirty years. 'When I first come here', Jeff says, 'they said, "you won't be in here long because we'll pull them [the estate's blocks] down". The sense of precarious uncertainty that emanates from this scene with Jeff, the feeling of living, suspended, in a kind of extended limbo, waiting for your home to be torn down, to be moved somewhere else, clinging to what you have in the meantime, drives the emotional affect of the film. This a precarious, fraught utopia.

The Haggerston estate was part of the Haggerston West and Kingsland 'prestige' estates, made up of blocks built by London County Council (which was replaced by the Greater London Council) on either side of the Regent's Canal between 1928 and 1953 (this canal-side location made the properties prime development opportunities later on). The estates were intended to house families as part of slum clearance programmes; as Zimmerman and Lasse Johansson explain in a book project documenting Fugitive Images' work on Haggerston West and Kingsland, these sites were initially intended to 'improve not only the living conditions of the residents but also their moral character' (2010: 5). In *Estate: A Reverie*, we see how even from their inception the estates and their inhabitants were viewed with suspicion by outsiders. In historical footage interspersed into the film, two local women discuss the residents on the new development, making it clear that they understand their incoming neighbours as dirty and morally inferior.

In a now familiar trajectory Haggerston West and Kingsland fell into decline and disrepair, especially after management of the sites was handed from the Greater London Council to Hackney Council in the 1980s, when some of the estates' residents were permanently moved elsewhere to make way for refurbishments, fracturing the established sense of community. By the 1990s Haggerston had become known as a 'sink estate', with a reputation as the 'heroin capital of Europe' (Zimmerman and Johansson 2010: 7). In 2007, residents voted for a regeneration package that would demolish the original development and build a new one in its place. Ownership of the buildings was transferred from Hackney Council to London and Quadrant Housing Association (L&Q) in preparation for the site's redevelopment, and in the seven-year period leading up to the demotion residents were afforded







unusual freedom to make use of estate space without interference from L&Q. Zimmerman describes this as both an idyllic and sad time. *Estate: A Reverie* captures this period, where residents lived with an enduring sense of loss, but came together to support one another, produce artworks and host community events in spaces across the estate. The film demonstrates how, during this transitional period, the conditions for creating a utopian, albeit temporary, community-led space became possible. Zimmerman describes it as

the thickening of the moment when you know you are going to lose something. Suddenly you see what's there and you know it's not going to be there anymore. It's that kind of time-warp – like you know you're going to lose something, then suddenly your eyes open. It's about exploring that.

(Mortimer 2014)

The last block on the Haggerston estate was demolished in 2014. Although the residents were given properties on the newly developed site and, unlike in many other London developments, were not forced to move away from the neighbourhood they had called home, the fraught politics of gentrification nonetheless run through the regeneration. In order to finance the new estate buildings, the development doubled in density to include private and shared ownership properties – a phenomenon that Fugitive Images argue embodies a Thatcherite economics of 'a trickle down effect, which claimed that the creation of wealth in an area would trickle down and benefit its poorer parts' (Zimmerman and Johansson 2010: 11).

The problem with this is two-fold. First, it embodies a logic of 'aspiration', where one should continually desire to have 'more'. Second, it could also be argued that when luxury developments, designer shops, artisan bakeries, high-end food markets etc., begin to crop up in a poor area there is an additional side-effect, which is that these opposites – rich and poor – tend to amplify each-other and, rather than any trickle-down, they even further articulate the vast socio-economic difference that exists between them.

(Zimmerman and Johansson 2010: 11)

The film deals with these tensions and anxieties, shedding light on the ways that estate residents come to terms with their changing neighbourhood and make sense of the gaze that incoming, wealthier occupants place on these social housing 'natives'. A young resident says that, although she enjoys some of the new shops and cafes, her friends often feel unwelcome







in the higher-end stores that have sprung up at the local Broadway Market. At one point the residents gather to discuss how their estate has become something of a cultural 'destination', filmed by art students and tourists. They disagree about how offensive they find this intrusion; one resident remarks that she doesn't mind, while another says that she feels it frames them as 'unfortunate'. In another scene, several of the Haggerston residents gather on the balcony of a block overlooking the estate's courtyard, staring down at a guided tour that is being held there as part of Hackney's 'Open House' initiative – offering access to notable architecture in the borough. 'I wonder what the tour guide's telling them?' a resident jokes, 'That we've just finished cleaning chimneys?!'

Distorted realism

The overarching story told by Estate: A Reverie is 'true' in the sense that it documents real events. However, the film itself engages a number of forms and registers, distorting the 'fly-on-the-wall' realism that dictates the estate documentary genre and is the dominant form used in the poverty porn television programmes discussed in Chapter 1 of this book. Zimmerman works poetically, juxtaposing conventional documentary footage with unexpected compositions. The film opens, for example, with a child, sitting in the snow, holding a chicken as sheep wander, bleating loudly behind him. This image references a story told later in the film, in which an early resident of Haggerston, unable to bring the farmyard animals he had lived with in his 'slum' property, took his own life once he moved onto the estate, gassing himself inside his flat with his dog - a story that points to the ambivalent origins of Haggerston: not only a place of community, but a place where people were homed after losing their communities. The opening image also calls on questions of the divide between the rural and the urban and invites the viewer to look at the estate and its possibilities anew by offering us an unusual framing of the space.

This layering of forms, Zimmerman explains, was an intentional method, designed to communicate the complexity of estate life:

This hybrid aspect of the film developed not out of a desire to be aesthetically 'avant-garde' but rather because the various devices were simply the most productive in terms of conveying both the layered aspects of the site, historically, architecturally and socially, and also the similarly textured identities the residents found themselves living







within, in terms of how they were viewed by peers, social agencies, and the neighbouring public.

(Fugitive Images N.D.)

Estate's 'textured' employment of forms usefully reveals how dominant narratives and stories we receive about estates and perceptions of residents that circulate in the public imagination are deeply embedded in history and culture. For example, in Estate we see a group of residents rehearsing and performing scenes from a stage adaptation of Samuel Richardson's classic novel Clarissa (1748). This reference to the novel nods to the fact that buildings on the Haggerston were named after Samuel Richardson ('Clarissa Road', 'Samuel House', etc.), using an elite literary figure as part of the attempt to 'improve' the original tenants. As they rehearse the play, the residents discuss the themes and ideas it expresses; one points out that a key concept that runs through the novel is about the divine and retributive nature of justice - if an injustice happens and is deserved, we are wrong to pity the victim. In the context of the injustices delivered on the estate's residents displayed elsewhere in the film, this statement illuminates the ways that the dominant discourse disavows pity for estate residents, whose 'morally inferior' behaviour positions them as deserving figures of injustice: a discourse that was literally manifested in the naming of the Haggerston estate's buildings.

Similarly, the erection of the 'I Am Here' photographs references the ways that developers often use images to erase working-class lives, conjuring a vision of a gentrified middle class who will live on newly redeveloped estate sites. It is common for hoardings to be erected around regeneration sites that depict affluent couples and families – often white skinned – surrounded by expensive furniture and consuming luxury goods, such as expensive coffee. These images communicate the message that incoming residents who will live on the new development are not the working classes who previously inhabited the site (regardless of whether that is actually the case).

The poetic juxtaposition of the everyday with stories, performances and interventions from across the estate's history works to give an affective sense of the ways that reality is constructed and conveys the complex lived texture of that constructed reality for Haggerston's residents.

Home unmaking

We might consider *Estate: A Reverie* as a documentation of the nuanced process of home *un*making. Richard Baxter and Katherine Brickell's (2014) introduction of the term 'home *un*making' to the vocabulary of home studies offers a means by which we can think through the complexity of the process







documented in the film. As Baxter and Brickell posit, studies of home have tended to focus on issues of homemaking and attachment, ignoring the various processes by which we become detached or removed from our places of home. This oversight in home studies means there is a lacuna in our understanding about the ways in which homes are unmade, a lacuna that extends from wider discrimination of certain types of people, spaces and experiences 'that do not fit an ideal model' (Baxter and Brickell 2014: 139). Like homemaking, home *un*making is a process that is both consciously enacted and unfolds in response to the environment. A 'precarious' series of activities 'by which material and/or imaginary components of home are unintentionally, deliberately, temporarily or permanently divested, damaged or even destroyed' (Baxter and Brickell 2014: 134).

Importantly, home homemaking and *un*making are not binary concepts that articulate the positive and negative aspects of attachment to one's home, but are in dialectical interplay as home is made and unmade in multiple physical and imaginative ways as we find our place(s) in the world. The ambivalent *un*making/making process is encapsulated in a scene towards the end of the documentary where residents throw belongings and items of furniture they no longer need from the balconies into a skip in the courtyard. As they do so an elderly resident walks slowly to the skip and places his old television gently on top of the rubbish. 'You see', he says, confronting his conflicting feelings as he unmakes and remakes his idea of home in anticipation of moving on, coming to terms with the prospect of change, 'I didn't want it [to] smash up'.

Yearning

In her seminal essay collection *Yearning: race, gender and cultural politics*, hooks argues that the term 'yearning' offers a useful means of articulating the intersectional 'depths of longing' that emerge from conditions of oppression across 'race, class, gender, and sexual practice' (1990: 12). She articulates the complicated ways that 'yearning' brings together different registers of longing that embrace the hopes and dreams of the oppressed and those from privileged groups who long for change:

All too often our political desire for change is seen as separate from longings and passions that consume lots of time and energy in daily life. Particularly the realm of fantasy is often seen as completely separate from politics. Yet I think all of the time black folks (especially the underclass) spend just fantasizing about what our lives would be like if there were no racism, no white supremacy. Surely our desire for radical social change is







intimately linked with the desire to experience pleasure, erotic fulfilment and a whole host of other passions.

(hooks 1990: 13)

hooks's 'yearning' is a means through which we can understand the cultural politics of Estate: A Reverie. It is also a way we can think about the raced as well as the class politics it depicts, with many of the residents in the film from black and other ethnic minority communities. The film evokes the 'fantasy' register both by offering ways of seeing the estate differently (as a bucolic farmyard covered in snow in the opening shot, for example) and showing us ways that residents practiced the estate differently in its final years: creating folk art, staging performances, making artistic interventions on the site and living apparently in harmony and solidarity side by side (perhaps class solidarity here is a means of erasing the 'white supremacy' that hooks refers to). The 'longing' that hooks describes runs through the film affectively, summoned through the layering of forms described above as well as through the use of diegetic and non-diegetic music. A folk musician playing the accordion appears several times through the film, her wistful, melancholic songs ('now's the time to hitch up and be strong/though our heart is breaking') drawing the sense of yearning from the screen into the viewer.

Zimmerman explains that the film's affective quality, what I am calling the 'yearning' affect (although she doesn't use that term), is a deliberate strategy 'offering a certain tone of memory, subjective of course, but one grounded in a common experience of living with difference' (Fugitive Images N.D.). Though the yearning here speaks from a specific site, it also, as hooks suggests this kind of political yearning might, opens up possibilities for understanding 'common ground' where 'differences might meet and engage one another' (hooks 1990: 13). The temporary utopian community depicted in the film, Zimmerman suggests, could act as a kind of template for 'ways of being in the city; a more inclusive and supportive form of social and personal interaction, taking place within a more porous and collectively focussed urban environment' (Fugitive images N.D.). This suggests one way that the documentary might resonate beyond Haggerston, offering an indication of how a located cultural politics of the hood can speak beyond a specific site, calling for recognition and action from those elsewhere who are also yearning for change.

Jane English's *20b*: Demolished estates, domicide and revenge nostalgia

How do you speak back from a site that doesn't exist anymore? Jane English's nostalgic project 20b (2015–2017) explores this question. 20b is a devised







performance in which English attempts to recreate her childhood home, a flat on the Brooks estate in Plaistow, in order to come to terms with her feelings about its demolition and resist the 'failure' narrative that enabled its demise. In the show, which has toured regional, fringe and subsidized theatres and arts centres across England in various iterations, English offers a nostalgic account of her life on the estate and narrates her struggle to accept its destruction.

The version of the performance I saw at Camden People's Theatre in 2017 was performed by English herself as a one-woman show. It begins as she recounts a recurring dream where she returns to flat 20b. English tells us that she didn't say goodbye to the estate before she left and that memories of her unresolved relationship with the place she once called home haunt her despite the years that have passed since its demolition.

As the performance progresses, English attempts to reconstruct her lost home from photographs, memory fragments and maps. At one point she reveals a replica of the block she has fashioned from cardboard boxes. She wants to remember exactly what it was like and wants us to know the place too. Guiding the audience through each cardboard replica flat in the block where she lived, English brings the space and her neighbours to life with nostalgic stories that elicit the sensory experience of living on the estate and celebrate the vibrant multicultural community – evoking the smells, sights and textures that made the place real.

If not sunbathing, I think of her peeling potatoes because she was always making homemade chips. Her flat often smelt of hot cooking oil, and dog, and bleach and dettol cos she was always cleaning up after the dogs. And hash, because if Angela didn't have a cup of tea in her hand, it was a spliff.

(English N.D.)

These recollections are delivered in a sentimental tone that risks replicating the kinds of reductive working-class nostalgia discussed in Chapter 1, but unlike those forms of politically neutral nostalgia, here English engages a political register. She takes us through documents that connect the destruction of the Brooks estate with the wider gentrification of London's East End – tracing the council's decision-making process and justification for the demolition.

Moving the performance further beyond a reductive nostalgia rooted in her personal memories of childhood, English recounts her attempts to find her neighbours during the research process for making the show. Her conversations with them demonstrate the lasting impact living on the estate has had on the lives of its residents, as well as the ambivalent







feelings former residents have about the estate now. Recalling some of the more difficult aspects of estate life such as poverty, crime and violence, English is careful not to fall entirely into sentimentality. Nonetheless, the show highlights that the estate holds both treasured and terrible memories and that it is the demolition of her home, not its existence, which is the source of English's pain and the pain of her neighbours, who also describe dreaming about the estate years after its demolition and longing to return there. In one moving scene, English plays a recording of a conversation with her neighbour, Trevor, who tells her about his experience of returning to the area after gentrification, realizing that he is no longer welcome or able to live there:

Three hundred grand for a flat. In Stratford, up the top. Literally there [sic] plan is to wipe out anyone who is not making enough money. Cos even people who is working, working class people, cant afford for their places.

(English N.D., original emphasis)

At the end of the show, English plays a recording where her mother describes returning to the estate on the afternoon after they had moved out. Detailing how she made her way through the abandoned property, looking at objects they had left behind, her mother explains how she came to terms with the fact that this was no longer their home. Sitting on the balcony of the flat, contemplating the familiar view, she disassociated completely from the space:

[W]e'd only just moved that morning and it felt completely alien to me, and that it just wasn't home anymore, everything, the essence of us didn't exist there anymore ... I just left with a sort of shrug of the shoulders that it was just, it was just over. It was just gone.

(English N.D., original emphasis)

Institutions and creative control

20b is English's first solo work. It was developed as a passion project – by which I mean it was driven by the artists' desire to speak, and not through a commission or call made by institutional gatekeepers. Although English worked with a number of institutions to create the performance – attending artist development programmes run by Friction Arts, Birmingham Repertory Theatre and Bryony Kimmings Ltd – and eventually secured funding from ACE, moving between institutions enabled her to maintain control and assert







a creative voice that operates outside of the dominant discourse. This is not a performance aimed at a middle-class audience, and it makes no attempt to appeal to those who are 'outsiders' by presenting life on the estate as 'other'. In fact, English relishes the mundane details of estate life. Her stories seem designed to resonate with other people who have lived on council estates. She recalls answering the public telephone in the street outside her block, where she would field calls for neighbours who didn't own a phone; describes how, on a visit to an abandoned block of flats in Aston, Birmingham, 'the wire mesh safety glass above the doors, the exact same lino tiles that were in our building' create an uneasy familiarity (English N.D.). The tone of delivery asks the audience to identify with rather than to 'learn' from the representation – highlighting, again, how working outside of conventional institutional frameworks can enable a platform for estate residents' voices that does not cater to the middle-class mainstream for whom the estate is other.

The venues where English has shown the work, notably the Theatre Royal Stratford East, Camden People's Theatre in London and Slung Low in Leeds, are predominately fringe institutions that are committed to fostering relationships with local communities and reflecting their concerns. None of the venues had creative input into 20b, but, as with DenMarked, staging a working-class story on a stage where working-class people are likely to visit and allowing the artist creative control enabled the performance to feel deeply connected to an urgent wider context. There is no sense that English is attempting to assert her authenticity in order to offer an 'authentic real' version of the estate – although, undoubtedly the fact that this is a 'real' story is part of its appeal. Nonetheless, this realness does not remain untroubled. The nostalgic register of 20b, and English's own admission that her memories tend to paper over the cracks of the less desirable aspects of estate life – along with the obviously 'not real' estate space, fashioned from cardboard boxes emphasize, in fact, that this version of the council estate is decidedly not the real thing; English's estate can only ever exist as a memory.

Domicide

20b is a personal account of the emotional consequences of what the geographer John Douglas Porteous has termed domicide. 'Domicide' describes 'the planned deliberate destruction of someone's home, causing suffering to the dweller' (Porteous and Smith 2001: 19). The invention of the term, as Frances Heywood notes, 'makes it possible to give a voice to all the feelings and understanding that the victims of the process have been unable







to articulate' (Heywood 2003: 269). Despite the introduction of the concept of domicide to the field of home studies, however, the ways that the loss of home impacts on those forcibly removed from the places they live in remain relatively underexplored in both scholarship and culture. In this context, English's work develops our sense of the ways that homes impact on the psyche and the process of grieving that is necessary to move on from the loss of home – as well as illuminating the specific human impacts of gentrification in east London.

English's performance of her experience of domicide enacts a tale which, like all love stories, is at once not only highly specific but also profoundly human. She tells the audience about the behaviour induced by her loss: returning to the estate on covert visits, during which she would feel more and more anger about the decision to destroy her home and the lack of care taken to preserve any aspect of the space:

Well, I knew the building was going to be demolished, so I'd kind of prepared myself for that, but I never expected they would get rid of the trees. That really upset me. Because they were so big, they were massive and beautiful. And they just fucking uprooted them.

(English N.D.)

English's devising process – her attempts to recreate a physical space that no longer exists in order to let it go – exemplifies how expressions of domicide might be conceived as part of the homemaking and *un*making process I described in the previous section.

Speaking to the importance of re-making the 'bounded' physical estate site, English explained to me how – unable to invite the audience into the estate to experience what was lost – she wanted to affectively place them in her former home. Much of the devising and developing process involved working out the most effective way to do this. First, she made an installation for one person at a time in an empty unit space with a patio door, which she turned into a version of her living room as it looked after she'd moved out.

My mum helped me to make it actually, put speakers inside this arm chair – so audience members would sit in the arm chair, and there were bits of the story that I told, about the moving and that experience. And then I left the space and then [a recording of] my mum telling the story came out of the chair.... When my mum had helped me make the chair she also made a backdrop, which was a view from the balcony drawn on a big bit of canvas that was hung up







behind the patio doors backwards, so it just looked blank. And then, as my mum was telling the story about looking at the view, there were lights behind it so it lit up and you could see the view behind it for a moment, and then it disappeared.

(My interview with Jane English May 2017)

The evolution to a cardboard recreation of the estate came as the performance developed and English realized she would need a means of staging the space for larger audiences, in a way that she could tour to different venues.

20b, although a highly specific and personal story, nonetheless resonates with a broader local national and global political picture. The gentrification of east London is part of a global neoliberal project, predicated on a rapid urbanization that displaces and unhomes citizens, mostly against their will. David Harvey calls this '[a] process of displacement and ... accumulation by dispossession' (2008: 24). He points to the invasion of hillside neighbourhoods in 1990s Seoul, slum clearance projects in Mumbai, gentrification projects in the Bronx and mooted plans to develop Brazil's favelas to highlight how the violent, local displacements of people form a global injustice, delivered by an ideology where the accumulation of capital is the core driver of the political economy. 20b gives voice to the human cost of the political status quo: a 'speaking back' that might resonate beyond the local, but which, nonetheless, enables a victim of a global injustice to take control of her specific experience.

Revenge nostalgia

In 2015, the visual artist Laura Oldfield Ford gave a talk about her drawings of abandoned council estates (and other former working-class sites) at Queen Mary University of London. During the Q&A discussion afterwards, she described the aesthetic of her drawings, which document the ways state policies have systematically devalued and destroyed working-class communities and spaces, as 'revenge nostalgia'. Like the 'rage' in the 'council estate rage' aesthetic I described earlier in this book, revenge in this phrase should not be misunderstood as an uncritical reactionary position: it is a term that encompasses the affective quality of politically and critically engaged nostalgia, able to connect specific stories to the wider injustices delivered on working-class communities. The term revenge acknowledges the difficult emotional terrain that results from those injustices and gives us a means by which to understand emotionally inflected, angry and reflectively nostalgic







works as critically important in the landscape of the housing crisis and its connection to the devaluing of working-class culture. As I have argued elsewhere,

The 'revenge' in this useful phrase highlights the political quality of estate artworks; it suggests that nostalgia is not necessarily reductive and can, in fact, be operationalized to offer complex, oppositional depictions of working-class communities that counter dominant and dangerous political ideologies. 'Revenge nostalgia' may usefully describe the critical potential of Boym's ambivalent model – the term 'revenge' being expedient in this context for describing the affective qualities of the interplay between the specific and the general, in which restorative nostalgia is co-opted to facilitate a reflective social critique that impacts other spaces and places, in one way or another.

(Beswick 2015: 37)

The demolition of Brooks Road is both a specific event and a symptom of wider local, national and global crises. Social housing users across the globe are disempowered, 'powerless up to the point where they can't even argue against the destruction of their self-made living arrangements within the strict planning system that was superimposed on them in the first place' (Engel 2011: 73). The nostalgic tone of *20b* is shot through with a piercing critical awareness of this wider context – and at moments, such as the visit to the Birmingham estate, offers a glimpse into the wider political landscape that is both angry and necessary.

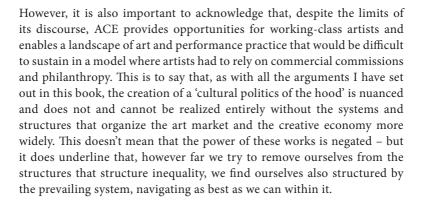
Institutions, the Arts Council and the impossibility of 'grass-roots'

In this chapter I have framed resident-led works as examples of grass-roots practice that operate to one degree or another outside of dominant media, state and market forces. Although all the works I discuss are 'grass-roots' in the sense that they emerge 'from the ground up' as part of an embodied, emplaced context, none of them circulate entirely outside of the wider capitalist context in which we are all embroiled. These are professional artists, whose work relies to some degree on the support of institutions and the state for funding, audience creation and sustainability. In earlier chapters of this book I have been highly critical of ACE and the ways in which its language erases class and reinforces an elitist system.





Resident Artists















Notes

Introduction: The council estate, definitions and parameters

- 1 The term 'discourse' is used here after Foucault (1971); it refers to the relationship between knowledge and power, presuming that power is controlled by what is known and by those who are able to create that knowledge.
- 2 The origins of the term 'chav' are contested, however; alternative understandings posit the term to have derived from the Romany *chavi* meaning 'child' (see Quinon N.D. for an example of the popular debate over the word's etymology).
- 3 The terminology is not consistent between countries. In some parts of Scotland the more common, often derogatory, colloquial phrase is 'scheme', for 'housing scheme'.
- 4 As I explain in more detail below, 'social housing' is an inexact term for council estates, as many estates are now mixed tenure with owner-occupiers and private renters living alongside social renters.
- 5 Of course, social housing exists in other parts of the United Kingdom, and much of the debate here can be extrapolated and applied beyond England. However, there are some differences in the policy and governance of estate spaces in the United Kingdom's different countries, a detailed discussion of which is beyond the scope of this book. So too, there are differences in the ways spaces of social housing are culturally understood and practiced. In Irvine Welsh's novel *Porno*, the character Sick Boy reminds us that the word 'estate' is routinely used to describe the sprawling homes of the landed gentry. He remarks that using the word 'estate' to describe state housing is laughably English. 'That's the English', he says, 'ridiculously pompous to the last. Who else would be grandiosely deluded enough to call a scheme an estate? I'm huntin', fishin' shootin' Simon David Williamson from Leith's Banana Flats Estate' (2002: 33). Although this statement is a humorous device in the novel, pointing both to the character's cynicism and his Scottish nationalist politics, the quotation also suggests the potential problems of presenting English examples and cultural understandings as if they reflect the United Kingdom in its entirety.
- 6 Although English/UK estate representation has been explored by scholars in journal articles and as a smaller element of wider comparative studies (see Burke 2007, Watt 2008, Taunton 2009, Cuming 2013 and 2016) and in PhD theses (see Goodwin 2013, Bell 2014b, McCarthy 2018).
- 7 There is also a geographical bias towards London. This is, in part, a personal decision: my experience of council estates has been a driving





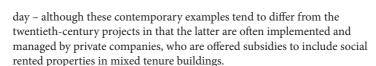
motivation for this research, and because I came to the project with experiential knowledge of London estates it made sense to focus the work in the city that had been my home and my place of work, and on performance practices about the types of estates I was most familiar with, staged in buildings I was easily able to access. Additionally, the representation of the council estate in the popular media – and on the nationally significant London stage – also tends to focus on London estates as part of a general bias towards London that the British media and artistic elite are often accused of.

- 8 The term 'social housing' is fairly imprecise and wide-ranging in both its use and its scope. 'Social housing' is generally used to refer to subsidized rented housing provision. Paul Reeves defines the term as 'housing provided by local authorities and housing associations ... and extended to cover housing managed by these properties, regardless of ownership'. Reeves argues that the key feature of social housing is that it is 'non market' and 'allocated principally on the basis of housing need rather than effective demand' (2005: 2). Although, generally speaking, we can consider council estates under the umbrella term of 'social housing' many council estates are either partly or entirely owner occupied or private rented. Usually this is because individuals have purchased their homes or because private companies have developed properties and sold or rented them privately for profit. In such cases the properties in question would not usually be considered 'social housing, because they operate within the principles of effective demand. However, to further complicate the picture, increased provisions for low-cost (or 'affordable') mortgages and shared ownership schemes mean that the line between owner occupation and 'social housing' is sometimes blurred (Reeves 2005: 2). Additionally, properties that are not part of a council estate, including street properties and sheltered accommodation, might also be considered social housing if they operate outside of effective demand.
- 9 The precise definition of 'spare bedroom' has been a central feature of the national debate over this policy. A discussion of the intricacies of the policy is beyond the scope of this investigation, but an overview of this welfare reform is available at the National Housing Federation website (2013).
- 10 This is because pre-existing policy already placed restrictions, in relation to accommodation size, on housing benefit for private renters (see Wilson 2017).
- 11 This strategic framework indicated that the Arts Council were prioritizing funding for socially engaged work, particularly work that targeted young people (2010: 19) and diverse communities in areas where 'engagement in the arts is low' (2010: 30). It was updated in 2013, and that iteration of the report is titled *Great Art and Culture for Everyone* (Arts Council England 2013).
- 12 However, these dates oversimplify a more complex picture. The introduction of estates to the United Kingdom was a gradual process, which Alison Ravetz (2001) traces from the nineteenth century (see also Boughton 2018). Indeed, state-subsidized housing projects continue to the present





Notes 191



- 13 The Garden City movement, developed by Ebenezer Howard, influenced the design of many of Britain's estates and New Towns in the first half of the twentieth century. The utopian ideal of the Garden City principle was to create living environments with idyllic green spaces, well-proportioned houses and accessible public buildings (Ravetz 2001, Reeves 2005). The Progress estate in Eltham, South East London, is an example of an estate whose design is based on Garden City principles.
- 14 A TRA is a group of tenants and leaseholders that represents the interests of those living on a particular estate. They will often hold regular open meetings, to which all residents are invited. These meetings are usually attended by representatives from the housing association or local authority responsible for overseeing the management of the estate. The TRA offers residents the opportunity for consultation, dispute resolution and advice on issues relating to the running of the estate.
- 15 This section develops and repeats work first published in *Performance Research* (Beswick 2016b).

1 Quotidian performance of the council estate

- 1 © Grant Kester, 2004, Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art, University of California Press.
- 2 Harpurhey is not, in fact, an estate as such; it is a neighbourhood in Manchester, although there are estates in the area. That it is presented as an estate by the BBC, however, is very revealing in terms of drawing attention to the way that estates are made to 'stand in' for class, antisocial behaviour and poverty in popular media representations.
- 3 My use of the term 'the real', as I expand below, explores how notions of absolute authenticity and truth operate in representations that purport to depict 'real life'. Although this conception of 'the real' has some resonances with the Lacanian use of that term, I am not mobilizing Lacan's model.
- 4 Some of the material in this section is developed from and repeats material published in an article I co-wrote with Charlotte Bell (see Bell and Beswick 2014), which emerged from our parallel doctoral research on theatre and social housing.
- 5 The *Sun* newspaper offered an initial reward of £20,000 for information leading to Shannon's return. This later increased to £50,000 (BBC 2017).
- 6 There is not space to offer an in-depth account of the vast media coverage of the Matthews case here, but Cotterill's article gives a very detailed and thorough reading. See also Jones (2011).







- 7 See Chapter 2 for a more detailed discussion of social realism.
- 8 The title was changed in the online version to 'Superstar Cheryl Cole overcomes council estate adversity'.
- 9 The acronym 'Wag' is a colloquial abbreviation of the phrase 'wives and girlfriends', it was used widely in the newspaper press (particularly tabloid newspapers such as the *Sun*, the *Daily Mail* and the *Mirror*) in Britain throughout the 2000s to refer to the female romantic partners of Premiership footballers.
- 10 She has also performed under her maiden name 'Cheryl Tweedy' and, after divorcing her footballer husband Ashley Cole and remarrying, as 'Cheryl Fernandez-Versini', as well as simply 'Cheryl'.
- 11 This section is developed and repeats material from an article that first appeared in *Performance Research* (Beswick 2015).
- 12 Interestingly, discourses of exceptionalism also allow middle-class people to position their success as 'exceptional', as a result of hard work and talent. This means middle-class culture can avoid examining the structural conditions that create 'social closure' where the working class are marginalized from certain elite positions and institutions dominated by the middle class.
- 13 Some of this material is rehearsed in a chapter that first appeared in *Theatre*, *Dance and Performance Training* (Beswick 2018).
- 14 Of course, there are clear distinctions to be made between the kind of sensational tabloid journalism I have mentioned elsewhere and policy initiatives that intend to address inequality. However, in mentioning these different orders of the 'quotidian' in the same chapter I am intending to demonstrate how the dominant discourse establishes and then reinserts itself in insidious ways at different levels of the 'every day'. We will consider ways in which it is possible to push against this dominant discourse in later chapters.
- 15 'Scruffs' is a colloquial term for casual clothing, such as tracksuit bottoms, while 'uggs' is a term for boots made by 'Ugg' an expensive brand of comfortable footwear, which became very fashionable in the late 2000s.
- 16 Cole did not appear on Pop Idol; she was a contestant on Popstars: The Rivals.
- 17 The 'why aye pet' refers to a Newcastle colloquialism, understood to be spoken by working-class people with strong Geordie (Newcastle) accents.
- 18 This section is developed from and repeats material that was first published in *Performing (for) Survival: Theatre, Crisis, Extremity* (Beswick 2016a).

2 Class and the council estate in mainstream theatre

1 Indeed, quite how we measure or categorize class is an ongoing debate across sociology and related disciplines (see Savage 2015). Hence I deliberately avoid offering a concrete definition or series of





Notes 193



- measurements here, rather I see the category 'working class' as an imprecise and dynamic term, with economic, social, educational and cultural dimensions.
- 2 A collective established by the journalist Bridget Minamore, playwright Sabrina Mahfouz and producer Georgia Dodsworth, Critics of Colour aims to broaden access to the theatre industry by expanding diversity in criticism.
- 3 I rehearsed this idea in the *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, some sentences from this chapter appear in that article (Beswick 2014).
- 4 The West End production of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time* moved to the Gielgud Theatre in 2014, after the ceiling of the Apollo collapsed during a performance. It ran until June 2017.
- 5 'Coching' is slang term, deriving from Jamaican patois that means, more or less, 'relaxing or staying idly in one place, often at home'.

3 Located on the estate

- 1 See Watt 2009, Lees and Ferreri 2016, ASH 2017a and Minton 2017 for a more in-depth discussion of the social cleansing debate and how it plays out in relation to specific estate regenerations.
- 2 In media coverage of the event different outlets offer different estimates for performer numbers in the show. The figure of 220 is given by one of the directors in an amateur news video about the production available online (SteelTVonline 2012).
- 3 Including Helen Mirren, Daniel Craig, Daniel Day-Lewis, Chiwetel Ejiofor, Colin Firth, Rosamund Pike, Orlando Bloom, Catherine Tate, Ben Kingsley, Derek Jacobi, Timothy Dalton, Matt Lucas and Hugh Bonneville.
- 4 Courses for 2017 ranged from £450 to £989. Accommodation is charged at between £465 and £950 (NYT 2017). There are competitive bursaries to enable low-income young people to participate in the core programme.
- 5 The NYT accepts an average of 500 members each year. In the archive of NYT productions the latest numbers available at the time of writing are for the years 2015, when ten shows were staged, and 2016, when fourteen shows were staged. This includes shows by the core and social inclusion arms of the company.
- 6 Although Claire's name does not feature as part of the neon sign it is still visible as part of the original graffiti.
- 7 TMOs are not necessarily benevolent organizations and, as the Grenfell Tower fire indicates, are also as vulnerable to corruption and oversight as other types of social housing management.
- 8 Of course, everyone in the space does not mean 'all estate residents' and it is more than likely that there are residents on the estate who feel less warm towards Fourthland and their work and indeed many who don't engage with it at all. This is part of the tricky politics of site-based applied work.





4 Resident artists

- 1 © David Roberts, 2018, Performing Architectures: Projects, Practices, Pedagogies, Methuen Drama, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.
- 2 © Lynne McCarthy, 2010, 'The agency of the applied body', Theatre Applications conference, Central School of Speech and Drama.
- 3 The use of the original video in this new performance is an example of 'sampling', a hip-hop technique usually used with aural material, where sections of an original work are taken and reused in a different song. I point this out to highlight how hood conventions growing out of grassroots hip-hop techniques are appropriated, both within and beyond hip-hop forms to stage resistance globally.
- 4 *Monsieur Poo-Pourri Takes a Dip* was a commission for the b-side arts festival, and McKenzie has received support from the Live Art Development Agency to realize projects such as the DIY training initiative 'Look at the e(s)tate we're in' a workshop he ran on his estate for other artists making socially engaged practice.
- 5 While this means the regeneration was ostensibly the residents' choice, Minton has evidenced how community consultation processes are often corrupt and fail to reflect the will of the residents, with frequent allegations of 'ballot rigging' (2017: 72).







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