FISH 'N' CRITS

WHAT IS A CRIT?

A crit (or critique) is a discussion or conversation that takes place in front of an art work or exhibition in order to analyse, interpret and contextualise the work. This shared interrogative experience often provides participants with new perspectives and alternative ways of approaching the work. In this issue our starting point was a concept rather than an art work.

For our featured conversation for this issue we discussed cultural regeneration and the "transformation" of Humber Street.

The site between Humber Street and the river Humber was once a thriving area and included a wholesale fruit market. In keeping with waterside sites in other cities, these warehouses became empty, docks closed and the derelict disused area became the focus for regeneration plans. However these stalled in 2010 following financial crisis and spending cuts. The council opened the area to cultural groups for cheap rents – which reinvigorated the site. This included three small artist run galleries and studio spaces, and 'Fruit', a night club and music venue. Prior to 2017 exhibitions, workshops, studios and music events were held on the street (labelled "stop gaps" and "meanwhile users"); which was also central to Hull's festivals – Sesh and Freedom. Humber Street was again a focus for regeneration as City of Culture approached. During 2017 the street gained Humber Street Gallery, lost The Museum of Club Culture, Eleven moved next door and Oresome stayed put. Subsequently KAG moved on, Fruit closed for refurbishment, Juice Studios were established, and several independent and creative businesses opened up, as well as bars, restaurants and new housing developments. The reasons for organisations moving on or closing wasn't always related to City of Culture or regeneration.

The purpose of the discussion was to reflect on the nature of this change, and to ask who benefits and how. We were interested in the detail of local developments and experiences – how have broader social and economic forces played out in this part of Hull? The full conversation was filmed by Culture Zone Productions and can be accessed via our website. Some extracts are included here.

Full discussion is here:
https://youtu.be/H5rveYQpnts

CRIT PARTICIPANTS

DC **David Cleary:** *David is an artist, a Juice Studio holder and works at Humber Street Gallery*

JC **Joe Cox:** *Joe owns and runs Form Shop & Studio, and has been central to the setting up of Juice Studios.*

BG **Barbara Grabher:** *Barbara is a Phd student researching in to the gender dimensions of City of Culture, as part of the GRACE project. She is also research assistant at CPPI University of Hull, working on the evaluation and upcoming conference.*

DH **Dom Heffer:** *Dom is a Hull based artist, attends events on the street and coordinated the KAG gallery for a number of years*

CH **Clare Holdstock:** *Clare is also a Hull based artist, who has worked at Eleven and currently works at Humber Street Gallery.*

JH **Jill Howitt:** *Jill edits 'Fish', is a Phd student and ex lecturer at HSAD, and attends events on the street.*

NG **Nicola Gibbons:** *Nicola owns Tessies boutique which is relatively new to the street.*



Photo: Dom fellowes

DH I wonder why we can't have everything? I think for a city's arts ecology to thrive, you need your artist-led spaces, you need your small independent galleries, you need your big publicly funded galleries, and you need your museums as well in order for it to be a varied arts ecology. So, in the context of regeneration...why can't existing spaces, like RED gallery before it was flattened, be incorporated into the spaces – like the Bonus arena – that replaced them? Why can't we have it all?

JC I think we can to an extent. I suppose it's down to finding those opportunities. For example, the Fruit Brokers unit down Humber Street has been used for pop up art exhibitions and the things that Feral Art School are doing, which feels like the next step from KAG – even though it's very different because it's more educational – but there's a connection. And elsewhere in the city places like Ground have popped up as others have disappeared. I do wish RED was still around... it'd be nice if it was a part of the arena and had held on there, like you say.

DH You made the important point earlier Joe that this entire floor has kind of been given as a gift by the developers. I think that its important, having spaces that don't constantly feel like they're under threat. When we had KAG we knew that it wasn't going to be forever, but the fact is that we had five years – we were just starting to get audiences that knew they could come down here and know we would be down here. I think pop ups are great but the downside of those is that they don't cultivate a regular audience.

BG That's the tricky bit, no? They generate a vibrancy but they don't generate an atmosphere where life and experiences are brought to the place. I mean, walking down the street recently once or twice a month has been fascinating to me. You always see something changing, so that's quite an exciting experience... but at the same time I don't intend to go there to be encountering those things. I'm facing a lot of pop up situations – where you're never really sure what's going to happen – where you basically run into them by accident. I think that's something that needs to be addressed when looking at the regeneration and the cultural regeneration element: that what you want to create is actually intention.

JC That's interesting to me because we have been on the street for two years and we still get asked if we are a pop up. It's only in the recent months that things are starting to get nailed down here though. I think there's an idea that the street is just pop ups. Apart from the likes of KAG and Studio Eleven, there were lots of empty warehouses, ones that were kind of occupied and the ones inbetween would get used for Freedom Festival or for other events, which were the only time you would come down here unless you were art engaged and were part of that scene.

BG The Fruit Brokers unit was always creating a situation where you're surprised. It's a place where you can easily change around quite a lot of things... so that's an interesting example of how stable situations can interact with those pop up situations.







DC Humber Street Gallery have used that space for some exhibitions as part of the actual 2017 programme. But it's in the nature of temporary pop up spaces that it's usable until business comes in. East Street Arts in Leeds do a lot of temporary studio spaces. Because they are a charity, developers give them discounted rent, which they then give to artists to use as they please – for display or as an opportunity to experiment a little with something exciting – but obviously only until a business comes in, meaning the artist has to move again. It's not a sustainable model for an individual but I think it is for a charity or an organisation to help facilitate arts in the city.

DH I think we are in a unique position in Hull because the city centre is easily traversable – I don't want to sound like the old fossil of the group, but I remember when there was events and openings in one side of the city and then openings on the other side of the city. You would regularly bump into people – in varying degrees of inebriation – and it was nice as people were circulating the city and you felt like 'the arts are happening tonight'.

JH I saw an advert about two openings happening at the same time and how transport was organised between the two...I think it would be so good to have a dedicated bus that takes people around those events like they do in Whitechapel.

DC I had a good view over the city today and I thought 'you know what, Hull is not actually that big'. But I think there's almost a psychological distance here that separates places, whereas in any big city you will happily travel 30-60 minutes just to go from point A to B.

BG You might think it's just a psychological distance but the public transport in this city is horrible – what the prices are, how many people have cars and how bicycle lanes barely exist. And then you have to think about how the transportation actually works – you can't go east-west, only to the city centre and then back out again. In terms of the distance, I am convinced that public transportation, or transportation in general, affects a lot of how we perceive distances in Hull.

Photo top: Fruit prior to refurbishment (2018)

Photo middle: Fruit Market branding (2017)

Photo bottom: Kingston Art Group during Humber Street Sesh (2015)

CH Generally the shop units and bars down Humber Street are used by the more affluent communities of Hull. It would be interesting to see how the less affluent communities viewed Humber Street?

BG I think there's a question here about who feels entitled to use these spaces. Arts spaces and festivals are considered to be approachable but there is still the sense of 'that's not for me', not just in the sense of 'that's not for me because its not my interest' but in terms of 'that's not for me because I do not belong there and they do not want me there'... and I think that's something to be tackled. We can keep prices low and do things for free but we have to work on those other barriers because it's not just about money, it's also about the question of self entitlement – although I feel self entitlement is not the right word.

JC You do hear people say 'oh, it's so expensive' about the street. But there are also free and cheap events happening on the street. There are expensive places and there are cheap places – why should everything on the street be for one type of person?

BG I don't think it's just a matter of how expensive it is. There's another symbolic line.

JH It feels like something that was a positive from City of Culture is that people's open-ness in going to cultural events definitely increased... but how long that lasts, I don't know. But I believe people still go and visit exhibitions in galleries, who wouldn't have done perhaps prior to 2017, so that feels like a positive.

BG I can contribute a little bit from the statistical side. If we look at the preliminary and upcoming evaluations, it's quite an interesting question. Interest in the arts has increased, significantly increased when compared to national numbers. But there is already a so-called "cliffhanger effect". Basically the idea that there's a kind of an acceleration in 2017 but there was already a drop at the end of 2017, and another drop in 2018. I think that's really interesting in terms of this kind of hunger to attend.

JC I suppose the question is how do you keep those people – who may say 'this wouldn't normally be my thing but I'm going to go' – keep feeling like they can attend stuff? How do you keep those audiences coming to a space that's more highbrow, for lack of a better word?

DH I think it takes a long time because it works around building trust. I'm thinking of my recent experiences working with Back to Ours in Bransholme. People register that you're there at first but maybe not engage. Then maybe they come to scope it out and say 'hi'. And then maybe next time have a coffee and not even look at the work. Over time it gradually teases people in. But the longer you're there and the longer you are around the more likely they are to have a positive experience with the arts.

JH It's back to that thing where there's a one-off explosion of spectacle verses the consistent, long-term, sustained input that people learn to trust and incorporate into their lives.

BG In terms of audience development, the kinds of discussions that goes around it is quite interesting because they always start from the idea that you have to get people through the door. I was recently at a conference at the Barbican in London where the entire presented idea of audience development was about footfall – but it didn't ask about what happened once they were through the door or if they'd come back again. It's more interesting to think about what happens in that space than whether or not you can get targeted groups of people into your establishment. Can you engage with them with a spectacle? It's much easier to attract someone to fireworks than to something that is more culturally intimate. If the question around audience development is not about numbers but rather quality, you want to ask about getting people back. Not about getting them to see the fireworks and then go back home again.



Humber Street Gallery



JH I'm wondering how much the developments in Hull have been led by grassroots groups, local businesses and local artists?

JC It's a really hard one, because a lot of the bigger presences feel like they have come through funding or organisations or things like that. But it's how much they have engaged with the grassroots, isnt it? For example, I was asked to develop Juice Studios and help set it up. The first thing I did was go and talk to as many people as I could, so while it may have been triggered by an organisation, I feel like this was informed a lot by the conversations I had with the grassroots of the city. I think it's hard for grassroots to get to this stage without it taking a really long time.

DH I think that established 'creative industries' are things that businesses and developers feel like they can tap into, rather than the sort of scuzzy, unpolished, grassy rootsy type of organisations that they can't. I think that 'creative industries' is the new buzzword in new neo-liberal capitalism, isn't it?



RED was an independent artist led gallery/ organisation that opened on Osborne St in 1997 and closed in 2016 to make way for the new Hull Venue. Red has continued to contribute to the culture of the city – but without a permanent space.

KAG or Kingston Art Group is a group of artists who used to have a gallery and studio spaces on Humber St. These closed in 2018 and currently they have studios on Park Avenue and Barmston St.