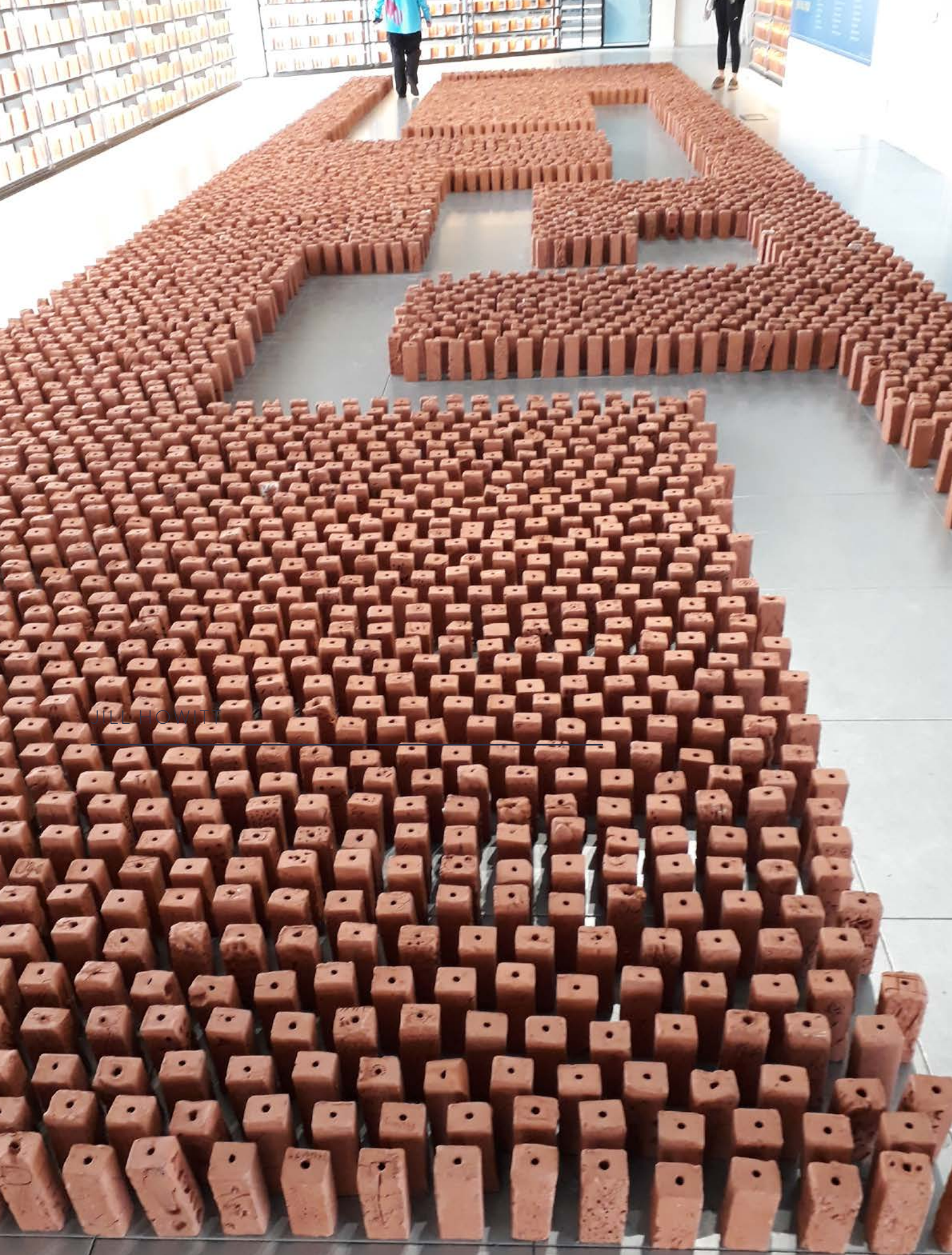




The Sixteen Thousand, 2017, Hull

ONCE UPON A TIME...

the impact of City of Culture on young children

JILL HOWITT

The backdrop for this essay is the evaluation of 2017 and the imprint of City of Culture on individuals and communities. For me, one of the stand out ideas was *Born into a City of Culture*; an art work comprised of the footprint of every baby born in Hull that year. Each individual set of marks and shapes contributed to a collage, representing an imaginary landscape, where tree trunks and branches are formed by midwives' handprints and the leaves are impressions from the babies they delivered. Reflecting on this composition brings me to consider the many questions raised by this project: what was the impact of 2017 on children? How will those lives unfold? What opportunities will there be for them to continue an involvement in culture?

In *Born into a City of Culture* footprints become leaves just as clouds can morph into the face of an old man, if we are open to the interchangeability of things. In writing this I came across the 'Theory of Loose Parts' as defined by Simon Nicholson.¹ He proposed that children should have various indeterminate objects (also sounds, words and concepts) at their disposal to transform and configure in their unique ways. In this way a box might be a bus, or a stick a boat, and the child uses objects and spaces in personal rather than predetermined ways. In some respects this is an essay of

similarly loose parts which can be traced back to 2017, and in particular to *Fountain17*, a project I co-produced, where artists, students, prisoners and children responded to the work of Marcel Duchamp 100 years after his Readymade *Fountain* (a urinal) was rejected for exhibition. We were proud to exhibit work by 3/4 year olds alongside that of established artists.²

City of Culture is an arts led regeneration strategy, inspired by the successes of Liverpool's Capital of Culture (2008), where economic and social impact is on offer to places beleaguered by deindustrialisation or conflict. I locate transformation within education and passionately believe in art education. Like many I am concerned about cut backs at every level and the consequences of fitting arts experiences into units that can be predicted and measured. Children and young people should have art, and more generally 'loose parts' to construct their own worlds in keeping with psychologist James J. Gibson's proposal that 'environments and objects within them have values and meanings that are unique to the person perceiving them'.³ Regarding impact, what are the early experiences that will shape the next generation, and what are the consequences of cutting back on making, imagining and representing in non-prescriptive ways? →

Given my background as an art teacher it was exciting to see the commitment to children in the City of Culture bid and programme. In this writing I would like to recognise this facet of 2017 and begin to conjecture on its impact – on children, families and cultural institutions. The hope is that City of Culture will have a long term impact and even offset,

in some ways, cuts to the arts in mainstream education. A sustained commitment would enable cultural initiatives for children to withstand the tide of austerity.^{IV} However, Josef Ploner and Lisa

Jones, from University of Hull, suggest that ‘the role of children and young people in culture-led regeneration and “place-making” schemes,

remains under-researched’ despite child friendly developments in urban planning.^V

Hull falls below national educational attainment figures, with a third of children growing up in poverty.^{VI} The bid proposed that school age children ‘will be given the opportunity to be

part of the City of Culture’, and the programme included the aim to ‘use the power of culture to generate a new population of thinkers and thinking in Hull’.^{VII}

The legacy plan, built on the programme outcomes,

proposed that ‘culture, participation and learning are embedded into the lives of young people growing up in the city’.^{VIII} This work with children and

young people was called ‘No Limits’ and culminated in a learning festival called LIMITLESS, which took place in an old Argos building at the end of 2017. Ian Reed stated that LIMITLESS would explore ‘learning and creativity as a driver in transforming a city’, and that ‘through culture, creativity and disrupting some of the existing models of education, we can realise the collective potential of a generation’.^{IX} The ‘Preliminary Evaluation’ captured the breadth of participation: at least 100 schools engaged in the No Limits programmes, amounting to 56,000 children and young people with a resulting 34% improvement in self-esteem. This feels like a force in the right direction.

From this programme I would like to highlight the aforementioned *Born into a City of Culture* and *The Sixteen Thousand*. Both projects involved under fives and share the attractive feature that ‘everyone’ contributed; they also focus attention on the children’s futures. *The Sixteen Thousand* is an installation of 16,000 hand decorated and inscribed clay bricks. Every child under five in Hull was asked to produce a brick for the exhibition, which has similarities with Antony Gormley’s multiple clay forms in the 1996 work *Field* (one version was made by families in Humberside).^{XI} The use of clay has both local and environmental significance, and potential for metaphor as a substance that undergoes transformation; yet it is also disappearing from all levels of education. The footprints project was a Creative Communities Project proposed by midwife Sallie Ward.^{XII} They make me think of our carbon footprint and, like the bricks, our impact on the planet and the legacy we leave behind. 2017 stands out in our collective memory and history. It was also a year when individuals and families experienced life changing events; loved ones died, babies were born – including my own granddaughter Ruby. The footprints and clay bricks, in their individual parts and collaborative whole, highlight the intersection between

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Photo left: *The 16,000*, Hull, 2017

private and public; personal and collective experience. 2017 created networks and connections and these two works are about our relationships with each other and the world we inhabit.

In some ways these projects lack creativity in the choices open to the children involved – in that they are carrying out a predetermined ‘script’ or instruction. However they are powerful, hope-filled gestures of possibility that this generation (including Ruby) could be born into a city invigorated by culture and these marks made with feet and fingers could be the first of many that shape and build individual and shared worlds in materials, actions, words and loose parts: perhaps representing a ‘what if’ rather than a reality. In order to examine these impacts and intentions I talked to a number of people working with children and art in Hull, initiating a set of dialogues that I would like to continue and expand.

Before recounting them I should register that they took place with artists who work on the edges of mainstream education. Exciting arts projects take place in schools everyday but the focus of this writing is the provision that has developed outside the curriculum and the potential to compensate for education cuts. Of course there should be more time and resources for teachers to carry out this work with their pupils in their classrooms. Between 2010 and 2017 there was a 20% drop in the number of arts teachers and a 34% drop between 2010 and 2018 in those taking GCSE Arts subjects.^{XIII} Andria Zafirakou (Global Teacher of the Year, 2018) explains that ‘the drive of the EBacc in secondary school has created a damaging perception that the arts are not serious subjects’.^{XIV} Arts in primary schools is variable; it can be a real strength (some offer an Arts Award); but in a recent survey of 350 primary school teachers 68% thought there is ‘less arts provision than in 2010’, and 49% that ‘the quality of the remaining offer has got worse’.^{XV}



Photo: BCAE, Made in Hull, 2017

My first conversation was with artist Dom Heffer, who runs workshops with children of all ages. Throughout 2017 he worked with Year 5 pupils in Wold Academy, Ainthorpe and Endike schools on a project called *Pipe Dreams*.^{XVI} This was a collaborative giant sculpture in which individual pupils contributed segments of pipework representing and containing their hopes. They were asked to imagine ‘what if’ the pipes carried dreams rather than electricity, and the school could be powered by these ideas. Wold Academy was undergoing a rebuild, so the infrastructure and underlying workings of things were visible. These normally hidden networks became interchangeable with interior trains of thought, the private made public, and connectivity between individuals and schools. There was plenty of discussion/reflection, the pupils learnt about themselves and each other. The final sculpture was revealed at a ‘convergence ceremony’ and displayed at the schools and at NO LIMITS.

Dom agreed that a large pot of the 2017 budget was spent on projects with children. He talked about this being their first introduction to the

‘power of the arts’ and the ambition was for them to look back positively at this interaction. Dom felt that the imprint of 2017 on children was a regular engagement with culture that created ease and familiarity with the arts. Schools were connected to a city wide extravaganza. Whilst ‘Absolutely Cultured’ and ‘Back To Ours’ continue to work with artists and children, Dom was unsure how much the momentum is sustained: 2017 was perhaps more a ‘one-off’ injection of culture, and afterwards many schools refocused on academic subjects.

Dom works from his own practice, exploring and adapting studio ideas to school contexts. When working in a ‘residency’ capacity the children benefit from seeing him create his work as well as making their own. They also love it when their teachers are able to join in the activities he initiates. In both cases there is a blurring of the teacher-pupil boundary and a sense of working alongside each other. 2017 enabled Dom to deliver ambitious projects in schools that wouldn’t have been possible outside the special circumstances and gravitas of the year. →

I next met with Wayne Wolton, who has worked for 12 years as a Youth Arts Worker for BCAE, a registered charity, funded by Children in Need since 2008, with contracts of 1, 2 or 3 years.^{xvii} This is a small charity that relies on partners to co-run projects and is impacted when these are cut back. Wayne works in different settings, including after school clubs, with children from 8 to 18. At least 90% have special needs, many have limited opportunities for social interaction, and all benefit from a relaxed atmosphere where they develop at their own pace. Some attend open access sessions, and others are referred by social workers. Wayne feels that art sessions change lives: ‘the whole point is that they find out about themselves’.

During 2017 Wayne’s art groups contributed to *Bransholme 50*: a community celebration of 50 years of the Bransholme estate, including exhibitions and public art.^{xviii} Wayne commented that ‘Bransholme went to town’. The estate was also a venue

for performances from outside and he took his children to as many events as possible. Wayne suggested that the opening ceremony (*Made in Hull*) was important for igniting interest and breaking the ice for future involvement. He used 2017 events, such as *Blade*, as a starting point for projects, ‘an easy hook’ that inspired a whole range of new creative work.

Like Dom, Wayne sees the positive legacy of 2017 in ‘breaking some barriers’ and changing attitudes towards visiting galleries. Conversely he sees a decline in arts provision in schools and youth settings, alongside increased uncertainty regarding jobs, organisations and contracts. ‘Things are going downhill’, he argued. We talked about one off sessions with children versus regular sustained input, and the differences in terms of pace and benefit. Wayne proposed that ‘what affects people’s lives is what happens on a day to day basis’. We discussed how this also applies on the level of cultural provision in a place.

Wayne has a strong personal practice rooted in drawing, humour and the everyday. He describes a ‘perpetual motion’, going back and forward between practice and community work – he couldn’t do one without the other. Earlier this year Wayne had an exhibition at Hull’s Central Library. Over the course of a week his drawing of Hull’s architecture and rooftops accumulated marks, layers and detail. His drawing spanned one of the walls and visitors could see it take shape from the early compositional markers through to the final highlights.^{xix} This took place during February half term so that his pupils could come and see him working as an artist in a gallery as well as witnessing the drawing process.

Artists talk about having a practice, and it is beneficial for children to encounter this individuality of style or approach. The things that influence practice can be unexpected and unplanned. In education it’s often the artist recommended to you that proves impactful; for instance, when a teacher spots, through careful listening and watching, a connection between a student’s work and that of another practitioner. This recognises and legitimises the individual voice, in the same way that Dom’s or Wayne’s pupils see that we have unique and distinctive ways of responding to the world.

Whilst there are cuts in arts provision in mainstream, further, higher education and youth settings it seems that activities for children in galleries are increasing. Ploner and Jones observe that traditionally galleries are places for grown ups: ‘“culture” itself continues to be widely associated with traditionally “grown-up” conceptions of art, creative expression, or the intellectual achievements of “high culture”, which seem to lie at odds with the seemingly more “natural” developmental stages of childhood and youth’.^{xx} In my own research into public art I’ve considered that children are also part of the current – not just the future – public and should be included as such (although Hull’s *Fish Trail* is thought provoking and playful



Photo: On 'The Fish Trail', Hull

if a lifelong engagement with art is good for individuals and communities, then adults have much to learn from children

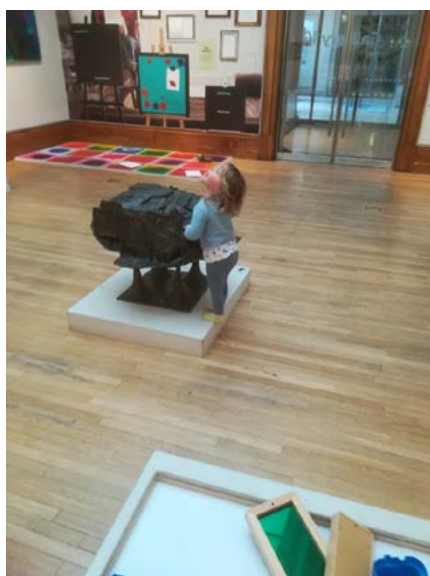


Photo top: *The Saturday Club* exhibit as part of *Fountain17* at The Gladstone Museum in Stoke 2017

Photo bottom: *The young persons gallery* at the Ferens

for all ages). Gallery education is well established.^{xxi} However there appears to have been a recent and notable increase in children's sessions in local galleries which may be a response to the commitment to including children in 2017, and the resulting change in attitude towards art events. Of course institutions are also increasingly required to engage in outreach activities.

The Ferens Art Gallery and Heritage Learning run sessions for schools, young children and families, including their 'A Day in the Life of an Artist' event. They have a great young person's gallery with lots of loose parts play – objects with interesting properties that can be rolled, stacked,

drummed and combined – which triggers conversation and invention. The walls are covered by famous paintings and children's drawings: the worlds of children and high art collide. I have discussed colour and shape in Victor Passmore's work with Ruby, and played with interchangeability – as we transformed a Paolozzi sculpture into *Pride Rock*, with the help of some plastic animals. Similarly, Humber Street Gallery run 'Fruit Factory' sessions for school children and support young artists with mentoring and trips to artist led organisations in other cities. They also host 'early bods' for under 5s; and when we went it was the best kind of play with material, beads, cotton reels available for us to thread, tie, hang and wrap. →

Interchangeability and transformation are crucial to loose parts play where ‘the “affordances” of an object or space are all the things it has the potential to do or be’.^{xxii} Similarly Artlink run outreach activities alongside ‘Explorers’ sessions in the gallery; children can make art works at Ground and Bankside report that some Graffiti artists are as young as 8. There are also ‘Tiny Treasure’ and ‘Young Creatives’ sessions at Beverley Art Gallery/Treasure House alongside exhibitions accompanied by activities and objects that spark children’s imagination and involvement.

It would be lovely to chart the impact of these activities on the future creative lives of those taking part. Children learn from the creative activities and people they encounter. But the reverse is also true – if a lifelong engagement with art is good for individuals and communities, then adults have much to learn from children. Francois Matarasso quotes Herbert Read who proposed that everyone should be an artist to ‘overcome a wholly mechanized and rationalised civilization’.^{xxiii} Matarasso talks about art as a way of ‘being in the world’ where children feel powerless and things are unpredictable.^{xxiv} He observes that art provides a ‘cyclical developmental process’, where children discover, process, understand, organise and share, and makes a powerful case for continuing this into adult life.^{xxv} I marvel at the way children’s marks, dots and dashes so easily stand for things experienced in the world and which become part of the parallel world of the drawing; Ruby’s own spirals and squiggles of ‘Nana, Gaga and Bobby’ tear the paper with intensity and effort (and love). In one of the textile panels of her recently exhibited *Journey to the Centre of the Couch* at Humber St. Gallery, Ella Dorton juxtaposed a little boy lost in drawing his world of ‘1 million car parks’ with his busy mum thinking how difficult it is as an adult to return

to child’s play.^{xxvi} This little moment highlighted to me that adults and children benefit from play and creativity and the opportunity to represent themselves and their worlds (rather than have it represented for them).

In this writing I have registered the focus on children’s involvement in City of Culture and raised questions about the impact and sustainability of that commitment against the broader backdrop of cuts to arts education and austerity. The essay is fuelled by my belief in the importance of art education and engagement for children and adults and ignited by two particular art works from 2017 where every baby provided a footprint and every under 5 made a poked/pinched clay brick.

This focused my attention on the future for that generation, what we can best do for them and how, in turn, we can learn from them (this present moment of climate crisis and children’s action indicates that there is much to learn). I am going to end with a project that will shortly be displayed at Tate Britain, called *Year 3*, by Steve McQueen. Every year 3 class in London will be photographed in the traditional group portrait format and will contribute to a ‘large-scale installation, capturing tens of thousands of Year 3 schoolchildren in a milestone year in their development’.^{xxvii} This speaks of children as a current and future audience for art, breaks down barriers, and ensures that thousands of families and children will visit the Tate gallery.

Which brings me full circle. In 1942 Duchamp curated the *First Papers of Surrealism* exhibition in New York, with the famous *Mile of String* installation (which obscured the art works from

view) and where 12 children played ball, hopscotch and skipping throughout the open evening. David Hopkins sees this as an ‘incursion’ (similar to placing a urinal on a pedestal?), which ‘trespassed into the domain of conventional adult social behaviour and became disruptive’.

^{xxviii} Reflecting on the phenomena of children trespassing on and disrupting adult territory is urgent and timely at this present moment of climate crisis action. Hopkins explores this intervention in relation to themes of work and play. Play and art are twin threads in this writing that could be further explored – but that’s another story for another day’.^{xxix} 🐟

THE END



ENDNOTES

- I Simon Nicholson was the son of Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson. In 1971 he wrote *How NOT to Cheat Children – The Theory of Loose Parts*, see: <https://creativestartlearning.co.uk/early-years-outdoors/simon-nicholson-and-the-theory-of-loose-parts-1-million-thanks/> (accessed September 2019)
- II For more information about Fountain17 and its subsequent impacts see Tony Rheinberg's essay in this issue.
- III See Casey, Theresa and Robertson, Juliet, *Loose Parts Play: A Toolkit*, available at: <https://www.inspiringscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Loose-Parts-Play-web.pdf> (accessed September 2019)
- IV Kenn Taylor discussed cuts to art education in his essay, *Access and the Arts*, in the 1st edition of *The Critical Fish* (May 2019). He particularly highlighted cuts to trips to cultural venues and the disadvantages for working class children.
- X Ploner, Josef and Jones, Lisa, 'Learning to Belong? "Culture" and "Place making" Among Children and Young People in Hull, UK City of Culture 2017', in *Children's Geographies*, 2019, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2019.1634245>
- VI Culture Place and Policy Institute, *Cultural Transformations: The Impacts of Hull UK City of Culture 2017, Preliminary Outcomes Evaluation*, University of Hull, March 2018, p.53.
- VII Ibid, p.5.
- VIII Ibid, p.62.
- IX Reed was Head of Learning and Participation at Hull 2017. 'No Limits' available at: <https://www.visithull.org/discover/article/join-us-limitless-festival-without-rules/>
- X Culture Place and Policy Institute, op. cit., , p.14.
- XI The project worked with nurseries, schools and other early years' provision, was led by Andrew Shimmin and Alex Hallows from McMillan Nursery School and supported by Hull City Council. The 16,000 exhibition took place 2 Oct – 5 Nov 2017.

For more information about Gormley's *Field* see: Searle, Adrian, *Field for the British Isles*, 1996, available at: <http://www.antonygormley.com/resources/essay-item/id/108> (accessed September 2019)
- XII The project was a Creative Communities Project, which means it was supported rather than initiated by City of Culture. For more information see: <https://www.hey.nhs.uk/news/2018/01/22/final-panel-unveiled-born-city-culture-artwork/>
- XIII See 'Arts in Schools A Bacc for the Future, Cultural Learning Alliance and WHAT NEXT?' *Toolkit*. The 3 organisations produced an advocacy kit for arts in schools: they present statistics concerning the value of the arts to the economy and the individual against those demonstrating cuts to arts education.

Available at: <https://culturallearningalliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Arts-in-Schools-Toolkit.pdf> (accessed September 2019)
- XIV Zafirakou, Andria, 'Power to Change' in *Tate Etc*, Issue 47, Autumn 2019, p.19.
- XV See Romer, Christy, 'Primary Schools Lament Decline in Arts Provision' in *Arts Professional*, 17 January 2019, available at: <https://www.artspromotional.co.uk/news/primary-schools-lament-decline-arts-provision> (accessed September 2019).
- XVI The project was jointly funded by the 'Look Up' Public Realm project and 'No Limits'

See: <https://ideasinthevoid.com/pipe-dreams/> (accessed September 2019)
- XVII Bransholme Community Arts Enterprise
- XVIII Bransholme 50 was also one of the Creative Community Programmes which received £10,000 funding from City of Culture.
- XIX See: *Domes of Hull* available at: <https://vimeo.com/323570296> (accessed September 2019)
- XX Ploner and Jones, op. cit.
- XXI 'Engage' champion and advocate gallery education through training and networking events. See: <https://engage.org/about-engage/> (accessed September 2019)
- XXII James J Gibson cited in: Casey, Theresa and Robertson, Juliet, *Loose Parts Play: A Toolkit*, September 2016, available at: <https://www.inspiringscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Loose-Parts-Play-web.pdf> (accessed September 2019)
- XXIII Matarasso, Francois, *A Restless Art*, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, London, 2019, p.41.
- XXIV Ibid.
- XXV Ibid, p.42.
- XXVI Ella Dorton's exhibition at Humber Street Gallery took place from 25 May to 7 July, see: <http://www.humberstreetgallery.co.uk/exhibition/journey-centre-couch-couches-good-ideas/>
- XXVII 'Steve McQueen: Year 3', available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/steve-mcqueen-year-3> (accessed September 2019)
- XXVIII Hopkins, David, 'Duchamp, Childhood, Work and Play: The Vernissage for First Papers of Surrealism, New York, 1942', in *Tate Papers*, no.22, Autumn 2014, available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/22/duchamp-childhood-work-and-play-the-vernissage-for-first-papers-of-surrealism-new-york-1942> (accessed September 2019)
- XXIX This is how many of my stories to my own children, and now to Ruby, end.