

One Thoresby Street, *Late Harvest*, 2nd October 2021.

Paul Hughes, 29th October 2021

I'm at One Thoresby Street, that tall lonely brick building perched between BioCity and the busy road that separates east Nottingham from the city centre. A wall has been removed since I last visited: GasLeak Mountain's exhibition space on the ground floor has expanded into a recently vacated studio. The current show (*Roddy McDowall*, by Daniel Cowlam) has been moved to one side, and the space is filled with chairs, a projector, a desk, a PA system and a microphone. Studio holder Kathryn Cooper is near the end of her talk on the history of the building.

The set-up feels provisional. Rather than taking a seat, I hover at the back amidst Cowlam's strange (and occasionally twitching) monkey sculptures. Cooper's history has taken us to the current situation: the tenancy is under threat. The previous landlord has gone into liquidation, and BioCity – the neighbouring centre for commercial pharmaceutical research – intends to buy the land. The legal situation is complex. And as different people are chipping in different information and perspectives (“Have you thought about...?”, “Have we contacted...?”, “Why don't we try...?”) our temporary roles of speaker and audience begin to break down.

The new directors of One Thoresby – Ellen Angus, Freddy Griffiths, Sophie Mackfall – have taken on leadership in the face of both the pandemic and this new threat to the building. They speak compassionately yet realistically: the tenancy was always short-term and provisional, and there is not much we can do to secure the space. Alongside their other efforts, Mackfall has worked with artist Effy Harle (who has a long-term relationship with the studios) to put together *Late Harvest*: this day of activities to reflect on the history of One Thoresby Street, and the potentials and challenges of self-organised artist spaces; and a chance to properly gather the community together after lockdown. Only then, perhaps, might we be able to imagine and work towards new futures for the building's community.

~

I head outside, get some tea and cake, and catch up with friends under a huge and richly dyed patchwork quilt by Sophie Giller. It

reminds me of Liam Gillick's colourful semi-architectural propositions that I think are meant to 'frame social encounters'. Rather than his cool, slick industrialism, Giller's work feels more vibrant, riotous, hand-made: I find it gleeful and inviting. I also admire the outcome of Effy Harle's 'well dressing' workshop, apparently a local Derbyshire tradition. Kids have been pushing flowers into – and mounting strange gargoyle faces upon – a huge slab of wet clay, that surrounds a gently trickling fountain. The result is luscious and strange. I head inside to Famicom Express, a DIY press for alternative comics run by Leomi and Stef Sadler. It runs mostly online and by post: another model to gather and support artists. I leaf through some of their zines and prints: they are crude, inventive, sexy, unnerving and hilarious.

Later on, I wander upstairs. I'm always amazed at just how many studios fit in the space. One is filled with a mess of notes and reference images for an as-yet-unrealised performance project. The artists have decided to surround these inchoate materials with looped recordings of music, wailing and muttering. In another, I chat with a friend about his next body of work – it feels slick, precise and knowing. I meet someone new, who makes these weird finely detailed wooden structures; half-way between Escher-like architectural models and wasps' nests. Almost every surface in the studio is covered in fine tools and mounds of wood-shavings – the sediment of months and years of precise and consuming work. I am entranced by this quiet, long-term and deep engagement with these materials.

One Thoresby supports not only a diversity of practices – with different economies, values, and processes – but also that which resists sitting neatly within established disciplinary frames; or work not yet be ready to articulate itself to institutional contexts or markets. It's a structure that can sustain difference. It let's diverse values and processes rub up against one another. It enables people to take the initiative and pursue curiosities and collaborations – not just within 'art', but just as likely into the realms of publishing, nightlife, carpentry, academia, care-work, activism, or education.

~

We gather downstairs for a round-table talk from artist-led spaces

and collectives around Nottingham and the East Midlands more broadly. It's a chance to hear shared needs and concerns, but also just a striking materialisation of the region's vibrant grassroots visual arts network – with representatives from Nottingham's Chaos Magic, Four/Four, Gasleak Mountain, KühleWamp; Lincoln's Mansions of the Future; and the recently formed DARP (Derbyshire Artist Residency Programme).

People speak about their desire to use what they have to try and support others. Over the pandemic, Chloë Laycock and Adam Grainger (Four/Four) had set up an online platform establishing new international networks of artists; while Dudley and Adam Beaumont (Chaos Magic) have focused on developing a community garden. Most speak about the challenges of maintaining these projects while holding down jobs that can actually pay their rent. The fate of One Thoresby hung over the shared question of how much we should be investing our time in developing these temporary spaces, when we could lose access to them at any moment.

As the facilitator Sean Cummins (himself co-founder/director of the hugely successful Gasworks gallery and studios in London) notes, the un/der-funded nature of these grassroots collectives affords them a relative flexibility and responsiveness. In some cases, these projects occupy space within larger host organisations (Four/Four and Chaos Magic in Primary and Backlit respectively) who receive regular Arts Council England funding as 'National Portfolio Organisations'. I've long held that these host-parasite relations are key to Nottingham's vibrant and expansive cultural ecosystem.

These grassroots initiatives develop emerging artistic practices that can later go on to fill the programmes of more major institutions. But they also enable another form of talent development: of organising and leadership. The artist-producer-organisers gathered around this table have an extraordinary wealth of knowledge. They are capable of organising residencies and mounting exhibitions; participating in round-table discussions; setting up PA systems and bars and DJing dance-floors; and quickly becoming expert in the weird nuances of British property law. They are the next generation of cultural leaders – within and beyond the field of art – working with models of collaboration that can inform and innovate our understanding of governance and

leadership. They are able to literally set up and tear down walls.

I'm at risk of romanticising all this. As the musician and producer Richard Phoenix writes <<https://richardphoenix.com/DIY-as-Privilege>>, the principle of Do It Yourself is deeply ableist and saturated in privilege. These grassroots initiatives depend on unpaid labour. These people are working very hard, often in very unsustainable and unglamorous conditions. For *Late Harvest*, someone has put together posters on the walls that give succinct timelines of the past 13 years, charting when various individuals had taken on or stepped back from different roles. As much as there is a real and extraordinary collectivity that has made this organisation possible, these kinds of spaces can often rely on one or two individuals quietly shouldering most of the work. I look at the people around the table, and think of the significant contribution made by many people, past or present, with or without formal recognition. What does it take to maintain an alternative cultural scene? There is a particular violence to expect or demand anyone to maintain this work.

~

The day is coming to an end. The ground-floor space has been cleared. Matt Woodham has rigged some lights and DJ FEMINEM has started to play. It's cold – we're now definitely past summer – but as I dance I begin to strip off layers of clothes. After months of lockdown, I've yearned for this. I'm grinning, sweating, weaving through the space, bouncing between friends and strangers. I imagine a flow of energy vibrating from the bodies in the room, into the walls and floor, back into the people, past and present and future.

I don't want to fetishise these DIY initiatives; or demand they hold the answer to my frustrations with the more institutional cultural landscape. But I think they do achieve extraordinary things. They enrich my life. They get me out of the house, move me around Nottingham, allow me to meet strangers and learn things and have fun. They make cities much more interesting and pleasurable places in which to live. As Charlie Dean (Gasleak Mountain) put it during the roundtable: these spaces might nominally be committed to putting on exhibitions, but some of their greatest moments are when they gently morph into joyous evenings out: full of music, drinks, chat, dancing, laughing. There was something very

beautiful and pure about the dance floor at the end of *Late Harvest*. Zero bullshit, zero judgement. Just people who want to move to music, however that felt right to them.

There are many tensions to these kinds of spaces: of the nature of collective working; the question how diverse they really are; of freedom from institutionalised processes, and the risk of things going wrong without any real accountability; of the DIY as a rejection of, or covert springboard into, more established contexts; of agency and (self-)exploitation in their independence to funding structures; of their vulnerability to and complicity within processes of gentrification. I suspect most of these will remain irresolvable. But without any definitive answers, I do think it's possible to live and work with these contradictions; to inhabit them, dance with them.

~

Since *Late Harvest*, One Thoresby Street has announced the end of its tenancy. While the city council – strapped for cash from Tory cuts and the pandemic – might be unwilling to give artists subsidised tenancies of otherwise unused spaces, I do hope the leaders of major cultural organisations can use whatever leverage they might have to insist on the importance of these kinds of grassroots initiatives. And I hope BioCity – which depends on Nottingham's rich cultural scene to attract its international workforce – will also lend its support for One Thoresby to continue to have a home in the city.

We do not necessarily have the power to secure these space. We rarely have the resources to make them wheelchair accessible, or particularly warm. So, the question always becomes: well, what can we do? What kinds of strategic choices can we make? One risk is that we feel the need to maintain things as they are; or follow the legacy of self-organised art spaces from the 80s, 90s and 00s, through which many of our teachers and mentors might have developed. These histories of counter-cultural making and organising are delicious – but were reliant on being able to get by on the dole, and through initiatives like Thatcher's Enterprise Allowance Scheme. How possible are these things within our increasingly harsh climate of austerity?

Rather than insisting we uphold this tradition or maintain things as they are, *Late Harvest* offered a generous and open engagement with vital questions: What can we really make possible? In terms of space, resources, energy, time, what are our capacities and needs? What sustains us: individually, and as a community? Here and now, in the face of everything: how do we want to gather?