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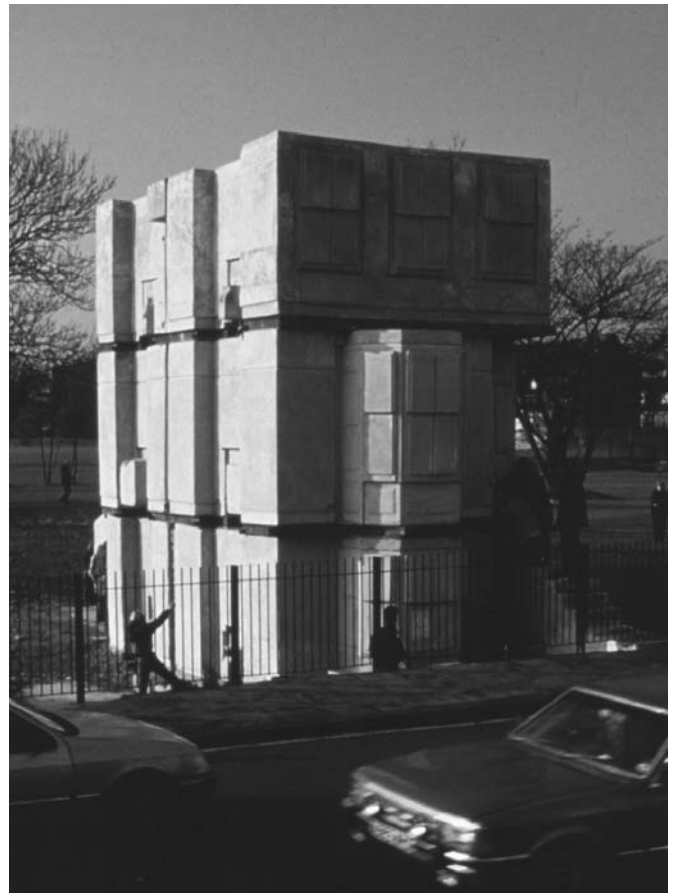
## ■ ARTISTS IN EAST LONDON (1960-2000)

Michael Archer's essay *Oranges and Lemons and Oranges and Bananas* published below has been commissioned by Acme Studios as part of our one year feasibility study to investigate the potential for a major research project on the history of artists in East London. The principal aim of the study is to highlight the extraordinary richness of the history and to promote its value as a subject for in-depth research and study. Our work will also help to demonstrate the significance of the contribution made by studio providers and individual artists in East London to the contemporary visual arts in the UK and the establishment of London as a world city.

The story has two main threads: firstly how cultural changes in art which in the 60s prompted artists' needs to find big buildings, and secondly how in the 70s a new generation of artists' quest for survival led them to East London. The unfolding of both these journeys saw the formation by artists of two organisations, **SPACE** and **ACME**, who played a key role in bringing about the massive influx of artists.

This publication coincides with the Museum of London's major exhibition, **Creative Quarters: the art world in London 1700 to 2000** (30 March to 15 July 2001). The exhibition for the first time maps 300 years of the life and work of the artist in London, identifying eight distinct areas that have attracted the capital's artists, and asks how these 'creative quarters' have influenced the wealth of art that has been produced in the city.

We have also commissioned Flat Earth Communications to build a web site as a curtain-raiser for the historical survey to follow. It provides an introduction to the artists and organisations involved and to the history of the growth and development of their community in East London. The web site is structured around ten significant buildings, iconic places which at different stages artists came to inhabit and develop their art. The



House, Rachel Whiteread, 1993/94

web site is not intended to be definitive, but rather as a starting point to help uncover other sources of information and to provoke debate. [www.artistsineastlondon.org.uk](http://www.artistsineastlondon.org.uk) will be on-line from the end of March 2001.

Our study is supported by the National Lottery through the Arts Council of England.

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Grove Road, 1983

## ■ ORANGES AND LEMONS AND ORANGES AND BANANAS

In his short essay on the planning and life of Rachel Whiteread's *House*, James Lingwood describes the initial search that he and Whiteread undertook to find a suitable site for the work. Their search eventually led them to 193 Grove Road, the last of a terrace of houses that was being cleared to make a piece of open parkland. They took possession of the house in the summer of 1993, from which time, as Lingwood says, '*House* was of a specific place and a particular time.'<sup>1</sup> Although in the year or so before that time they had extended their area of investigation well into North London, it was appropriate, for many reasons, that the site finally settled upon was in the east end. A few years before completing *House*, Whiteread had shown *Ghost* at the Chisenhale Gallery, just round the corner from Grove Road. Closely related to the idea behind *House*, *Ghost* was the cast of the sitting room of a similar terraced house. Common to both works was the strong sense of familiarity they evoked in those who saw them, a sense of familiarity with a type of domestic space and the way of living that went along with it. What we saw was the way we lived, and the directness with which *House* conveyed this contributed in large part to its popular success. That it was successful, rather than merely notorious as most contemporary art that finds its way into the media remains, was significant. Of course it was also contentious, as the argument in the Council Chamber and in the letters pages of the local and national press over when it should be demolished confirms. Yet, as Lingwood points out, this argument was not one conducted between different communities, but within them. It was not a case of the art world attempting to impose its vision upon a locale whose residents objected to it. There were, rather,

a variety of viewpoints within the community, some for and others against either the presence or the idea of Whiteread's work. Looking at the graffiti that very quickly appeared on *House* one was aware that it had been recognised, not as the cause of the area's social problems, but possibly as symptomatic of them and certainly as a focus for debate as to what might be done about them. 'Wot for?' asked one, only to provide its own, equally interrogatory answer, 'Why not?' The largest message made the demand, 'Homes for all, black + white', while on what had been a doorway, more discreet but just as telling, was the statement, 'This house is a nice home.'

In this last message is the key to one of the factors that had contributed to the situation in which *House* appeared. What Lingwood leaves unsaid, but which is integral to his meaning, is the degree to which artists had, over the preceding twenty five years, established themselves as part of the east end community. That houses such as this one, earmarked for demolition in order to make way for improvements to the roads and amenities of the borough, could remain viable until the last minute, was the very idea that had led to the influx of artists into the east end from the later 1960s onwards.

**That the two** most important organisations in fostering the move of so many artists into east London were Space and Acme is a statement so often rehearsed that it is in danger of becoming a meaningless truism. In the history of these efforts to provide support for artists, and in the many ways in which they both connect with shifting patterns of economic and social behaviour, and mirror changing tendencies in art, there are a wealth of stories to be researched and told. A brochure published by Space – Space Provision (Artistic, Cultural, Educational) Ltd – on its founding in 1968 identified several factors that made it difficult for artists to find adequate accommodation and working space, especially in London:

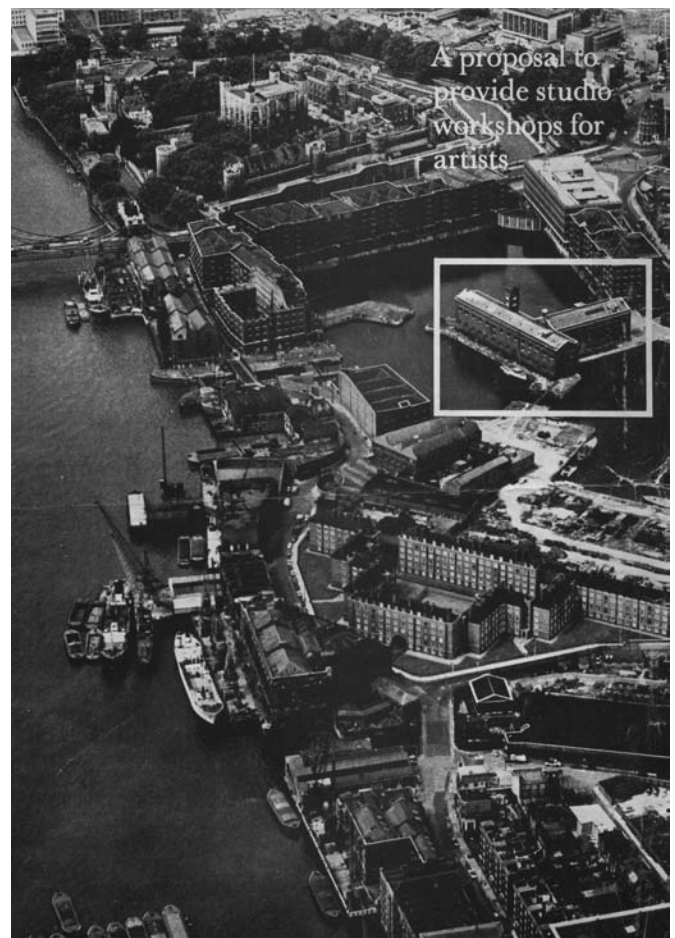
The rise in land values in every urban centre; the development for high-rental residential purposes of those districts traditionally provided with facilities for artists (one thinks, for example, of Chelsea, Hampstead, Kensington, where studios are converted into 'desirable' flats and there is no replacement of working studios); the greater scale on which painters and sculptors are working.<sup>2</sup>

In an effort to combat this situation, Space was set up as an organisation dedicated to administering the usage as studio space of the many industrial buildings standing vacant in inner city areas. As a result of the decline in activity in London's dockland following the relocation of facilities downstream at Tilbury, a large number of warehouse buildings fell out of use in the years following the war. In the late 1960s, Peter Sedgley and Bridget Riley identified the buildings at St Katharine Dock, near Tower Bridge, as suitable for artists' studios, and with the help of the artists' labour and small grants from the Greater London Council, the Arts Council of Great Britain and the Gulbenkian Foundation, were able to convert it in 1968 for occupation by 90 artists. Other such properties followed, and Space established itself as a significant conduit for artists in search of affordable work space in the capital. Sedgley and Riley's co-directors in the new venture were Maurice de Sausmarez, principal of Byam Shaw School of Art, the actress Irene Worth, and Peter Townsend, editor of Studio International. In addition they had sponsors in the fields of finance and local and national government, as well as backing from Henry Moore and Norman Reid, director of the Tate. The range of this support indicates that the venture was, from the very first, identified as a good thing not only within the narrow confines of the art world, but also for the cultural and economic well-being of the community at large. Furthermore, the Space brochure's reference to the greater scale on which artists were working at that time, points to a phenomenon that was to be so often evident over the subsequent decades: that of the interesting relationship existing between the various opportunities available for making and showing art, and the forms that the art so enabled was to take.

It is well understood that the impact of American painting, shown not just in group exhibitions at the Tate in the later 1950s, but also, and perhaps more importantly, in a series of one person shows – Pollock, Krasner, Rauschenberg, Johns – organised by Bryan Robertson at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in the 1960s, was instrumental in stimulating that move to larger-scale work. Without ready access to adequate studio space,

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however, the continued development of those tendencies identified in the Whitechapel's 'New Generation' shows of 1964 and 1965 would have been more difficult. David Thompson wrote in his introduction to the 'New Generation' catalogue in 1964 that we were experiencing 'a boom period for modern art,' and that 'British art in particular has suddenly woken up out of a long provincial doze, is seriously entering the international lists and winning prestige for itself.'<sup>3</sup> Space was both symptomatic of and a contributory factor in the furtherance of that boom. In more general terms, that close connection between the variety of forms of art and the different tactics employed by artists to make and exhibit it, can be seen to be inextricably bound up with the changing economic and cultural conditions over the subsequent decades.



*A Proposal to Provide Studio Workshops for Artists, S.P.A.C.E., 1968. Brochure showing detail of St Katharine Dock*



## The close connection between the variety of forms of art and the different tactics employed by artists to make and exhibit it, can be seen to be inextricably bound up with the changing economic and cultural conditions over the subsequent decades.

**Shortly after the** setting up of Space, in the early 1970s, a group of recent Fine Art graduates from Reading University that included Jonathan Harvey and David Panton found themselves in the capital in need not just of studio space, but also, and perhaps more pressingly, of somewhere to live. As a friend had, by luck as much as anything else, managed to get the use of an old chemist's shop in Mile End, their first thought was to find a similar unoccupied property and approach the owner for a lease. I came to London not too many years after this and was struck by the fact that among the innumerable messages one could read in the graffiti of the east end, two in particular stood out. The first, GEORGE DAVIS IS INNOCENT OK, examples of which can still be seen today, was part of a concerted campaign on behalf of Davis who had been wrongfully imprisoned for armed robbery. The second, LEB OFF, was daubed on many empty houses as an indication that the London Electricity Board had disconnected the power supply. It was this second message, popping up as it did all over the area, that held the key. The buildings on which it appeared were part of the substantial stock owned by the Greater London Council. Although they were standing empty awaiting demolition, it seemed that until such time as they were knocked down they might provide a cheap home for those who needed one. The alternative to a properly negotiated tenancy, under the terms of which the occupier would agree to vacate the property when required, was that the houses would be squatted, leading to many more headaches for the Council. When Harvey and Panton approached the Council for such a property, they were told that it was not policy to negotiate deals with individuals, but that if they cared to form themselves into a housing association something might be possible. The association was duly formed – its constituting membership determined as much as anything by those who were able to stump up the necessary £10 at the time – and the GLC made two buildings in Devons Road, Bow available.

Nowadays, when no college course can be validated unless it can identify how it is imparting key transferable skills to students, and when the government's practice of quality assurance auditing includes a close look at where students go after graduation, it is the norm for colleges to 'prepare' their charges for life beyond the educational environment. Series of seminars in all art schools introduce students to the essentials of self-employment, setting up a studio, and so on. In the early seventies this was far from being the case, and the process of establishing the housing association and negotiating with the council was accomplished without any prior knowledge of just what would be involved.

As Panton recalls, both 105 and 117 Devons Road were in an extremely poor state of repair, with all services cut off, their plumbing and wiring in bad condition, and their roofs leaking. In retrospect it seemed that they had been set something of a test. Faced with such run-down properties, they would either capitulate in the face of overwhelming odds and go off elsewhere in search of a home, or they would manage somehow to make them habitable. Either way, the GLC couldn't lose. The houses were in such a bad state that any further damage done would be no great loss, and in the event of success they would start to pick up a rental income. Harvey and Panton point out that at this early stage, their only real concern was to find homes for the small group of people who had formed themselves into the housing association. What transpired, of course, was something rather different. Given that they did succeed in rehabilitating the original properties, and in providing the GLC with a regular (and regularly paid) income, the Council were soon offering them other houses in the hope that they might be able to find other, similarly placed tenants. In this way the number of short life properties administered by Acme grew substantially within a very short space of time. Already by 1975, Acme had become 'the largest single manager of short life housing in London,' and by 1978, 204 properties were being managed, providing space for over 350 artists.<sup>4</sup> Given that many of these houses were in a run-down state and that they were only licensed for occupation for a strictly limited period, the scope for their new occupants to remodel them, sometimes drastically, to suit their particular needs and wishes was considerable.

Swift though the growth in Acme's housing stock was, however, it was easily matched by the number of people keen to avail themselves of the association's services and the waiting list remained high until it was closed in 1987. The GLC had by then been abolished, the Department of Transport – another significant source during

the preceding decade – was going ahead with the M11 Link Road scheme, and the Conservative government's policy of transferring council housing to private ownership was thoroughly underway. A tailing off of suitable housing was therefore inevitable from that time onwards, and Acme's parallel service of providing studio space began to predominate. While they had assumed control of studio buildings at Faroe Road and Hetley Road in Hammersmith, and in the former meat packing facility in Acre Lane, Brixton in the 1970s, the three major east end blocks at Robinson Road in Bethnal Green, Orsman Road near Dalston and Carpenters Road in Stratford came in the first half of the 1980s. There were some Acme houses in Approach Road, just round the corner from Robinson Road, so the Approach pub in that street was an artists' haunt from early on. The more recently formed Approach Gallery, in the rooms above the bar, is thus only the most recent manifestation of the pub's connection with the art world.



Stephen Cripps' studio, D6 Butlers Wharf, Shad Thames, London, 1978. Photo Michael Heindorff

**Largely as a** result of the Space and Acme initiatives, the number of artists living and/or working in the east end of London had grown considerably by the mid-1970s. An indication of the size of the population was given by the task of mailing prospective contributors undertaken by the Whitechapel Art Gallery for its annual Open exhibitions. Around 500 names were quickly gathered in the effort to draw up a definitive mailing list. The gallery had been staging an annual showcasing of work by local artists since the early 1930s, but in 1977 Nicholas Serota, who had taken over as director the previous year, decided to broaden the catchment area and to make it an open submission show. Very much in response to changing circumstances, those living or working in Tower Hamlets and Hackney to the north of the river, and Greenwich and Bermondsey to the south, were all eligible to submit work for consideration. Extending it in this way allowed for inclusion of

both the studios on Royal Hill, Greenwich, and the buildings at Butlers Wharf to the south of Tower Bridge. The response to the gallery's invitation was substantial, and the Open that year included among many others Roger Ackling, Tim Allen, Stephen Buckley, Marc Chaimowicz, Alan Charlton, Stephen Cox, Harry Diamond, Alexis Hunter, Bert Irvin, Robin Klassnik, Mali Morris, Avis Newman, Michael Porter, Simon Read, David Ward, Boyd Webb, Richard Wentworth and Richard Wilson.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike the situation with either Space or Acme, studios at Butlers Wharf were obtained through direct negotiation with the building's owners. In addition to affording studio space to Buckley, Read, Wilson and many others, Butlers Wharf was also home to the B2 performance and X6 dance spaces. Beginning in 1976, B2 was jointly rented by a group of young artists and filmmakers including Alison Winckle, David Critchley, Kevin Atherton and Steven Partridge. I had recently come to London, and had been fortunate enough to get a job painting the walls and cleaning the floors at the Whitechapel Art Gallery. Saturdays in that traditionally Jewish part of the city were always quiet, and walking over the bridge to see a performance was a good way of finishing the day with at least a little conversation. Two evenings in particular I remember. The first was a performance by Alastair MacLennan that required the lighting of a bonfire in the space. (There was, perhaps, not so much attention paid to health and safety issues as might subsequently have to be the case.) As a result of the thick smoke it very quickly became more or less impossible to see anything at all of what was going on. The other was Charlie Hooker's *Percussion Walk 23* in which an increasingly complex rhythmic pattern is built up by five people marching back and forth across the space, banging rhythm sticks each time they walk over marks chalked on the floor by Hooker. The movement of sound in the space, and the requirement that the spectators become involved in the work by themselves moving around the room, was startlingly beautiful, and was just one of the many instances of work at that time which hovered in the margins between the various art forms. There was much crossover between the audiences for, and performers at B2, X6 and, further afield in Camden, the London Musicians Collective and London Film-makers Co-op.

Some years later, in late 1983, Hooker would make another performance in the upper gallery at the Whitechapel. The piece finished with him pulling on the bundled ends of a series of wires that had been threaded behind the room's screen walls. This caused the boards to collapse into the room, providing a symbolic start to the gallery's ambitious renovation programme. That refit saw

the Whitechapel expand to incorporate an adjacent building accessible via Angel Alley. Recently there have been further enlargements. As his contribution to last year's 'Protest and Survive' exhibition, the Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn constructed a temporary bridge from the coffee bar over Angel Alley to the long-established premises of the anarchist Freedom Press on the other side. More permanently, the library to the other side of the gallery has now been made available to it.

**The increasing popularity** of the Whitechapel Opens – 225 artists submitted in 1976, 376 in 1977, and 548 in 1978 – confirmed the extent to which the east end of London had become a home for artists over the preceding decade. Frequent appearances on the artists' address list of Bruce Road, Devons Road, Spanby Road and other sites of GLC short-life housing, also indicated the centrality of Acme's role in bringing this about. The growth in reputation of the Opens, however, was only one symptom of the growing need to find an outlet for the work of those artists who had moved into the area. Space had begun their annual programme of Open Studios in 1975 as another means to connect their tenants with an audience without having to rely on the necessarily restricted opportunities offered by the city's commercial galleries, at that time still largely concentrated around Cork Street in the west end. Although they were situated outside the area under consideration here, both Space and Acme quickly realised the need to set up their own exhibiting spaces, the AIR gallery (which had evolved from Space's sister organisation, the Artists Information Registry) beginning in Shaftesbury Avenue before moving to Rosebery Avenue, and Acme taking up residence in a former warehouse in Covent Garden. Taken together, these phenomena fitted in well with the predominant artistic mood at the time. Just as a post-minimalist and conceptualist legacy was fuelling the enquiries into just what sort of thing art was that had resulted in the dialogue between disciplines mentioned above, the degree to which art making could be kept separate from the related activities of curating, exhibiting, and so forth, was also a matter for debate. Prime among the fruits of this need to function in a professionally ambiguous manner were the decision by Robin Klassnik to invite other artists to show work in his Space studio in Martello Street, London Fields, and the similar move by Maureen Paley to use part of her Acme house as the gallery Interim Art.

Apart from a brief period in the west end just at the time of the late 1980s economic downturn, Interim remained in the Beck Road house in Hackney until its recent move to Bethnal Green.

When the history of art in the east end comes to be written, Beck Road – a small street of terraced houses in which lived more than thirty artists pursuing a wide variety of practices – should probably get a chapter to itself. In spite of there being such a high proportion of artists in the street, it is important to recognise that there was never any intention to create something like an artists' community within the area. The houses became available to Acme gradually, rather than all at once and the numbers grew accordingly, each new occupant being left to find their own place within the life of the borough. Across the road from Interim, for example, lived Ray Walker who, before his early death in 1984, had completed several ambitious murals in the area. Among these, the Chicksand Street mural, facing a recreation area just off Brick Lane, was painted in 1979-80, a commemoration of the 600th anniversary of the Peasants' Revolt in Bow Common Lane the following year, and a celebration of the successful confrontation with Mosley's brownshirts – the 'Battle of Cable Street' – on a gable wall in that road in 1982-3.<sup>6</sup> Another Beck Road resident, and another who, like Walker, sadly died young, was Helen Chadwick. Those of us who teach are aware of how important the example of her work continues to be today for many students in art schools around the country.

The catalogue introduction to the 1977 Whitechapel Open did more than merely acknowledge the recent influx of artists to this part of the capital. It went further in expressing the hope that the exhibition and its successors would contribute to the integration of these new inhabitants into the community:

We have one particular long term wish: we see the Whitechapel Open as one way of extending the place of the visual arts in the area beyond the Gallery itself into a wider community. This is a necessary long term goal, not only because the artists represented in the exhibition are part of that community, but because the separation of the visual arts from everyday life has been so complete that the alienation of a vast part of the public from many aspects of the visual arts can now only be broken down by offering them opportunities to experience and take part in the arts in a familiar environment, such as their homes or at work.

The two signatories to the text were Serota himself and Martin Rewcastle, the gallery's Education and Community Officer. This newly created post, consonant with the spirit of the times, was part of the gallery's effort to create more substan-





Beck Road, Hackney, 1988, Photo: Edward Woodman

tial links with the people and institutions of the area. As one gesture towards the realisation of this goal, the poster inviting submissions for the exhibition was printed in Bengali as well as English, a reflection of the gallery's desire to forge links with the large Bangladeshi community centred on Brick Lane. The mounting at the gallery of the historical exhibition, 'The Arts of Bengal', in 1981 emphasised this aspect of its role in the broader cultural life of the area. It had also previously put on 'The Tower Hamlets Show', and although that exhibition brought much of the variety of community based arts activity into the purview of those who regularly went to see the more established visual arts, there remained throughout this period, despite the rhetoric for a socially aware art practice prevalent in the 1970s, a fairly clear distinction between the constituencies for the different approaches. What did happen through the Whitechapel, though, was the establishing of a strong programme of 'Artists in Schools' placements, particularly under Jenni Lomax who had previously been working in nearby Toynbee Hall. Several schools, both in Tower Hamlets and Hackney, invited an individual artist on to their premises for a short period, both to make their own work, and to run workshops with the pupils. This developed subsequently to encompass placements in other working environments, such as the health centre on Brick Lane. The idea of placements, encouraged and supported by the various arts funding bodies at the time was in part derived from interest in the activities of John Latham and Barbara Steveni's Artist Placement Group (APG). APG championed the notion that an artist who was allowed to practise freely within an industrial or governmental structure would be able to propose innovative solutions to problems since he or she could work across and between the established channels of operation and command. Two artists who had experience of APG through their involvement with

Stuart Brisley's controversial placement in the north east new town of Peterlee were Peter Dunn and Lorraine Leeson. In the east end they worked with local pressure groups to produce a series of posters in support of the campaign to keep the threatened Bethnal Green hospital open. Subsequent to this they worked with residents of the Isle of Dogs on a billboard campaign aimed at articulating the needs and wishes of those whose way of life was in danger of being swept away by wholesale commercial development.

**Robin Klassnik's Matt's Gallery** was never conceived as a straightforward showing space into which he, as director, would introduce work made elsewhere for display. Instead, each show was understood as the outcome of a collaborative project between himself and an artist responding to the opportunities thrown up by the space itself. Even when the work was finished, the place remained more of a studio, perhaps even a domestic space, than a regular art venue. Visitors had to ring the bell and wait to be let in by Klassnik and accompanied through the rest of the studio block to Matt's Gallery, where they could look at and discuss the work with him before being let out of the building again. It was impossible simply to take a quick look and walk out again, and because of this one was forced, as part of a 'captive' audience, to take time with the work. In response to suggestions that Matt's was a conceptual gallery, Klassnik replied that he thought of himself as 'running a gallery that shows thinking artists.'

Matt's Gallery, which opened in the autumn of 1979, was in fact modelled on a similar space run by Klassnik's friend Jaroslaw Koslowski in Poznań. Far from being a career change from artist to gallery director, he saw it as a natural extension of the work he had been doing as an artist up to that time. 'In the past,' he said, 'I often used the public to make works for me, and I don't see Matt's Gallery as being that different. I see it as part of my own creative output.' What Klassnik saw himself as having done was to introduce a 'professional attitude' to working with artists, and while Matt's Gallery received funding from what was then the Greater London Arts Association, such professionalism was not at all the same thing as functioning respectfully according to the precepts of the prevailing art world bureaucracy. The focus was entirely on realising the work, and although there was no ideological objection to selling if and when someone offered to buy, there was no thought at all given to the active soliciting of purchasers.

Given the consistent manner in which Klassnik has applied these principles, both at Martello



*She Came in Through the Bathroom Window*, Richard Wilson, Matt's Gallery, 1989, Photo: Edward Woodman

Street and from 1992 in his new, larger space in Acme's Copperfield Road premises, it is interesting that the one work in Charles Saatchi's large collection of British art that is permanently installed in his north London gallery is Richard Wilson's *20:50*, first shown at Matt's Gallery in 1987. It was one of a series of works Wilson made there – *Sheer Fluke*, *20:50*, *She Came in Through the Bathroom Window* – each of which addressed the physical space of the gallery. *She Came in through the Bathroom Window* (1989) involved pulling a 16 foot section of the window that ran the length of one entire wall right into the room. The frame was attached to the opening in the wall by lengths of concertinaed white PVC so that the whole thing formed a kind of lens and bellows, turning the space into an inverted camera. Wilson's manipulation of the fabric of the building in this way continued a history of such engagements that could be traced back to the spectacular work of the American Gordon Matta Clark in the 1970s. More immediately, though, it stood in relation to the rich history of The Acme Gallery. The short life of that space – it was open for less than five years – saw, among other things, Ron Haselden use it as a dry dock in which to reconstruct a boat, Stuart Brisley break through from one floor to

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another, Stephen Cripps' pyrotechnic performances and Kerry Trengove tunnel out of the building altogether. The work of Cripps, who died in 1982, was a strong influence on the Bow Gamelan Ensemble, a trio that performed throughout the 1980s using drainpipes, bedsteads and assorted other found materials for instruments, and whose blowtorch-wielding members included Wilson, the performance artist Anne Bean and percussionist Paul Burwell. It should not be inferred from the brief list above, however, that The Acme Gallery was intent on the promotion of a particular kind of work. Alongside events and performances such as these in its biography one is as likely to find exhibitions of paintings by John Bellany, Bert Irvin, or Anthony Whishaw. It was Wilson who inaugurated the second of two gallery spaces in the new Matt's Gallery at Copperfield Road with his *watertable* (1994), an installation that at one and the same time provided both a link with the previous activities through its strategy of architectural intervention, and a confirmation of the gallery's new location in its emphasis on the building's surroundings. A section of concrete pipe set into a billiard table that had been sunk level with the floor reached down to the very shallow water table, thereby tying the gallery to the canal outside and to the gasometers that rose up out of, and sank back into the ground on the far bank.

The broad range of artistic approaches encompassed by The Acme Gallery's programme reflects the organisation's general position vis-à-vis the artists it serves. Beyond evidence that one was serious and committed to some form of creative endeavour, no other guarantees have ever been required of Acme's tenants. Because its essential philosophy has been to provide as unrestricted a working environment as possible, there has never been a desire to fix the precise form in which that might be delivered. This open stance has meant that the organisation has been able to remain flexible in the face of changing economic and political circumstances, and has been able to exploit resources as and when they have become available. Thus the gradual transformation from an organisation initially concerned to provide artists with living accommodation, through the taking on of increasing numbers of studio properties since the 1980s, to the current schemes to consolidate this role by developing and selling off a portion of acquired properties as work/live units, has been achieved without compromising that fundamental aim.<sup>8</sup>

**Although Acme itself** ceased any direct role in running a gallery once the Covent Garden warehouse was handed back to the GLC, it remained



peripherally involved, not only in housing Matt's Gallery, but also insofar as The Showroom, opened in 1983, forms part of the Robinson Road studio complex. Initially run as a bookable space, Acme granted David Thorp a licence to run it as a public gallery in 1988. It survived in this guise for a couple of years until, after a brief hiatus, it was set up as a new company with first Kim Sweet and then Kirsty Ogg in charge of the programme. Just as *20:50* sits in the popular imagination as the model for the collaborative venture in which Klassnik was engaged, so Mona Hatoum's *Light at the End* remains in the memory as a powerfully successful use of The Showroom's awkward triangular floor plan. Drawn into the darkened room by a comforting glow in the distance, it came as a real shock to realise that the light was coming from a series of unguarded electric heating bars. Notwithstanding the place of *Light at the End* in the gallery's history and in the development of Hatoum's career, there have been many other interesting solutions to The Showroom's unique qualities. To cite just one example, in 1996 Elizabeth Wright built a fragment of a bungalow in the front part of the gallery. Derived from design ideas that had been developed in 1943 by the Stepney Reconstruction Group, it represented the kind of dwelling that local people would prefer to see built when the borough's dilapidated and bomb-damaged buildings were modernised. The County of London Plan of that year had proposed a building programme consisting mainly of flats rather than houses as a way of accommodating the population:



*Working 12 Days at the Acme Gallery*, Ron Haselden, The Acme Gallery, 1978

Obsolescence, overcrowding, insanitary conditions, lack of open spaces, inadequate road systems and bomb damage, require now, or within a short term of years, a high degree of reconstruction in conformity with modern accepted standards. Comprehensive re-planning schemes have become essential as a means of ensuring satisfactory living and working conditions, and economy in cost.<sup>9</sup>

The Stepney inhabitants were disinclined to accept this plan and so did their own survey of people's wishes and needs. In the event, of course, the Plan was put into effect, large parts of the east end were demolished in order to achieve its aims, and roughly 40% of the population were moved out of the area to new towns in the surrounding counties. In part then, what was represented in Wright's house and in the facsimiles of all the related documentation that were placed in the rear gallery, was one of the factors contributing to the set of circumstances that encouraged artists to move into the east end.

**Due to their** longevity, Interim, Matt's Gallery and The Showroom now stand as established orientation points in the artistic history of the area. To that trio should probably be added Chisenhale, a gallery which, like The Showroom, was set up in the establishing of a studio block. The body which runs the Chisenhale building, Arts Place Trust (APT), was formed in the early 1980s by a group of those artists who had been forced to leave Butlers Wharf prior to its conversion into loft apartments and a Conran eatery. With them were several dancers who transferred with the X6 sprung floor, thus maintaining one of those interdisciplinary relationships that had been so productive in the 1970s. In 1994, then gallery director Jonathan Watkins invited the musician David Cunningham to make a show in the space. Cunningham fixed sensitive microphones on opposite walls and fed the signals from these through an amplifier to speakers set against the other two walls. What was 'exhibited', therefore, was the space itself through the movements and sounds of those who occupied it. A noise gate was put into the system so that when the inevitable feedback reached a certain level it would cut out and start to build up again. When installing the work, Cunningham was puzzled by the curiously incoherent mix of basic frequencies that were generated. It was as if the space he was hearing was not the one he occupied. The reason for this, he finally realised, was that the walls of the gallery were not the walls of the building, and that what the system was revealing was the larger,

structurally basic space beyond within which the gallery had been constructed. Less physically intrusive than those earlier investigations into architectural fabric, Cunningham's installation (*The Listening Room*) nonetheless revealed the history of the building and the character of its present occupation in a closely related manner.

**Less physically intrusive than those earlier investigations into architectural fabric, the installation nonetheless revealed the history of the building and the character of its present occupation.**

**Lying as they** do close to Tower Bridge, St Katharine Dock and Butlers Wharf were early candidates for transformation as the City began its inexorable march eastwards in this period. As we all know, the less than smooth progress of this advance, not least because of the difficult economic circumstances of the later 1980s, opened up many more opportunities for artists. In her survey of the public response to the 'Brit Pack', Patricia Bickers points out how often it is asserted that 1988 represents something of a starting point:

In most accounts, at home and abroad, 1988, the year of 'Freeze', has come to represent a critical Year Zero, *a terminus post quam*, from which everything that is exciting – hot – in contemporary British art has flowed.<sup>10</sup>

Hirst's show – mounted with help from the London Docklands Development Corporation and with sponsorship from Olympia and York, builders of Canary Wharf, among many others – confirms in the photographic reference of its very title that it is of the moment. Ian Jeffery expressed much the same opinion in his catalogue essay – 'FREEZE IS EIGHTIES ART ... FREEZE is NOW' – and the flurry of shows that succeeded it seemed from a certain perspective merely to reinforce this message.<sup>11</sup> Hirst went on with Billee Sellman and Carl Freedman to stage 'Modern Medicine', 'Gambler' and Michael Landy's 'Market' at Building One, the former Peak Frean's biscuit factory in Bermondsey, and Henry Bond put on the 'East Country Yard Show' in what was about to be changed from Surrey Docks into Surrey Quays. Taken together these exhibitions did much to establish not only the reputations of that generation of Goldsmiths artists, but also those of their peers and immediate successors. Writing on the phenomenon in

*Artforum* a couple of years later, Michael Corris composed a Vorticist-inspired manifesto, blasting those things against which the new generation were reacting. In the midst of the list we read:

Blast the years 1979 to 1990; blast the pasty shadow cast by minuscule Major, wring the neck of all whining late-night show hosts. Blast the deadly chic of Dering Street, the horrors of Hackney (more artists per square metre than any other locale in the Western world; in outlook 'just like New York City, only smaller').<sup>12</sup>

The last point was a reference to Bob Hoskins' description of New York as being much like Hackney only bigger. In light of the rich history that I have been recounting in very truncated terms here, though, the possibility of an alternative view suggests itself. It would take nothing away from the interest, innovation and excitement of those shows and the work they featured, to recognise that, in tactical terms, they represented, not something entirely new and different, but rather just one more shift in the game of exploiting the area's resources for mutual benefit. Indeed, one of the freedoms enjoyed by Hirst and others was that they no longer felt the need to spend time investigating what art was, or what an artist, as opposed to a curator, critic, dealer or whatever, should or should not be doing. That such things had been thought about at length, and worked through in the practices of their predecessors was something upon which they were able to rely implicitly. One could therefore see the rejectionist stance of which Corris wrote as a rhetorical flourish, an effort to assert themselves and not a mere gesture of thoroughgoing dismissal. In this they were indeed of their moment, expressing themselves within the individualistic climate of late Thatcherism. As a somewhat opportune indication that we are dealing here with continuities as much as breaks and new beginnings, it could be pointed out that Anya Gallaccio's contribution to Bond's 'East Country Yard Show' was a ton of oranges spread in a large rectangle on the floor. Together with an orange-motif wallpaper

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Elizabeth Wright, *The Showroom*, 1996

plastering one of the walls, the work made reference to the building's past as a fruit warehouse and its planned future as a luxury residence. Similarly, the Covent Garden warehouse occupied by The Acme Gallery had previously been used to store bananas.

Time and again, the past forces its way into the present, inspiring the making of work and materially affecting the conditions of its reception. My memories of another exhibition put on in 1992, for example, are less of the works by Jake and Dinos Chapman, or Sam Taylor Wood that it contained, than they are of the smell that still permeated the Clove Building near Butlers Wharf that was the venue for the show. Being another form of trade, art, too, has its histories that are becoming increasingly densely woven within the overall texture of the east end. Two summers ago Simon Morrissey, who was then working at Matt's Gallery, organised a large group show of work by young artists. 'Word Enough to Take a Life, Word Enough to Save a Life' was held in a disused church, Dilston Grove on the southern edge of Southwark Park. The church had been found as a result of the park's Café Gallery closing for lottery redevelopment and the consequent need for a temporary alternative home in the vicinity. Originally the chapel for the Clare College Mission, it had long been deconsecrated and had, in fact, already enjoyed a life as a studio at the beginning of the 1970s.

**The proliferation of** artistic activity in the years since 'Freeze' and its progeny has continued unabated. New spaces are appropriated, either temporarily or on a longer term basis, and the plaint of that first Space brochure that art supplies are almost impossible to obtain in east London has long been rectified, not least by the presence in Brick Lane of the Atlantis store and gallery. Shoreditch and Hoxton, areas that were still relatively run down only a decade ago, now give a home to many more spaces of varying kinds in amongst design and architectural practices and the inevitably burgeoning number of restaurants and bars. Hoxton Square itself, the site of the late Joshua Compston's garden party events in the early 90s, is now presided over by the Lux cinema and gallery, and the new, cavernous White Cube<sup>2</sup>. To the south is the The Agency, resited in Charlotte Road from its original premises in the Curtain Road studio building, and to the north there are both upmarket – Victoria Miro at Wharf Road – and artist-run spaces such as Five Years, Mellow Birds and 30 Underwood Street. All of these latter three are, once again, part of larger buildings, the remainder of which provide studio space. Mellow Birds occupies one of the spaces previously used by the artists' group Bank for their series of humorous and critically acute attacks on art world complacency during the 1990s. Already those attacks have themselves been swept up in the onward rush of curatorial orthodoxy. Documented and placed in neat vitrines they have been featured in the Tate Modern's 'Century City' exhibition as being exemplary of the London art world in the last decade. 'CHISENHALE: WHY?' Bank asked on the front page of one of one of its spoof tabloids. A thorough account of the rich history of which it is part might go some way towards providing an answer to that question. An alternative reply would be to take a leaf out of the book of those who added their graffiti to Whiteread's House and to ask simply in return, Why not?

Michael Archer

## NOTES

1. James Lingwood, introduction to *Rachel Whiteread: House*, Phaidon, London, 1995, p7
2. *A Proposal to Provide Studio Workshops for Artists*, S.P.A.C.E., 1968
3. David Thompson, catalogue introduction to 'New Generation: 1964', Whitechapel Art Gallery, March May 1964, p7
4. Information published in *Acme: Studios for Artists*, Acme Housing Association Ltd, 1995, p15
5. Catalogue to the 'Whitechapel Open', Whitechapel Art Gallery, 3 – 28 August 1977
6. *Ray Walker*, catalogue to the exhibition of his work at the Royal Festival Hall, 17 May – 16 June 1985
7. This and other quotes by Klassnik from 'Locations and Strategies', *Audio Arts* vol 6 no 4, 1984
8. 'Bohemian Rhapsody', *Evening Standard* Homes and Property section, February 28, 2001, p11
9. Quoted in Kim Sweet's introduction to the catalogue accompanying Elizabeth Wright's exhibition, *The Showroom*, 5 June – 7 July 1996
10. Patricia Bickers, *The Brit Pack: Contemporary British Art, the view from abroad*, Cornerhouse Communiqué no 7, Manchester, 1995, p6
11. Ian Jeffrey, catalogue introduction to 'Freeze', 1988, unpaginated
12. Michael Corris, 'British? Young? Invisible? w/Attitude?', *Artforum*, May 1992, p106



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