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Live Art as Urban Praxis: The Political Aesthetics of the City

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Abstract

This article examines the political possibilities for an aesthetic disruption of urban space and time. Locating the discussion within debates about the neoliberal city, selected art-works from Fierce live art festival in Birmingham, England are used in order to examine how, in a specific and localised context, normative spatial patterns and temporal rhythms can be challenged and subverted. The analysis draws on, and contributes to, a sociological account of the centrality of aesthetics to political and social organisation.

Keywords: City, Urban, Space, Time, Live Art, Political Aesthetics

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Live art as urban praxis: the political aesthetics of the city

> *Why city?*
> *Because it is a contested space.*
> *Because it is used at the same time by many people, sectors, factions, groups whose interests do not by any means coincide.*
> *Because it layers commerce, manufacture, leisure, the political sphere – because it demands negotiations, compromise, co-operation, conflict, agreement in order to function, in order to move.*
> *Because if you look for even a moment at those things, you see ripples out to the bigger questions of our time – the relationship between local and global, between cultures nested in and around each other.*
 Because the city is a model; of dynamic relativism, a space where everything means more than one thing – a nondescript door, invisible for some, is for others the gate to a magical garden, a place of work, worship or otherwise

(Tim Etchells 2008: xii).

Introduction: the political aesthetics of neoliberal cities

1.1 This paper explores urban praxis in the form of the creation of, and participation in, live art. The discussion is located at the intersection of (a) established insights from urban sociology and geography around the spatial and temporal landscapes of contemporary neoliberal politics in the city, and (b) emergent debates exploring the relationship between politics and aesthetics. Examples of live art practice taken from an on-going qualitative study of Fierce Festival in the city of Birmingham, England, are used to explore the opportunities live art presents for disrupting the hegemonic space and time of the city and offering people alternative affective and political engagements with/in the urban environment.

1.2 As the title and the opening quote suggest, the urban focus is significant. A number of commentators have established the ways in which cities are central to sociological investigations into contemporary politics (Lefebvre 1991, 2006; Harvey 1973, 2012; Sennett 1994; Tonkiss 2005). Cities are interdisciplinary, un/ruly and dis/ordered (Whybrow 2010). They are the places where the macro politics of globalising economics make and unmake landscapes and architectures with/in which the micro-politics of many millions of people's day-to-day existences are lived out. They are the locus for resistances and revolutions. Unsurprising, then, that cities are subject to so much and such interesting critical attention. The city that forms the empirical focus of this paper, Birmingham, is a post-industrial metropolitan borough of the West Midlands, England. It has a diverse, multi-cultural population of over one million people. Like other 'global cities' (see Sassen 2001) all over the world, Birmingham has experienced an intensification of neoliberal development in recent decades. Its industrial and manufacturing base has given way to a flourishing of service sector and so-called 'creative industries', transforming not only lives and communities but also the physical landscape as housing estates built to house workers for the car industry turn into 'sink estates', and factories and warehouses are either left to ruin and decay or are 'regenerated' into trendy commercial opportunities[1]. In Birmingham as elsewhere, a key aspect of the neoliberal economic consensus is the normalisation of deep inequalities and a concomitant democratic disenfranchisement of many groups and individuals (see Massey 1993; Means 2011; Purcell 2002; Peck 2005: for discussion in relation to Birmingham see Fenton et al. 2010). In this context, what possibilities remain for the generation of different ways of experiencing and understanding the city?

1.3 In addressing this question, this paper illustrates the deep connections between aesthetics and politics, and as such adds its voice to an emergent field of 'political aesthetics' (Ranci�re 2004; Sartwell 2010; Panagia 2009; Wolfe 2006) that emphasises the vital role of sensory, haptic and spatio-temporal dimensions to politics. A touchstone for these debates is the philosopher Jacques Ranci�re's (2004: 13) definition of aesthetics as

> a system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of space and the possibilities of time.

For Ranci�re, a disruption or redistribution of the dominant forms of sense experience is thus a requisite for politics, which he defines in quite specific ways as being a genuine interruption, a

moment of 'dissensus', in the powerful fabric of the 'police order'. As I have discussed elsewhere (Lambert 2012), Ranci�re uses the concept of 'the police' to describe the ways in which power is organised through institutions and processes in order to legitimate the roles and subject positions which people are able to occupy. The police order maintains the hierarchical structures of the social order based on assumptions about individuals' different and unequal capacities (see Ranci�re 2004; Davies 2010). In contrast *politics*, for Ranci�re, involves a radical dis- or re-ordering of the social world and this is enacted through an aesthetic redistribution which recognises all people's intellectual and creative capacities, and enables different forms of knowledge to be expressed and different roles and subjectivities to be expressed. Alex Means (2011:1091) explains it thus:

> Within neoliberal democratic societies these a priori orders of aesthetic perception represent the normative frames governing social struggles over material provisions of symbolic recognition, and, as such, represent the organising interests of power. The aesthetic dimension, the field of visibility and sayability within the social order, is thus the realm proper to politics itself.

1.4 I suggest in this paper that some forms of live art practice offer genuine examples of interruption and aesthetic redistribution with concomitant possibilities for the political organisation of people and their experiences in the city. However before pursuing this claim further, the following section reviews the critical urban literature in order to establish what can be understood by the normative and dominant aesthetic-politics of the contemporary western city and what kinds of spatial and temporal practices and norms map onto this architecture.

Mapping and disrupting urban space and time

2.1 Building on the insights and arguments from the field of political aesthetics, it is essential to pay critical attention to the aesthetic ordering of the city if we are to make any sense of contemporary urban politics. Central to this ordering are, as Ranci�re (2004:13) put it, 'the properties of space and the possibilities of time'. The production of space and time is political as social relations are established in spatio-temporal terms. As Engin Isin (2002:43) notes, whilst there are differences of emphasis between theorists,

> … that space is a condition of being political, and that spaces of citizenship as expressions of being political always involve buildings … configurations … and arrangements … has been a premise of critical urban studies for some time now.

2.2 In addition, the dynamic relationship between space and time is such that space is imbued with the temporal (see Massey 2005). Space and time are central to both the organisational processes of 'the police' as well as the generation of dissensus (Ranci�re 2004). David Harvey (2012:15) has documented the spatial impact of the vast divides and polarised distribution of wealth and power which increasingly turn cities into

> … fortified fragments, of gated communities and privitized public spaces kept under constant surveillance. The neoliberal protection of private property rights and their values becomes a hegemonic form of politics.

2.3 These fragmentations, fortifications, and surveillances of communities and individuals, result in feelings of alienation and excessive individualisation as the lives of people who live in the city are regulated by the time-space rhythms of capitalist development, the commodification of public space and the concomitant restrictions on (some) people's freedoms, by consumerist

imperatives and the market domination of (almost) all aspects of culture and community (Harvey 2012). Marc Auge (2008) argues that globalisation and the related processes of urbanisation have led to a proliferation of 'empirical non-places' such as transport vehicles, routes and interchanges, retail centres, leisure parks, and hotel chains. Such 'non-places' produce specific social and contractual relations and powers of governance (such as the requirement to purchase a valid ticket or produce an identity document). Auge (2008: 90) tells us that, 'The non-place is the opposite of Utopia: it exists, and it does not contain any organic society'.

2.4 The 'supermodern excess' to which Auge (2008) attributes the proliferation of non-places also has a temporal dimension in the form of an accelerated transformation of history[2]. Extended life expectancy and a corresponding expansion of memories for individuals to hold and process, as well as an overload of events that we try to make sense of, are increasingly common features of contemporary life (Auge 2008). If we add this excess of time to the well documented accounts of the compression of time and space brought about by globalisation, most keenly felt in urban centres where financial transactions across the world take seconds and high speed travel and technology brings distant places closer together (Castells 2009; Harvey 1990; Sassen 1991), we begin to get some sense of the particular ways in which temporality is deployed by contemporary capitalism. A useful account of this, with particular resonance for our understanding of lived urban experience, is provided by Elizabeth Freeman (2010) whose concept of chrononormativity makes explicit the political shaping of our temporal lives by capitalist modes of governance and organisation. She documents the ways in which,

> ... corporations and nation-states seek to adjust the pace of living in the places and people they take on: to quicken up and/or synchronise some elements of everyday existence, while offering up other spaces and activities as leisurely, slow, sacred, cyclical, and so on and thereby repressing or effacing alternative strategies for organising time. Thus being normatively 'modern' is a matter not only of occupying an imagined place and the new end of a sequence but also of living a coordinated, carefully syncopated tempo between a quick time that seems to be enforced and a slow time that seems to be a matter of free choice (Freeman 2010: xii).

Her analysis points to the use of temporality in shaping and delineating our movement and activities, defining chrononormativity as, 'the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity' (Freeman 2010:3). Social relations are in turn produced and embodied as,

> ... people are bound to one another, engrouped, made to feel coherently collective, through particular orchestrations of time ... institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts. Schedules, calendars, time-zones, and even wristwatches inculcate what the sociologist Evitar Zerubavel calls "hidden rhythms", forms of temporal experience that seem natural to those whom they privilege. Manipulations of time convert historically specific regimes of asymmetrical power into seemingly ordinary bodily tempos and routines, which in turn organise the value and meaning of time (Freeman 2010: 3).

2.5 There are echoes in Freeman's analysis of Judith Butler's (1990) account of the reproduction of gendered relations and identities through the stylised repetitions of performative acts that, like chrononormativity, serve to disguise the work of reproduction through seeming to be natural and 'ordinary'. The legibility and intelligibility of individuals' own lives are contained (notwithstanding the extra-ordinary and all its complications) within this apparatus of temporal

normality. As Freeman (2010:4) puts it,

> In a chronobiological society, the state and other institutions, including representational apparatuses, link properly temporalized bodies to narratives and movement and change ... so-called personal histories become legible only within a state-sponsored time-line.

2.6 There are clear political consequences to the selective il/legibility of personal histories whose narratives deviate from this time-line. At the same time, there are clear political possibilities for refusing the link between properly temporalised bodies and linear (progress) narratives and *re*-fusing differently (improperly) temporalised bodies with alternative narratives. The question here is the extent to which urban live art practices provide one possible way in which these 'redistributions of the sensible' as Ranci�re's (2004) puts it, can be enacted and experienced. The scope of artistic and cultural practices to intervene in the political status quo has been well documented (Ruskin 1857/2007; Groys 2008; Bishop 2012). As Harvey (2012: 89) notes:

> The number of workers engaged in cultural activities and production has increased considerably over the past few decades ... and continues to rise ... While commercialisation and market incentives unquestionably dominate in these times, there are plenty of dissident sub-currents and discontents to be detected among cultural producers to make this a fertile field for critical expression and political agitation for the production of a new kind of commons.

2.7 The following section of this paper turns to assess the potential of live art to constitute 'dissident sub-currents'. Such analyses need to proceed with caution. Urban regeneration, operating at the vanguard of the development of the neoliberal city, makes increasing use of what Jamie Peck (2005: 740) scathingly calls the 'credo of creativity'. Such a credo harnesses the skills and influence of an elite 'creative class' (see Florida 2005, 2012) who, 'work quietly with the grain of extant 'neoliberal' development agendas, framed around inter urban competition, gentrification, middle class consumption and place marketing' (Peck 2005: 740-741). Rather than enabling new forms of community, celebrating diversity or being inclusive of social difference, creative cities seek to gentrify through cultural homogeneity. Whilst not wanting to allow the complete co-option of creative thought and action by neoliberal agendas, it must be recognised that even radical art projects depend to some extent on (neoliberal) arts funding initiatives, and there is arguably no space entirely free from the kinds of creative imperatives celebrated by capitalist entrepreneurs such as Richard Florida (2012) and deplored by self-labelled 'philistines' such as Thomas Osborne (2003).

2.8 The locus of Birmingham provides an important context for the following discussion. Critical accounts of the contemporary city have tended to neglect the localised impact of art. In a critique of the 'postmodern' analyses of urban spaces (exemplified by the work of Reyner Banham, Frederick Jameson, Boudrillard and Edward Soja), Amelia Jones (2006) demonstrates that artists who were working in Los Angeles at the same time as Jameson (1984) produced his influential account of the disorienting effects of the Bonaventure Hotel area of the city, offered different experiences which contest Jameson's thesis. Jones (2006: 90) reminds us that different subjects experience particular spaces differently. By failing to account for the partiality and specificity of his own embodied and culturally situated location, Jameson's (1984) account relies on what proponents of feminist methodology, following Donna Haraway (1991), refer to as the detached and disembodied 'god eye' of (male, white, 'western', middle class) privilege (see also Harding 1991). Jones (2006: 91) suggests that some artists (she discusses in particular the work of the

Asco Group, Sam Lee and Susan Stilton) can be credited with,

> Producing a different city – multivalent and never fixed in terms of ethnic, class, gender and sexual experience, though conditioned by (and conditioning of) these modes – they offer other ways of seeing which provide other versions of postmodern, posturban subjectivity.

2.9 These 'other ways of seeing' are explored in the remainder of this paper in relation to the temporal and spatial disruptions enabled by live art practice in Birmingham. I begin with a brief introduction to Fierce Festival and my methods of researching, before presenting three examples of artistic interventions: Graeme Miller's participatory installation *Track*, Hamish Fulton's *Group Walk*, and Mette Edvardsen's *Time Has Fallen Asleep In The Afternoon Sunshine*, which all offered distinctive embodied and affective experiences of the material space and time of the city.

Fierce Festival: 'Live art: Collision: Hyperlocal: Supernow'

> *Hyperlocal: Artists from across the globe showing work in Birmingham developed in Birmingham. Performances sited in locations that re-imagine the city; in car parks, legendary clubs, the Brutalist Central Library and @AE Harris (a venue in an old metal factory) alongside established art centres ....*
>
> *Supernow: adj. [sou'per nou] 1. An intense sense of presence or awareness in a moment. 2. An emergent or contemporaneous form. 3. An attitude provoking new ways of seeing, being, feeling and thinking.*
>
> (*Fierce Festival brochure, April 2012* <http://issuu.com/fiercefestival/docs/aw_fierce_prog2012_web_singlepgs>)

3.1 Fierce is a live art festival with a reputation for producing risk-taking, innovative, challenging art, which has brought queer, disruptive and often beautiful live art practice to the city of Birmingham since 1998. As its tagline 'Live art. Collision. Hyperlocal. Supernow.' indicates, Fierce Festival's curators espouse a specific spatial and temporal politics. Although a detailed discussion of this is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that there are many ways in which the festival as a whole has impacted on the historical development of the city and its politics over the past fifteen years, not least in relation to production of queer representations and the re/vitalisation of public urban spaces (Fierce 2011)[3]. I carried out ethnographic research of the Fierce 2012 festival, attending and participating in all the scheduled events, which amounted to over 100 hours of participant observation, supplemented by detailed field notes, conversations with artists, fellow audience members and volunteers, and formal audio recorded interviews with four of the artists and with the Fierce Press Gang, a group of thirteen 16-19 year olds tasked with 'capturing the story' of the festival through interviewing, photography and film[4]. I also made extensive use of the reviews, blogs, social media commentary and video and image sharing which accompanied the festival. My experience of this eleven days of intensive programming across the city was that it produced a powerfully disorienting set of spatio-temporal relations: the performances themselves and the movement of participants between events connected the city in new ways, bringing about incongruous meetings of people and place in an intensive temporary subculture. My own account resonated in places with Lefebvre's attention in The Right to The City (1905/2006) to the ludic potential of festivals to create a radical 'space of play'. As Kofman and Lebas (1996: 18) put it, festivals for Lefebvre 'represented a moment in the overthrow of habitual use ... heightened moments of the everyday ... entailed an expenditure of surplus'. For the

purposes of this paper, however, the discussion focuses on just three of the artworks featured in the Fierce 2012 programme: Graeme Miller's *Track*, Hamish Fulton's *Group Walk* and Mette Edvardsen's *Time Has Fallen Asleep in the Afternoon Sunshine* (THFAITAS). These have been selected because they most clearly enact both critique and transformation of the chrononormative (Freeman 2010) and the non-place (Auge 2008) of the city in order to offer participants with alternative spatio-temporal experiences. All these artworks were public, free (or extremely low cost in the case of THFAITAS), and attracted a wide and diverse 'audience', which arguably enhances their radical potential. I begin with a discussion of *Track* and *Group Walk*.

Being here, being now: tracking and walking (slowly)

4.1 Graeme Miller's installation *Track* comprised 100m of 'dolly track'[5] installed on scaffolding underneath the Gravelly Hill Interchange of Birmingham's infamous 'Spaghetti Junction'[6]. Visitors first had to find the location, tucked under the raised knotty intersection at which roads, rail and canal interweave, transporting thousands of vehicles through, in and out of Birmingham. The walk to the site of the installation took participants through long, dark, dripping tunnels with flashes of surprising urban beauty in the form of light from the motorway above lighting the graffiti, and reflecting it onto the canal's still surface (see Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1. On route to Track

Figure 2. Reflections on the canal

Figure 3a. On Track

Figure 3b. On Track

4.2 This was own description of my experience of *Track* (see also Figure 3a and 3b):

> When my turn comes, I climb a few steps to the beginning of the track and lie on my back with my feet tucked up on a flat, wooden board fixed to the track. A piece of foam is beneath my head. The board has a long pole attached to it, and a volunteer slowly, serenely, pushes me along the length of the track. Supine, I see the world, literally, from a different perspective. As if I were a camera tracking along, the landscape passes above me: the underneath of the looping roads, the sky between them. I am not sure if it is the sensation of slow movement and being laid out on my back, or the beautiful, surprising architecture that unfolds from this angle, or both, but I am lost in the present. When my journey comes to a jolt at the end of the track, I feel as though I have had no thoughts in my head and although the journey was short I have experienced a kind of timelessness. I realise I hadn't wanted it to stop. (Field notes, 31 April 2012).

4.3 Returning the next day, I 'rode'[7] *Track* a further two times, and perhaps knowing what to expect this time, I felt less and thought more. I noticed the disjunction between the strangely slow pace at which I was travelling relative to the accelerated version of life going on beyond my

vision on the roads above. I thought about how incongruous the feelings of beauty and serenity were amidst this ruined and brutal(ist) landscape. I felt the (guilty?) disconnection between my inaction and the seeming 'pointlessness' of my journey to nowhere, and the purposeful activities of building and maintaining this urban architecture and travelling through it. The labour of construction was evident from this upside-down view: I noted the hand-written markings on the huge stone slabs and imagined the feat of engineering it took to build this glorious monstrosity[8]. The subaltern perspective made visible the individual, historical labours that are usually eradicated or hidden from view.

4.4 The artist Graeme Miller described *Track* as being in keeping with what he calls his 'civic works' which are to do with,

> being useful member of the village in some way … addressing as wide a public as possible … and creating an aesthetic and transforming space.

This utility comes from being what Graeme calls 'an imagineer':

> … the imagination's not used for fantasy or escape. You need every drop of imagination to look at what *is,* and to look at reality, especially anything complex, the complex lives of other people, the reality of, the motion of the planet, you know, what things are made of, all those things are kind of wondrous … Once you start clarifying that frame and emptying it out, it suddenly gets bewildering (Graeme Miller, Interview Thursday 5 April, 2012).

Graeme explains this work as being a response to the contemporary acceleration of everyday, particularly urban, life. He noted that this acceleration makes it difficult to concentrate for any significant amount of time on artworks presented in the form of, for example, a video installation in a gallery. His constructions aim instead at putting the viewer in a time-space in which their body is held and their concentration is captured. In this way *Track* works, in Graeme's words, as

> … a little device for showing that things *are*, that the minute you start staring at them, they become bewilderingly complex, quite mercurial … you need a lot of faith just to keep reality believable.
> (Graeme Miller, Interview Thursday 5 April, 2012).

4.5 Rather than the modernist futuristic pull of progress, the postmodern sensation of disorientation or the supermodern excess of meaning, for the duration of my participation in *Track*, I had indeed felt 'that things are'. The art creates a framing device through which audiences (differently) experience the present. Similarly, Graeme described his second work at the festival (on which he was beginning work at the time of the interview) as part of the Curious Sounds in Curious Spaces free public event[9], in the following terms:

> I'm using tracking again in this next piece I'm doing at Symphony Hall where I'll push a piano very, very slowly all the way out of the building, from the stage, out into Birmingham. Because it happens very slowly … it's like watching an hour hand on a clock. You just notice it's moved, you can't see it moving. You don't know what you've got until it's gone, basically. And so jumps etcetera are happening entirely in your mind and the more slowly you do things the more magical just ordinary sort of doorways and things become.
> (Graeme Miller, Interview Thursday 5 April, 2012).

In this way the purposeful slowing of time is used as a device to enhance our perception and to frame and illuminate – to make 'more magical' – the ordinary, material world around us. It is possible to see *Track* as an example of what philosopher Michel Foucault (1986: 24) calls a 'heterotopia': heterotopias are real sites which have, 'the curious property of being in relation with all other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralise, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror or reflect'. Heterotopias contain representations of and contestations if not disruptions to every-day life. Peter Johnson (2006: 87) describes how:

> Heterotopias … light up an imaginary spatial field, a set of relations that are not separate from dominant structures and ideology, but go against the grain and offer lines of flight ... They offer no resolution or consolation, but disrupt and test our customary notions of ourselves.

4.6 Unlike the 'no place' of utopia, the magical space generated by *Track* was firmly located in (critical) relation to the speed, aesthetics, and purpose of the city above and around it. In addition to their relational properties, heterotopias disrupt normative expectation around the flow of time. Foucault (1986: 26) refers to such temporal displacements as 'heterocronies', explaining that 'the heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men (sic) arrive at a sort of break with their traditional time'. These 'breaks' were enacted on a number of levels by *Track*: the feeling of time slowing or suspended which was generated by the movement of the 'ride', the disjuncture between the travelling speed of the cars above and bodies below, the markers of recent history in the traces of construction from the 1970s and the dated graffiti tags. *Track* opened up a space which at once felt like a world apart and yet simultaneously commented on the space/time of the 'usual' by being its upside down, its underbelly. Although participants' experiences were short-lived, the space the art opened up remains, both in the sense that it exists as a memory and can be re-visited, and also as a prompt to think differently about the 'familiar'.

4.7 Experiencing and thinking critically about Miller's *Track* through the framework of political aesthetics helps materialise some of the embodied, everyday possibilities for disrupting the normative space-time of the city. Commenting on an earlier work of Miller's, entitled *Linked*[10], Carl Lavery (2005: 140-151) notes that,

> While Miller's work encourages the participant to experience, and then reflect on, the cultural significance of space and time, he is not content to use performance merely to reveal these processes. He wants to resist them … performance, Miller argues, ought to find a way of contesting this erasure by providing alternative methods of humanising space.

4.8 Both *Linked* and to a lesser degree *Track* were structured around walking: in the case of *Linked* the artwork took the form of a walk and for *Track* participants needed to undertake the journey I described above in order to get to the site of installation. Like the Situationist International's urban walking in 1950s and 1960s Paris (see McDonough 2009) Miller's works enable participants to see and experience the city '… at ground level and to experience events and sensations that maps and images of the city always miss in their quest for totality and spectacle' (Lavery 2005: 152). Rather than being spectators of the urban environment, *Track* participants were engaged, arguably, in a form of 'witnessing': Lavery (2005: 150) articulates this as part of the methodology of Miller's art practice, which like ethnography involves 'witnessing through empirical immersion, a means of arriving at the general through the particular, the macro through the micro'. Tim Etchells (1999: 17) similarly talks of the ethics and political effects of the act of witnessing as, 'To be present … to feel the weight of things and one's own place in

them' which provides an alternative political stance to that of the spectator[11].

4.9 Hamish Fulton's *Group Walk* generated similar political possibilities. For this, over sixty members of the public congregated to create a collective walking artwork on an expanse of abandoned car park at Birmingham's disused Curzon Street railway station. Like the location for *Track*, this place is embedded in the historical and geographical imagination of the city, and yet is a marginalised space dramatically at odds with the aesthetic of the regulated and regenerated urban spaces which surround it (and into which it will, at some point in the near future, be subsumed). Antagonistic symbolisms abound. The space is flanked by the landmark Millennium Point (<http://www.millenniumpoint.org.uk/>), 'a catalyst for the continued regeneration of Birmingham' (see Figure 4) and a mainline railway which runs in and out of the city. At the top end, there is one of the increasingly ubiquitous privately financed new-build student accommodation blocks (Figure 6), standing opposite the 1838 former railway entrance, now a listed building sitting incongruously amidst the ruins (Figure 5).

Figure 4. The regenerated cityscape beyond the ruins of Curzon Street car park

Figure 5. The 1838 Curzon Street railway entrance and Millennium Point

Figure 6. Group Walk participants with student accommodation in the background

4.10 Our 'walk' was, as I wrote in my research notes, a 'non-walk, or perhaps an anti-walk'. Participants were asked to choose one of the many straight lines on the car park's surface and then walk the length of that line, in silence, for two hours. Some of the lines were no more than ten metres long. As the starting gong was sounded, a hush fell. Tim Edensor (2007:224) writes how,

> Passage through regular sonic realms consolidates a sense of being in place and accompanies habitual routines. In the ruin, the background pulse of the city is quieter, less discernible, and the quiescence generates thoughts of a vanished,

> working soundscape.

Certainly, here, at that moment, I felt both out of place and far from the certainty of habitual routine. My field notes read:

> Time and space are stretching out. I feel a bit despairing. This is the frustration of the slow-down, slow-down. It is like standing still. The landscape around here stretches … trains speed past mocking our stillness. Around us is ruin and unfinished business, a city in a state of transition and reinvention … You day-dream, look back and nothing's moved – or has it? … I watch one person bending down to examine the moss and grass trying to grow between the crack of her line; it's like our attention to detail heightens with the lack of event, narrative, anything. (Field notes, Sunday 8 April, 2012).

Like Graeme Miller's work, *Group Walk* forcibly slowed time down and removed stimulus, action, communication so that what was left was the recognition – to echo Graeme's earlier words, 'that things are'. This is, arguably, a practical response – intellectually and sensorially – to the complexity of the world and the endless drive for futurity – epitomised by the ruinous landscape of Curzon Street car park awaiting redevelopment.

4.11 Reflecting on another of Hamish Fulton's slow walks undertaken in Newcastle, a participant writes:

> It was both very mundane – simply being still, walking very slowly – and quite sublime. I experienced waves of bliss, full of appreciation for this group of strangers and friends, willing to take two hours out of a Saturday afternoon to face themselves and each other, to experiment with time and space, and participate in a community artwork on a scrap of post-industrial land …. We were stepping out of time with the rest of the city, the world, and, unlike on a retreat at the monastery, could actually witness the other world happening in front of our eyes, even though we weren't part of it (France 2012).

Both mine and Linda France's accounts as participants offer different affective responses, but seem to articulate what Doreen Massey's (1993: 67) calls an 'alternative interpretation of place', where

> … what gives a place its specificity is not some long internalised history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of relations, articulated together at a particular locus.

4.12 This ability to witness, at a critical distance, resonates with the designation of the heterotopia as an 'other' space but connected to what is 'happening in front of our eyes' in the rest of the city. Like *Track*, *Group Walk* usefully prompts us to think further about such urban spaces and how they are/can be utilised in terms of the aesthetico-political planning and occupancy. For many of the participants in the walk, the ruins of Curzon Street car park represent a space of 'otherness', a disorienting heterotopia in relation to the usual mapping of our everyday lives, however they are clearly experienced differently by other people. This space is generally occupied by groups of young people who come to 'hang out'. The terrain makes it particularly popular with skateboarders, a number of whom turned up during the two-hour duration of the walk to find their territory being so strangely occupied. As the art participants left, the skateboarders moved in and skated over the lines we had stared at for two hours. These young

people, and the many like them who occupy similar urban sites, are displaced from the 'smooth' regenerated and commercial sites where they often look out of place (dress, demeanor), sound out of place (music, laughter) and move against the regulated patterns of the street or mall (skateboarding, or sitting still for long periods of time) (see Flusty 2000). Like urban explorers or 'urbexers' (Davidov 2008; Laviolette 2010) these young people share,

> … a value system concerned with the locations and material remnants that, in the mainstream capitalist value system are nothing more than negative spaces around the trajectory of economic and industrial progress (Davidov 2008).

In different ways, the activities of both the skateboarders and the *Group Walk* participants constitute an alternative economy of what Andrew Wallace, writing in this journal about the 2011 UK 'riots' refers to as 'moral space-making within the inner city' (2012: 1.2).

Feeling backwards: Time Has Fallen Asleep in the Afternoon Sunshine

5.1 Norwegian artist Mette Edvardsen's work *Time Has Fallen Asleep in The Afternoon Sunshine*[12] (*THFAITAS*) made an interesting intervention in (site-specific) time, foregrounding themes of memory and loss. In Edvardsen's work, five local volunteers joined three artists including the artist, and over a number of weeks learnt a book of their choice in order to become 'a living book'. They were based within the iconic Birmingham Central Library, a brutalist building which opened in 1974 and now faces imminent demolition once the new library (currently in construction) is completed (see Fulcher 2012). Over the course of eight days (Friday 30 March - Saturday 7 April 2012), visitors could book half-hour slots with the living book of their choice. They would be met by the 'book', taken somewhere within the library, and would be 'read' the story in the form of having it spoken to them from memory.

Figure 7. Mette Edvardsen's *THFAITAS*. Photo courtesy of Megan Vaughan

5.2 I found the experience touching (I read four different books), as did other participants:

> It was an incredibly intimate experience, more so than simply being read to. You are listening in at the edges of someone's memory (Grady 2012).

> Someone who I had never met before was reading a one hundred year old story to me, and I was being transported through their living book into Oscar Wilde's imagination. In a society where it is out of the norm to smile to one another on public transport this was a very refreshing experience. A sense of community and inclusion was created as despite the hustle and bustle of modern life someone had taken the time to memorise a whole story and was now spending their time sharing that with me. At certain points in the performance I found myself feeling like a child reminiscing in the joy of having a bedtime story (Fierce Gang Press 2012).

5.3 In multiple ways, then, this project raised personal and collective issues about memory and emotion. The localised struggle to remember embodied in the books themselves, resonated with the bigger sense of memory and displacement symbolised by the library building itself. Referring initially to their long lead-in time spent planning and rehearsing in the library, Mette Edvardsen described how:

> This is different from when you set up, do a show, leave again ... [here] you start to grow into a situation. We have already a history in this place [the library], and so you start to be in the place in a certain way, and also the history of this place which is very special, because it is changing ... sometimes readers will say this also, just this dimension of having you walking around in this building memorising, at the same time knowing that ... even the building physically will be demolished. It's a strong contrast. In this sense, for a little while, you grow into another community somehow (Mette Edvardsen, Interview 5 April, 2012).

5.4 This productive tension of *THFSITAS*, caught between being a positive, affirming experience in the present and yet evoking multiple (personal and collective) losses, resonates with queer theorist Heather Love's attempt to constitute an alternative form of politics in the present by 'feeling backward'. Love (2007: 30) writes:

> It is this disposition towards the past - embracing loss, risking abjection - that I mean to evoke with the phrase "feeling backward" ... I insist on the important of clinging to ruined identities and to histories of injury.

5.5 Love (2007) is working in the context of queer cultural production, where the negative affect of the past might become a mobilising force. Her attempts to tease out 'how this approach to the past might constitute an alternative form of politics in the present' (p 26) are relevant for understanding projects such as THFAITAS which bring time and place together in a specifically localised context. The notion of 'feeling backward' also adds a critical temporal dimension to understanding affective geographies (Taylor 2012; Thrift 2004). In fact many of the Fierce venues created a strong, sensory pull to Birmingham's histories and I would argue that an important politics can arise at the juncture between 'feeling backward' and the 'supernow': a standpoint, grounded in the materiality of a place to stand, which enables a sensory engagement with the multiple pasts without nostalgia or recuperation. Such a politics is an important counter-point to the expanding hegemony of the non-places Auge (2008) delineates.

Conclusions: towards an alternative form of politics?

> *The aesthetic encounter presents a conceptual opening for imagining an imminent*

> *critique beyond judgement, which, through attentiveness to affective intensities carries with it the creative possibilities for dislocating the binding naturalised and taken-for-granted distributions of value inherent to particular social formations and modes of subjectivity. Here the affects generated through aesthetic experience signal moments of ethical potential where new sensibilities for thinking, feeling, seeing, and being with others might be imagined and practiced.* (Means 2011:1090)

6.1 This paper has attempted to explore the possibilities for urban praxis presented by live art. In particular, the discussion has explored the moments of political possibility generated by the art works' re/distribution of urban aesthetics, specifically the spatial patterns and temporal rhythms of the neoliberal city. The art of Miller, Fulton and Edvardsen has been shown to temporarily transform the everyday life of the modern city in ways which run counter to the trajectories of neoliberal individualism, spectacle, consumerism and futurity. The participatory activities these artistic practices offer have the potential to re-activate urban spaces emphasising embodiment, experimentation and play. They generate an intense and sometimes uncomfortable awareness of the present, yet are mindful of history and offer affective ways of engaging with history which challenge narratives of modernist progress and supermodern excess (Auge 2008). In temporal terms, these different art-works defy chrononormativity (Freeman 2010). They craft a physical and experiential 'time-out' from the normative rhythms of urban life and defy the imperative of (economic) productivity by valuing and signifying time spent on the 'pointless' tasks of walking, standing still, lying supine while the landscape passes by, learning a whole book by heart or listening to a story. The specific siting of the works connects disparate places, times and paces of the city and its activities, in ways which do not aim to tell or project any one particular political version of events, but which enable participants to experience and reflect on themselves, their situatedness and their relationship to their surroundings in a specific spatial, temporal and historical context. In the terms of Ranci�re's (2004) definition of the political as a radical dis- or re-ordering of the social world enacted thorough an aesthetic redistribution which recognises all people's intellectual and creative capacities, the work of the artists selected here is exemplary: they do not attempt to teach or even suggest a new form of politics, instead they open a space-time in which different forms of knowledge can be expressed and different roles and subjectivities expressed.

6.2 Although the empirical focus of this research has been live art, the point is not the art itself but rather that live art can serve as an important mechanism for disrupting and re/distributing the normative spatio-temporal aesthetics of the neoliberal city. Live art, as any other art form, does not bring different resources to its projects of subversion and intervention: Ranci�re (2004:19) reminds us that,

> The arts only ever lend to projects of domination or emancipation what they are able to lend to them, that is to say, quite simply, what they have in common with them: bodily positions and movements, functions of speech, the parcelling out of the visible and the invisible.

6.3 There is much work to be done on moving beyond the possibilities for alternative politics identified here and understanding how these possibilities are, or can be, mobilised into action in the context of the neoliberal consensus discussed at the beginning of this paper. My hope for this paper is that it might provide a springboard for such investigation by highlighting not only the sociological potential of live art practice but more generally the central role of political aesthetics as a critical framework for understanding the politics of the city.

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Notes

[1]For example the regeneration of the Eastside area of Birmingham: <www.birmingham.gov.uk/eastside>

[2]Although Auge associates excess with supermodernity, George Simmel (1903/2003) similarly noted how individuals detach from the scene around them in response to the sensory excess of the city and its crowds.

[3]See Fierce (2011). This historical contribution is the subject of on-going research analysing and creating a public archive of Fierce Festival.

[4]The Press Gang were recruited by Ideas Tap http://www.ideastap.com/> with funding from Birmingham City Council's Next Generation Fund. The blog of the festival to which they contributed is available at <www.wearefierce.org/blog>

[5]Dolly track as used when filming to achieve a smooth horizontal ('dolly') shot.

[6]Spaghetti Junction is the popular name for the 1970s Gravelly Hill Interchange, a sprawling network of roads connecting Birmingham to the M6 motorway. It is elevated on over 500 concrete columns above the city's canal and rail networks. For more information and images see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-18173739>.

[7]The artist referred to *Track* as 'zen funfair' (Graeme Miller, Interview Thursday 5 April 2012)

[8]See one participant's perspective <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tYTGoqVZrro>.

[9]This free day-long family event was a collaboration between Fierce and Birmingham's Symphony Hall. It opened the spaces of Symphony Hall - not only the stage and auditorium, but also the 'backroom spaces' such as the Green Room, staff canteen, lockers, toilets and corridors, and filled them with 'curious sounds' generated by experimental sound artists and performances. See <http://curious-sounds.tumblr.com/> for programme and more information.

[10]*Linked* opened in 2003 and consists of a free 3 mile walk or 'treasure trail' stretching across from Hackney Marshes to Redbridge, under the M11 Link Road which was completed in 1999 after the demolition of 400 houses. 20 transmitters are concealed across the route, continually broadcasting hidden voices, recorded testimonies and rekindled memories of those who once lived and worked where the motorway now runs. More information at <http://www.linkedm11.net/>

[11]I am mindful of the risks of oversimplifying the political roles of 'participation' and 'spectatorship'. Spectatorship can be 'emancipatory' (Ranci�re 2009) and participation, 'artificial hell' (Bishop 2012).

[12]The title of the work comes from a sentence in Ray Bradbury's sci-fi novel Farenheit 451, in

which an underground community responds to the burning and banning of books by learning them by heart in order to preserve them for the future.

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