

# History(s) of MEANTIME

Sarah Bowden



<https://www.meantime.org.uk/>

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① This document sets out to explore the dynamics of practice that established the experimental art-space MEANTIME, to create a more comprehensive understanding of the context and conditions that affected the arc of its existence and reflect on its catalysing influence and legacy of informal knowledge and spontaneity. The document will provide no definitive conclusions, in part because the nature of the project resisted fixed categorisation; a radical opportunist, it adapted and reformed at will. Instead, the document intends to initiate a dialogue that calls on some of the people who were present in the realisation of MEANTIME, who were part of the dreaming, to share their thoughts, memories and mis-remembrances; no single truth, many truths. Others have taken the request into new lines of thought and enquiry. Each section reflects on aspects relating to the idea of the project, largely without reference to individual residencies or projects that took place, which are documented elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> This document has provided an opportunity to reinhabit a moment in time, if a moment can last for seven years. Part review, part revision, part exposition, this is a story about a space in time.

1. <https://www.meantime.org.uk/>



*Lynda Whitehouse, 25A Oxford Passage upper floor,  
from a series of portraits, 2014*

② I arrived in Cheltenham in 1998 to study at the art college in Pittville. At the time of my graduation, the town's local art centre and studios, The Axiom, had recently closed due to financial mismanagement. I asked around to find the group attempting to reopen it and joined them. We worked for a number of years advocating for the centre to raise capital funding, however Cheltenham Borough Council (CBC) took the decision to sell the Winchcombe Street site and the group ceased campaigning. A couple of us continued looking for buildings that could become studios and exhibition spaces, inspired by places like Stroud Valleys Artspace, where I'd had a studio for a while.



Sometime later, and still looking, I noticed some interesting storage facilities behind the Lower High Street, and tracked down the owner, a local shopkeeper and landlord. He dismissed the water-logged storage facilities and showed me another building, through an alley around the corner, then in use as the site-office for a new retail development on Cheltenham's former brewery. Mike, the building's owner, was keen I buy the place off him, for a good price. I organised to take on a rental lease. By the time I moved in, Mike had sold the building to his friend Ken who was keen to maximise its commercial potential. He accepted what I was able to muster with the support of the Arts Development Officer at CBC, Paul McKee, whose budget covered the first six months' rent. It was 1 April 2007. The builders left a hard hat and a faulty ladder.

③ The building occupied two stories roughly 45 square metres each. The upper floor was light and open with exposed beams and two sets of windows facing east and west at the front and back of the building. Downstairs there were no windows but two sets of arched double doors that opened to the street. The lower floor had been divided into an office, toilet and meeting room when remodelled as a site-office, stud-walled and plasterboarded throughout, painted magnolia and carpet-tiled. Outside there was no paving and the building fronted directly onto Oxford Passage, a narrow cul-de-sac off the north stretch of the Cheltenham ring-road that attracted traffic looking to cut through to the high street. Opposite stood the backside of the new Brewery complex: offices and apartments, their picture windows with rear views of Bennington Street and parking bays.

25A Oxford Passage had no official name, number or postcode. It was one of two adjacent buildings, around 200 years old, both workshops connected to the rear of terraced houses in the parallel road, Bennington Street. Unofficially, it took the 25 from Bennington Street, occupied by J. & R. Printers. During Adam Burton's residency project in February 2008, we began talking to the printer, Roy Harris. Roy had been working in Bennington Street for over 30 years and would make letterpress publications for different projects with us for the next year or so. They were part of his trade. 25 Bennington Street was completely unmodified since it was first built in the mid-1800s. We discovered that the boarded-up trap-door in the floor of 25A was a brick-lined tunnel that connected to the cellar of the print shop.

When he retired in 2009, Roy asked if we could crack open the plasterboard that covered the back wall of the ground floor project room at 25A. Behind the plasterboard was a door and small covered passage leading to 25 Bennington Street. This was the way the printing presses had gone in. They trolled them out and the scrap merchant craned the giant presses onto the flatbed lorry. Roy wasn't sentimental about leaving, he was pragmatic, and it was a final revelation to see the building as it once functioned: porous, an extension, a workplace.



**Juliet MacDonald:** *The history and layout of the building (with its subterranean tunnel to the print workshop) was significant to the work I made at MEANTIME. I became slightly obsessed by a crack in the concrete floor of the downstairs room. The crack led to a locked hatch. My project was concerned with a buried history, that of a particular chimpanzee, Alpha, who was a laboratory animal in Florida in the mid-20th century. The residency enabled me to take the project out of storage in my attic and to physically work it out, testing various arrangements of objects, drawings and texts in order to graphically retrace aspects of Alpha's life. I wished to investigate her shifting status as 'almost human' and to recreate her part in a drawing experiment.*

*The dimensions of the windowless downstairs room were equivalent to those of a standard animal cage at the laboratories. That became a site in which to consider her stark living quarters, and more generally, the enclosure of experimental animals, and our own sublimated animality. The upstairs space was comparatively light, airy and open, and lent itself to thinking about Alpha's child-like status when she briefly lived in a scientist's home. I created a domestic and study space here and imagined Alpha emerging from the archives and swinging from the rafters.*



④ It felt urgent that the building, the space, should be named in order to exist. And that the name should refer to temporality, something that sounded provisional, something open and ambiguous. It felt like a project that hovered above the town, a project suspended in its own time and space. There were no reference points to the space in the town. When people found it, they couldn't believe it was there. In some ways the name determined the project: nominative determinism. At some point I grew to dislike the name; it began to sound apologetic. People on the outside struggled to understand what MEANTIME was, what it stood for, what it did; as a name it was both too abstract and too suggestive. I don't remember why I went for all-caps.

**Rupert Howe:** You say you don't know why you went for ALL CAPS when styling the name. I'll hazard a guess. Because it made the name appear as an object? Capitalised it becomes more obviously a sequence of letters rather than a word with an already fixed meaning. From there MEANTIME can come to stand for whatever you want.

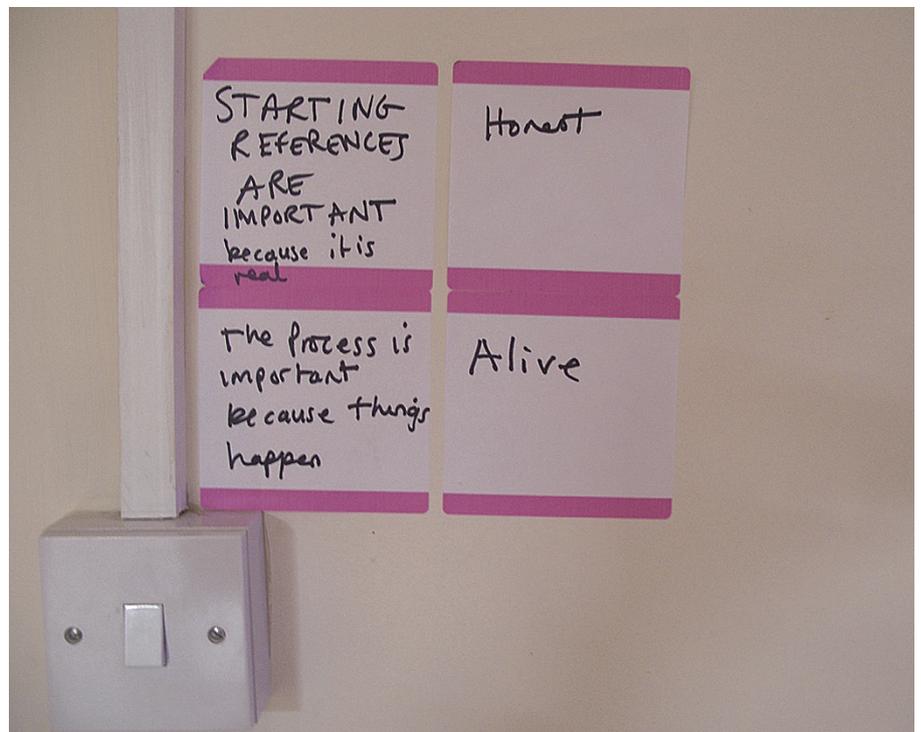
**Dominic Thomas:** I think it must have been the 'farewell' show – *Where Were We?* maybe, to which, as a past contributing artist, I was invited to submit a work; you'll remember better than me. Being stressed and distracted by many things not art I emailed an A4 pdf with just the letters NOTIME in what I hoped was the right font.

'People on the outside struggled to understand what MEANTIME was, what it stood for, what it did' – but this is the trouble with trying to invent a different way of being. People like things that fit the dominant narrative. We have been trained to understand the world beyond our private lives as fitting into simple categories like employment, shopping or entertainment. And yet from my inside/ outside perspective MEANTIME seemed to embrace a wide and diverse 'programme of artists' presentations, discussions, live music, curated film screenings, and so on'.

⑤ MEANTIME launched with an implicit question: how would Cheltenham, the town, its people and institutions, engage with an experimental space for artists? There was no long-term strategy. It was conceived as a temporary proposition, to be open and responsive. This was both a

pragmatic and a critical decision. There were no groups or scene to support a gallery for contemporary art: art students graduated and moved away, and I didn't know of any communities of artists in Cheltenham, nor in Gloucester, only in Stroud, 15 miles away. The few artists I knew I leant on enormously. Plus I had young children whose lives the project, the building, the work, had to fit around. It was going to take time.

**Rupert Howe:** Having personally moved to Stroud in 2006 with an idea of connecting with an artistic community – and almost immediately doing so – it was interesting to then discover Cheltenham didn't have something similar going on. The first times I visited MEANTIME it wasn't clear how it was going to evolve, but Sarah seemed very clear-sighted. Though I do remember meeting her son Dylan – who was around 10 at the time, I think – and wondering how she was going to balance family life with this new project. But one of the great things about MEANTIME was that it made the boundary between artistic practice and so-called real life more permeable.



*Helen Hardaker residency, 2007*

2. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/hakim-bey-t-a-z-the-temporary-autonomous-zone-ontological-anarchy-poetic-terrorism.a4.pdf>

⑥ Two decades earlier I had been a squatter and activist in south London, organising collectives, demos, zines, events. Something in the self-determinacy of these projects resonated and I began to see MEANTIME as an extension of that time, an offshoot germinating under the right conditions, at an angle to existing structures. I drew on squatter methodologies and the creation of intentional communities, spontaneous environments, and people-made places in formulating its mission. MEANTIME was a form of direct action, a commons, a thought-experiment, a temporary autonomous zone:<sup>2</sup> open, permissive and hospitable. Trying things out to see what happened; saying yes to whatever came along.

**Rupert Howe:** It somehow seemed appropriate that Oxford Passage was a dead-end street. Somehow 'off the map'. What with Sarah's background in radical LDN, which I was only dimly aware of at the time, and the building's abraded exterior it now gives the whole period in memory a Laura Oldfield Ford 'edgeland' quality. I also agree that the scale of 25A made finding new purposes seem possible, achievable. That dim downstairs room with the double-doors? Make it into a camera obscura.

**Dominic Thomas:** Coming originally out of the Hackney squat scene and then taking on various empty and abandoned buildings in Stroud and Gloucester for the making of art, 25A came as a seamless but welcome development. Another empty but resonant space for the imagination.

I made it into a camera obscura for Gavin McClafferty's...? group show. Ah yes, thought it was you!

*Juliet MacDonald: Your background in activism and squatting seems like a significant part of this history. MEANTIME was grounded in an understanding of improvised ways of living, acting and questioning established orders of knowledge.*

⑦ At the same time as setting up MEANTIME, the collective *a.group*, comprised of myself, Dominic Thomas and Rupert Howe, were attempting to locate an artistic practice appropriate to the time we were living in. This was, amongst other things, a time of intractable world conflict reverberating to the low hum of the failing New Labour project.

*a.group* employed negotiation, discussion, dispute, debate and contradiction as practice. Our first outing began and ended at MEANTIME, a road-trip to take part in a weekend of live art events in Falmouth. On the way we talked, wrote, sang, bought food, swapped glasses and collected flowers on the motorway verge, a lived experience forensically recorded. Once at the venue and framed within that context, the intention was to replay the documentation and leave space around the table for people to join us in conversation, a case of getting ourselves into a situation to see what happens.

Much of this activity was influenced by Jan Verwoert's publication on Bas Jan Ader, *In Search of the Miraculous*, particularly the passage where Verwoert discusses Ader's technique of 'bringing about a decision by provoking a crisis'.

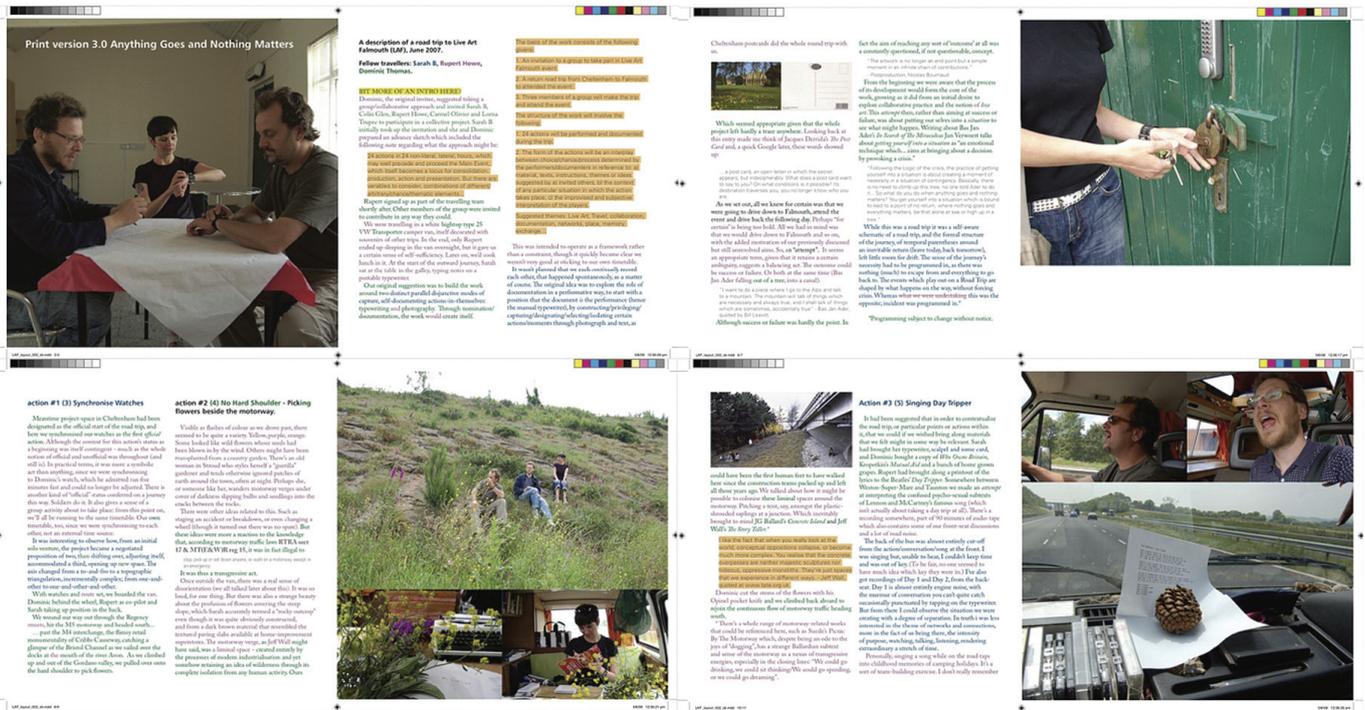
'Following the logic of the crisis, the practice of getting yourself into a situation is about creating a situation of contingency. Basically, there is no need to climb up this tree, no one told Ader to do it, just as no one can tell an artist what to do. So what do you do when anything goes and nothing matters? You get yourself into a situation which is bound to lead up to a point of no return, where nothing goes anymore and everything matters, be that alone at sea or high up in a tree.'<sup>3</sup>

3. Jan Verwoert, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 2006, p.28

Although Verwoert here was discussing Ader's practice of falling from trees and his fatal Atlantic crossing, the idea produced a context for collectively exploring notions of contingency and failure as resources for practice. Ours was what Charles Esche might call a 'modest proposal',<sup>4</sup> a model of small-scale critical engagement with existing conditions through mechanisms of improvised exchanges. *a.group* maintained an indeterminate and fluid position towards artistic production, examining the complex nature of a collective practice, hierarchical structures within the context or site of production, and the conditions of authorship and spectatorship as an extended, or suspended narrative.

4. [https://www.academia.edu/2450774/Modest\\_proposals\\_or\\_why\\_the\\_choice\\_is\\_limited\\_to\\_how\\_the\\_wealth\\_is\\_to\\_be\\_squandered\\_](https://www.academia.edu/2450774/Modest_proposals_or_why_the_choice_is_limited_to_how_the_wealth_is_to_be_squandered_)

**John Walter:** I never heard that quote. Brilliant. I can definitely relate to that in my own practice, from crisis to crisis – I induce these things, which you might call outcomes, as a way of visualising the invisible work that is going on in a continuum.



a. group document, unpublished, that interwove discussions, journeys and references, 2008

⑧ In his text from 2009, *Maybe it would be better if we worked in groups of three*,<sup>5</sup> Liam Gillick states: ‘The discursive is the only structure that allows you to project a problem just out of reach and to work with that permanent displacement.’ The thing with a *group* was that the problem was unnamed, indeterminate. In fact the problem was art-making itself, and so the discursive in reproducing itself, for its own sake, took a trajectory that spiralled inwards, and in 2009 activity was indefinitely deferred.

**Rupert Howe / Dominic Thomas:** It’s funny when you see yourself named in a document. You start to think, Was that me? Was that me? Or another ‘me’? Then you start to think about what happened, how you experienced it and what your place was in that experience. The thing about recording experience is the way it attempts to fix things in time and space. Even though ostensibly the collective practice of the ‘group’ was about recording the minutiae of our own discursive and improvised activities, ultimately nothing was fixed and virtually no trace was left. The thing about using failure as artistic practice is that you are bound never to really succeed... Yes, though as an experience travelling to Live Art Falmouth in June 2007 was also a lot of fun ‘in the moment’. I’d never really tried live art before so the whole thing felt a bit like taking a holiday while high on relational aesthetics. Also Dom’s well-travelled white VW camper van was a bit like MEANTIME on wheels.

Somewhat precarious but adaptable and a place where creative things could just happen. It was also surprisingly reliable – it never broke down. I particularly remember being on the M5, Sarah’s typewriter tapping away in the back. I had a portable Sony tape recorder with me and began recording bits and pieces. Road noise, conversations, more road noise. I have that tape somewhere. The Liam Gillick text is also a key reference point for me. And re-reading it, still is. That sense of contingency being integral to the ‘work’. Also the opening quote from Philippe Parreno: ‘Some people are the motor of the event...’ Was this Sarah? Working to move things along, sometimes in the background like a visitor ‘observing the party’ (Parreno again), but always present and a part of whatever was happening.

⑨ Collective production, collaborative working, the focus and enquiry of *a.group* created a context in relation to conceptual practice that directly informed the development of MEANTIME. It led to the formation of a curatorial practice investigating the function of art in a social reality, asking questions of artistic methodology, production and presentation, examining how and why art is made and shared. Knowledge through practice. The experimentation at the heart of the project extended to artists with an open-ended invitation to work with not-knowing, to try out new ideas and processes.

**Rupert Howe:** I remember talking a lot about collaborative working as art practice around this time, though it didn’t always work. For instance, when Sarah writes about ‘the collective *a.group*’, I think, Was that really the name? Did we ever formally decide on ‘*a.group*’ as a name for whatever it was we were doing? But in the end, it didn’t matter since things seemed to happen anyway.

⑩ Early on it became clear MEANTIME was to be a site of production, rather than presentation, an offer of time and space for speculative or negotiated outcomes. This made sense of the building’s historical function as workshop, it made sense of the discursive framework, it made sense of holding or occupying space. It also allowed for a process of being in and moving through a particular space, and of hanging around as a form of production. Artists would work to a proposed project with outcomes diverging, dissolving or

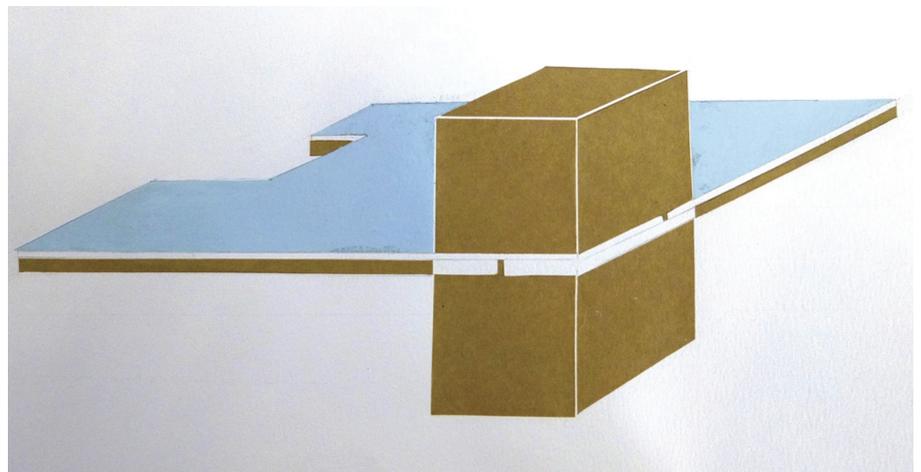
occasionally remaining stable to original intentions. My role would shift from residency to residency to engage in the context around different artistic processes. For some the experience was cathartic, for others working through their practice was a kind of critical reckoning and they resolved never to make art again.

***Elaine Fisher:*** *My first experience with MEANTIME was during an MA Residency in March 2014. I submitted a brief to explore new ways of working (substituting photography with drawing and collage to research and remember form from the inside out) and examine, as form and space, the structures and supports that made MEANTIME a platform for artists and artistic practice.*

*The installation I created for the end of residency exhibition was a triangulation of my investigations in which the three-dimensional fabric and space of MEANTIME (floor boards with plastercast model of the imagined space between) and the two-dimensional documentation of its projects (the same space collaged using promotional material from MEANTIME's past residencies) pointed towards a fourth dimension, a video work in which the experiential aspects of MEANTIME were explored.*

*Positioned inside the cavity of a boarded-up window, looking into the building 'as if' from the outside, the video records and shows, on a seemingly never-ending loop, the opening and closing of a work space (the window cover dropping down to form a cantilevered desk) each day, between each residency, between MEANTIME's identities as working space and gallery.<sup>6</sup>*

6. <https://youtu.be/tyyA35v8vkU>



*Elaine Fisher, 2014*

⑪ For this informally produced practice to have any relevance MEANTIME had to build a community around the work. Audiences weren't a given; there was and continues to be a conspicuous underdevelopment of the visual arts in Cheltenham's cultural infrastructure. It was slow-going. In those first few months, people attended events in tragically small numbers. On 8 May 2008, during a series of events commemorating the legacy of May '68, I received notice from the Arts Council that my first application for a year-long programme was successful. That evening was scheduled a screening of *Society of the Spectacle*. No one came. I opened a bottle of wine and watched the film.

**Martin Wooster:** MEANTIME fought its battles against the rising tide of capitalism's production of images, which in reality was never just a retreat from the madness of capitalism's hyper-activity but a necessity to form a resistance against being the best participants in its game. If capitalism continues to champion the need to maintain the inner peace of non-thinking our resistance had taught us to concentrate on those unsettling forces, whatever the risks of this operation, because to choose to be radical in the search for freedom already knows that not-knowing lies at the very heart of thinking and necessarily leads thought into the night. Thus, to embrace negativity is not to revel in the nihilism of our age busy contracting the political space in its destructive reproduction, but to discover in its performative use a means to open a different path of freedom, both individual and collective, and as such one less vulgar, less all too human.

⑫ Finding allies in musicians, cine buffs, lecturers, students, people looking for people, people wanting to perform or show their work, people looking to get involved in a collective endeavour, the community gradually expanded. Visits and conversations with Peter Stiles, visual arts officer for the Arts Council in the south west, plus support through the former ALIAS scheme – a hugely important advisory service for the development of artist-led groups in the SW – provided back-up, resources and shared knowledge. This worked as a kind of brace for the climb; the more it was discussed the stronger the project emerged.

13 Early funding proposals talk about the building itself as a catalyst for activity. This was fundamental: MEANTIME as a shell, a bounded yet porous entity, a construct with the capacity to change and transform. Its presence addressed the purpose of occupying space: what can/should be done with it? It destabilised the fixed position of the art-space or gallery and expanded the resources offered, who and what it represented, with a pluralist approach. This was negotiated with the people who occupied and attended to it, by the accumulation of time invested, and interest.

**John Walter:** I think this is what was unique about MEANTIME and what made it urgent and important in that place. A real lifeline. Certainly for me it was a test site. In retrospect, my project at MEANTIME was one of several projects that I did with spaces outside London around that time and what they enabled me to do was put big experiments to the test, which was not a possibility elsewhere.



*Kate Lepper residency, 2012*

14 MEANTIME was an important location for locally based practitioners – artists, musicians, writers. With its restless programme of artists' presentations, discussions, live music, curated film screenings and so on, it provided a form of sustenance otherwise unavailable over a wide radius. It addressed a need for a space that was available, open to

experimentation, and open to the idea that the roles of audience and producer were permeable, able to be flipped. MEANTIME was a place of exchange. It was a space of invitation to practitioners and audiences that attempted as far as possible to flatten conventional cultural power relations and extractive practices.

**Rupert Howe:** Yes, MEANTIME's 'restless programme' felt like it opened up a space that was as energising for participants – who could just turn up and let things happen – as it was for the audience.

15 Out of necessity MEANTIME created its own, continuously evolving context. Although geographically isolated the project was aligned with artist-led projects, spaces and networks of self-organised practitioners in urban and rural locations around the UK. A key intention of MEANTIME was to develop the visual arts ecology of the region, to offer a model for artists, students, returning graduates to see the possibilities and seize opportunities, so that a cluster of grassroots activity might germinate, sustain and support each other.

**Patrick Lowry:** The MEANTIME residency in 2009 was my first residency anywhere and was in several ways a significant opportunity for me. Not only did it offer me the opportunity of a dedicated period of time to develop a new, site-specific piece of work, it also made me realise how beneficial the opportunity to have uninterrupted time, a good-sized, dedicated, making and exhibiting space, along with critical support, was to the development of my practice. But even more significantly, the residency happened at the same time that I, along with two other artists, had acquired a space in Redruth, Cornwall, later named Back Lane West. Drawing on my own experience of the artist-led residency model of support and collaboration developed at MEANTIME, it became clear that we should try to develop Back Lane West along similar lines. The adoption of the model instigated by Sarah for MEANTIME has led Back Lane West to over 10 years of activity and has

involved many artists and associated audiences, local, national and international, along with the development of links and exchanges between artists across the world including the US, Germany, France, Italy, Ukraine, Russia, and South Korea.

*Jane Lowry: Having developed BLW initially from the experience of the MEANTIME model, it is interesting, I think, how we have each developed, based on our locally experienced dynamics, opportunities, and influences. As BLW had no funding, or only for specific projects and to pay the rent, we could offer very little apart from the space and our/other artists' support. We had to ask artists for a small fee to cover basic overheads so it made sense that the residencies were conceived of as being for the artist, with a mutual benefit from, and to, any interested local artists. Building and holding an interested, involved community is not easy. Being even further geographically isolated actually provided the spur, we didn't just want to be endlessly talking to ourselves in Cornwall. We recognised that beyond providing the space, time, and artist community within Cornwall, the most important other resource that artists need is connections, routes, and pathways to wider opportunities, as their work develops, and to develop their work.*



16 Sometime after founding MEANTIME, in 2010 I met the organiser of Retreat,<sup>7</sup> Michael Whitby, when he attended Tom Down's residency event. Tom and Michael had studied together at Wimbledon. Retreat is an annual week-long self-organised, self-funded residential workshop that offers 'fresh air, communal living and artistic discourse' with groups of around twenty broadly defined practising artists. The web of those attending began with the organiser and has built successively from invitations extended by previous attendees – a literal manifestation of a network in action. Retreat is structured to create a temporary community with each iteration and facilitates a mutually committed environment focused on interests and practices (everyone attending gives a presentation) and acts of care (everyone attending cooks a meal). There is something transformational in the attention to everyday practices, the generosity of its organisation, the intensity of purpose, and in critical exchange that is both safe and rigorous. The spaces of Retreat were important loci of discovery and engagement through the seven workshops I attended, introducing the work of many practitioners who undertook residencies at MEANTIME.

17 In his Retreat presentation John Walter discussed the idea of hospitality as practice, attending to the space of human relations within his work by inviting people into a space of engagement with art objects through conversation, costume and jesting, food, drink and friendship. This offered a framework for thinking about MEANTIME's *modus operandi* as a hosting relationship, supporting artists at crucial times in their careers and providing opportunities to make new work. The human scale of the operation suggested a domestic dwelling – the physical dimensions of the building equivalent to those of a two-storey terraced house, its public spaces calibrated for one person to maintain.

**John Walter:** This meeting at RETREAT was a fundamental moment in my development; meeting you and other key people whom I worked with around that time and continue to work with to this day. It was a confluence and enabled unlikely meetings of people, which otherwise would not have happened.

Honestly though, I can't imagine not having done *The Tarot Garden* and *The John McCririck Memorial Bar*. They are such seminal projects for me. I still show

them all the time. They are very important intellectual and visual building blocks in my oeuvre.

Do you remember finding that yellow material we covered the floor in? That was amazing! And cheap I remember... The 'laws of hospitality' that you mention – if I can call them that, because I think they have been proven over a long time now to hold true – are fundamental rules of engagement. They have proven useful right up to my current artist-in-residence role at Kavli Institute in Delft. Going towards people rewards them and you with a bond that is the building block for the art to happen. It's like quantum dynamics – there is an idea of entanglement in which particles are birthed or join. Something like this is going on in making art but also in engaging audiences too.



*John Walter, The Tarot Garden, 2012*

*Juliet MacDonald: I felt at home during my residency at MEANTIME. I actually slept there, with a sleeping bag on the floor of the upstairs space, looking up at the rafters, surrounded by the paraphernalia of my experiments. I made myself at home in a way that is possible only in a temporary encampment: setting up around me the limited items needed for comfort and meaningful existence, getting to know the local area and establishing little routines that last only for the short period of occupation. I have happy memories of it. The relocation from my usual home/work gave me the space and time to think like an artist.*

*Sarah, your hospitality contributed to this feeling. You were generous with your time, invited me to your home to eat with your family, and provided critical discussion and careful consideration of my work. This created a welcoming space for the uncertainty I felt about my artistic project.*



18 The responsibilities of host extended outwards to the neighbours. An early altercation between musicians, their van and The Brewery security, with the ensuing letter to the council alleging regular parties and drug-taking, was a reminder that it was important to make friends and allies. Although well within the town centre, the building was in a quiet residential area and despite occasional raucous sonic events, we didn't receive a word of complaint from close neighbours.

**Rupert Howe:** Though I always thought MEANTIME would be a great place for a rave.

19 Early in 2010 I invited local MP Martin Horwood to visit MEANTIME following his declaration in the local press of Cheltenham's need for a new arts centre. He was openly underwhelmed by the modesty and scale of the operation and was keen to know where I'd *really* like to be. Horwood's idea was for the new Arts Centre to be self-financing through corporate hire, as public funding for the arts was finished. As a space for the public that is publicly funded, I wondered aloud how MEANTIME would fare in a world imperilled by corporate and private interests.



*Wojciech Kosma, Waterfall event, 2007*

20 The residency programme was constructed, as far as artists engaged with it, to examine the context within which it was operating. Most often the building on Oxford Passage was the stage and focus, with the town's rotation of festivals and heritage playing out at a distance. Locating MEANTIME alongside other realities, global realities and complexes, against a backdrop of conflict, economic calamity, political conservatism, austerity and cuts, with hindsight it is interesting to see how far these realities were addressed through practice. Probably in just a handful of cases.

**Martin Wooster:** MEANTIME was – and still is as memory – an attempt to break free. It sought to break free from the weight of history (Cheltenham), from the weight of an absence that now dominates the political scene and is increasingly absorbed by human suffering (neoliberalism), and from a culture of destruction that can no longer tolerate the other as an obstacle of complexity, ambivalence and contradiction (global finance capitalism).

21 In May 2010, just as the Liberal Democrat party went into coalition with the Conservative party and set the next decade's political agenda, the artist Chie Konishi and

I organised a town meeting. With Martin Horwood's calls for a new arts centre, the University's proposed relocation of Pittville arts campus, and the temporary closure of the Art Gallery & Museum for major building works in the coming months, Cheltenham was undergoing a period of change in its arts infrastructure. Through our conversations, Chie and I wondered about the ambitions for the visual arts in the town, and wanted to hear from the various institutions, groups and individuals with an interest in the field of art production. *Are We OK?* would help us gauge the impact of MEANTIME on the cultural ecology of Cheltenham and the wider the region.

Furthermore, given that we live in a world in need of a radical re-imagining, we speculated as to how artistic representation could be used as a platform to formulate and disseminate new models of thought, activity and engagement in the process of constructing the future.

**NOTICE**

On the Occasion of the third Anniversary of MEANTIME

**ARE WE OK?**

An Open Invitation to All Citizens of Cheltenham & All strangers to  
join in a Discussion and

**PUBLIC FORUM**

to Debate Questions proposed as to the Value and Function of  
*ARTISTIC ENQUIRY*  
and to Speculate on its Role in Producing the Future

ON

**FRIDAY 14th MAY 2010**  
2 - 5 p.m.  
AT

**MEANTIME, OXFORD PASSAGE, CHELTENHAM**

**ENROL YOURSELF** 

[www.meantime.org.uk](http://www.meantime.org.uk)

22 The forum was attended by a cross-section of artists, arts organisers, educators, a politician and members of the public. Its intention was to invite discussion around different forms of cultural process and production, in some way to address tensions surrounding the MEANTIME project and relations with the town.

Having posed the questions, rather than directing answers or conclusions, the floor was left open to see what surfaced through discussion. Further questions were asked about the priorities of cultural provision and resources. We discussed how MEANTIME negotiates the double-edge of visibility and invisibility, of being in Cheltenham, and the challenge of creating a context for the visual arts and building audiences for the work. The reluctance of larger institutions to champion smaller initiatives was noted. The questions themselves pointed to the impossibility of MEANTIME, occupying a territory that has no institutional map, but with a sense of itself as a part of a wider domain.

**Martin Wooster:** Are We OK? This I believe is as much a spiritual as a literary question. It is also one that inevitably brings us to a limit of what language itself can say about the crisis of meaning that now besets our lives. Faced with the malignant narcissism of the capitalist system in which the pressure to conform is relentless and the obligation to enjoy that has become as much a part of the mechanism of oppression as renunciation has, the question thus challenges thought to address how is it possible to collectively break with such a paralysing power.



23 Over time things shifted and took more intentional turns. The MEANTIME project morphed from a temporary zone into something more open-ended, something with momentum. The commitment to new work and experimental practice found a new context with the artists and networks around Retreat, and expanded the scope and scale of work being produced on residencies. Network connected to network and the sense of isolation began to diminish.

*Grace Davies: This was a time when artist-led spaces continued to pop up across the region and beyond, and a network of artists resources, spaces and opportunities was contributing to a vibrant creative ecology. And the conviviality of the spaces was enabling exchange and discourse across broad geographical areas, building a supportive cohort of practitioners.*

*MEANTIME was one of a number of artist-led spaces that placed their focus on the production and experimentation – rather than the presentation – of creative practice. This dedication to the development of practice in the region was identified as a clear need by and for practitioners, at a time when sustaining a creative practice career was increasingly more challenging. Though the demand from practitioners was clear, the relative lack of public engagement opportunities made gaining funding for these spaces difficult – either through Arts Council funding, other trusts and foundations or corporate sponsorship.*

24 Following *Are We OK?* I was keen to continue the conversation and bring other voices and expertise to address the issue of visibility by discussing the circulation and impact of MEANTIME's communications. Here I was influenced by artist-led gallery Eastside Projects, who had launched around the same time as MEANTIME. In October 2011 Eastside Projects convened a three-day *Public Evaluation Event* at the gallery that de- and re-constructed the practice of reflection and analysis around the various elements that make up the Eastside whole. Particularly interesting was the integration of design processes – from mailed posters to user manuals<sup>8</sup> and crowd-sourced typographics – in both the conception of the gallery and their marketing output.

8. <https://eastsideprojects.org/about/users-manual/>

*MEANTIME: Communicating* took place in 2012, an invitation for people to feed back on the ways the project engaged with the public, alongside artist and designer Adam Burton.

The gathering provided much insightful commentary into how the building, and the project, spoke to people: the careful anonymity of the building's exterior had to go; it was time to let people know what went on inside. We installed an outside light. We worked on the website's digital presence and a more intentional logo was produced. This process set in train a resolve to create further opportunities to work with people on the development of the project.

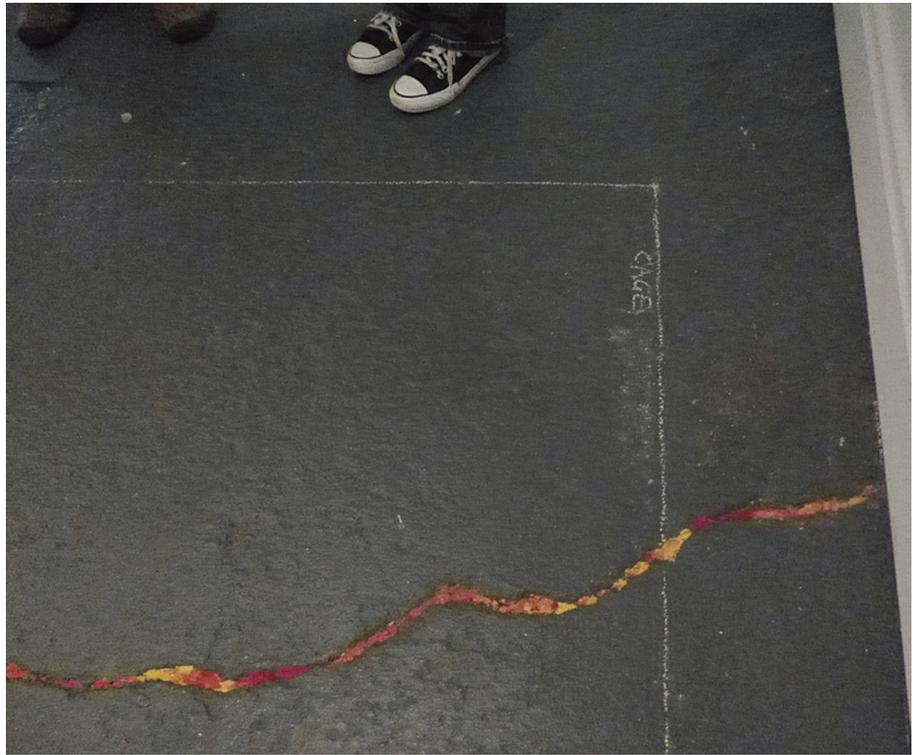


25 MEANTIME had operated through extremely cost-efficient means and relied on the commitment and generosity of many, within an economy of its own making. The main burden of financial support was placed on the Arts Council, through the Grants for the Arts project funding strand. This was augmented with modest contributions from the short-lived but crucially important Arts Development department at Cheltenham Borough Council, and from the Arts faculty at the University of Gloucestershire. Although Arts Council bids for funding could extend to a three-year programme of activity, applying for this length of project was not advisable given both the quantity of money at a time of economic contraction, uncertainty over the security of tenure on property, and the reliance on a single individual to carry the project over a lengthy timespan. This meant that MEANTIME cycled through annual rounds of bid-writing, suspense, celebration, graft and uncertainty, a struggle that underpinned and often threatened to overwhelm the enterprise.

Whatever limited cash-money/resources/public funds were accessed for the project, these were, as far as possible, redistributed back into the pockets of cultural workers in the forms of residency bursaries. A bursary would just about cover costs over a month's residency but was not a living wage. While there was never feedback on a successful application, and rarely conditions placed on funding by the Arts Council, my sense was that with successive successful bids I was pitching the ask at the right level.

In 2013, when MEANTIME had become established as more-than-temporary, I fundraised to commission a formal consultancy process. This was carried out with Ruth Claxton (Eastside Projects) and Cheryl Jones (Grand Union) and aimed to review the organisation's processes and strategic planning and development. The exercise pushed me to think through where the project was and where it was going, and exposed organisational faultlines, such as the level at which the time and labour involved in organising and curating MEANTIME was acknowledged and remunerated. It argued for improvements to the building, in terms of access and digital infrastructure. It identified a number of scenarios that would propel the organisation forward, including the need to bring in an associate producer to ease the burden of duties – it was clear that at the current pace of programming, the sheer amount of work involved in running and maintaining the project was more than one person could manage. (MEANTIME not only hosted residencies but frequent exhibitions, live music, performance events and film screenings, developed publications.) The benefits of authoring the organisation – fundraising, organising the public programme, managing the residencies, hosting the artists, their well-being, being social, discussing the work – needed to be weighed up against capacity for further development and innovation.

②⑥ Subsequent applications to the Arts Council that made a case for greater investment in the project were unsuccessful. It's possible to understand these decisions in terms of the particularities of time and place: by 2013 austerity had bitten down hard on public resources and there was not yet the capacity for smaller organisations to be supported through the National Portfolio. But it can also be seen as a failure to understand the value of small-scale organisations within the arts ecosystem – organisations that are never going to attract levels of corporate or philanthropic sponsorship that national institutions were increasingly able/required to obtain.



*Juliet MacDonald residency, 2012*

9. <http://www.commonpractice.org.uk/>

10. <http://www.commonpractice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Common-Practice-London-Size-Matters.pdf>

Common Practice,<sup>9</sup> an advocacy group working for the recognition and fostering of the small-scale contemporary visual arts sector in London, have produced research papers and conferences arguing for ‘the ways in which small-scale arts organisations produce artistic value beyond measurability and quantification, provide spaces for public experience extra to the market, and in so doing contribute importantly to cultural wealth’. Defending the dependence of small visual arts organisations on Arts Council funding, in *Size Matters*<sup>10</sup> Sarah Thelwall argues that ‘small organisations act as an unofficial support mechanism for larger organisations, by investing in risk-taking and the development of work. [...] In this way, small-scale arts organisations provide ample evidence of the necessity to build rather than diminish state funding for the arts as a core public asset.’

**John Walter:** I think the financial deftness, while at the time felt tight, now looking back was very important. It enabled nimbleness for you and me. It’s a classic punk strategy. Better to just bash on using a limited budget that force through something over-polished and expensive.

**Kate Lepper:** Artist residencies differ across the board in terms of the support offered to artists. One thing they all have in common is by their very nature, provision for the artist's regular life as well as the practice has to be taken into consideration. The greater the support for the daily life needs of the artist, the less risk averse the artist can be in carrying out the residency project.

The success of each project in a residency offering scant support for life's necessities will rise and fall on the resources that each artist has available to them from other sources – i.e. public funding, private financial support, employment leave with pay, other passive income. Therefore, a residency without sufficient support for artist's lives as well as practice will always favour those who already have a level of privilege.

In such circumstances, whatever costs are paid to the artist for production materials are necessarily fudged to cover living costs, which in turn favours either dematerialised practice, reiteration of previous successes, a practice with access to an abundance of free or low-cost material, or a practice that is otherwise resourced to cover production costs as previously mentioned. Therefore, residencies with scant resources tend to entrench practice that is risk-averse, dematerialised and/or 'low-fi' for poorly resourced artists, rather than freeing under-resourced practice from having to negotiate economic market pressures and the conservatism that those pressures necessarily breed. As a result, an art language divide is increased along class lines rather than unpicked, as experimental equity for all art practice is lost to the advantages enjoyed only by the language of privilege.

True artistic experimentation is a luxury of the well-resourced. Under current market-driven funding models, it seems that experimentation remains the preserve of academy, although this too is under threat. Risk-averse public funding breeds risk-averse artistic practice, with residencies in the middle like MEANTIME, between a rock and a hard place.

②7 Once the complex of structures that prop up otherwise thriving entities start to fall away it produces a momentum in one direction. At the same time as the Arts Council had become apprehensive about continued investment, so the backbone of moral and financial support from the Borough Council disappeared as Leisure & Culture operations moved from council-run to a multi-venue charitable trust, with no remit or capacity for local arts development. MEANTIME, though sustaining and sustained by its growing communities, and backed by its landlord who had long since stopped talking about rent increases and waived rental payments while funding was sought, would have to close.

**Grace Davies:** Looking back, it's possible to chart the confluence of factors that played into the ultimate unsustainability of MEANTIME and its counterparts operating in this realm. The rise of commercial rent rates, the development of cities and towns by commercial and private developers, the policies of funding bodies such as ACE, a growth in the enterprise model of universities leading to a focus on more commercial opportunities (and perhaps a negligence of local and community interests), and even student communities not engaging so deeply with artist-led initiatives thus failing to generate a wide enough community of interest to support the initiative. A study of MEANTIME and its contemporaries feels important at this juncture in order to understand its impact on practice, of creative communities, and on the development of the sector.

It's interesting to note that now at the end of 2020 when ACE have just launched their 'Let's Create' strategy, the emphasis has once again returned to the act of making and the intrinsic value of creativity itself (rather than its instrumental or economic value). Had MEANTIME been operating now, perhaps ACE would have invested, potentially even endowing it with National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) status. Perhaps the University would have invested in the value of having local space dedicated to the experimentation and production of art by artists with a range of lived experiences and practices.



*Patrick Lowry residency, 2011*

Perhaps, given the current circumstances and the fragility of the high street, there would have been a thirst for the occupation of spaces. It's impossible to say.

From my own perspective, it opened my eyes to new artists, new ways of making art and it enabled me to re-evaluate my preconceived ideas of contemporary practice. I saw it form new networks, new ways of working and new friendships, and these are things that should not be underestimated.

*Elaine Fisher: The importance of MEANTIME as physical location was never more apparent to me than in the last days of its tenancy in Oxford Passage. At this time Sarah had initiated an expansive archive project to document changes (past and present) to Cheltenham's Lower High Street, particularly in light of the imminent loss of a modernist building that provided a canopy to a vibrant community market-place. I was part of the project team and used MEANTIME as a space in which to make work, collaboratively with another artist.*

*As my collaborator William Lindley lived between London and Brighton we decided to base our collaboration around fixed meeting points at MEANTIME, spending two days together once a month. The time lapse between each session created a kind of stop-motion frame through which we viewed the building demolition/development that was happening on MEANTIME's doorstep and which not only our work but the MEANTIME project began to mirror.*

28 It seemed necessary to close the project with a further public debate. In June 2014, *Where Were We?* picked up the threads of conversation and expanded on the questions previously explored through the idea of *cultural renewal*. Mark Fisher, in the introductory paragraphs of *Capitalist Realism*, argues: 'Tradition counts for nothing when it is no longer contested and modified. A culture that is merely preserved is no culture at all.'<sup>11</sup> On the same page Mark Fisher had asked 'how long can a culture persist without the new?' *Where Were We?* asked to consider the complex of conditions required for the new to happen. Should not MEANTIME have made itself redundant? If not, why not?

11. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 2009, p.3

My notes from the event read: 'The quote reminded me immediately of Cheltenham. But it also reminded me that MEANTIME isn't owed anything, and nor should it be. It has no intrinsic right to exist. It's a project that has always been



MEANTIME Projects, 25A Oxford Passage, Off St Margaret's Rd, Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, GL50 4EF

For further information please contact Sarah Bowden on 07990 540692. Not for publication.

For immediate release

(STARTS)

MEANTIME Director Sarah B announces the closure of Cheltenham's contemporary arts project-space after seven years, at the end of June 2014. While MEANTIME itself may continue in another location, the Oxford Passage building that has hosted artist-residencies, exhibitions, live music and performance, will close. A final public discussion and exhibition on Friday 27<sup>th</sup> June will consider MEANTIME in context, and will include works on paper by many of the 122 artists that have developed and produced new work at the building since 2007.

Contemporary art enthusiasts are urged to sign-up to the mailing list at <http://meantime.org.uk> to hear of new projects in the pipeline.

**WHERE WERE WE?**

Friday 27<sup>th</sup> June 2014

**ALL WELCOME!**

**Public Discussion, 2 – 5pm:** a conversation about cultural renewal with artists, citizens, and leaders of regional arts organisations and institutions, chaired by Rupert Howe. "A culture that is merely preserved is no culture at all." (Mark Fisher, Capitalist Realism)

**Exhibition, 6 – 8pm:** viewing the works

Generously supported by the University of Gloucestershire and the Mike Holland Trust.

(ENDS)

contingent on favourable conditions. It has always been precarious, and that precarity has kept the project alive, striving. MEANTIME has existed in a state of perpetual renewal, not for the sake of renewal itself, but in the process of evolving, adapting and responding, critically and productively.'

**Rupert Howe:** I'd actually forgotten I 'chaired' this event. Though I don't recall it needing much direction from me. As for the What Next? question, it's just as relevant and problematic now as it was when MEANTIME opened. Though I wonder about the term 'artist run' and what that actually means in practice today. On a personal level, many recent discussions have tried to articulate a broader 'conviviality' – a term derived from the work of Ivan Illich whose ideas informed the first Camp 0 – which might encompass artistic practice alongside, say, mutual aid and the development of practical tools for living. And RIP Mark Fisher. He may be gone but his ideas are still strikingly in and of our moment.

**James Fisher:** Sarah's notes from *Where Were We?* seem to me to go right to the heart of the mechanics of MEANTIME, and perhaps reveal something about why it flourished and flared.

Risk can reveal an artist's frailties, but in that precarity is a liberation. MEANTIME was a collaborative initiative in various ways – it presented an arena for collaborating artists as well as offering the hand of partnership in collaboration itself. To enter into a collaborative practice with other artists elicits uncertainty – will your voice be diffused? – and this instability is often reflected in the materiality of the objects that emerge from a collaborative interaction. Such volatility was recognised in reflections on an early project at MEANTIME, Gavin McClafferty's *Horizontal Column*, and described as the poetry of materials: 'their mass and their interaction with gravity; their fragility and their transience.'<sup>12</sup>

12. Gavin McClafferty, *Horizontal Column*, review by James Fisher, a-n October 2007

At the same time, while the individuality of artists engaged in collaborative partnership are imperilled, they also take liberating harbour in which they can detach themselves from their usual persona and authorial responsibility to play. MEANTIME fostered many performative gestures of collaborative play and through this enabled fertile communication between participants and the things they made.



**29** To paraphrase Jane Lowry: *building and holding a community is not easy*. In many ways the complex environment (as noted by James Fisher) is epitomised by Gavin McClafferty's project, *Horizontal Column*: our fates interlocked in a fragile arc, under intense external pressures. The closure of MEANTIME in 2014

is linked to the ending of a whole swathe of artist-run spaces and projects around the same time. Subsequently, wider structural changes such as the dismantling of working tax credits that supported artists/workers/self-employed/families on low incomes and for many subsidised artistic labour has further impacted on the kinds of *ad hoc* and informal occupations that support an ecology. Working tax credits have, since the mid 2010s, been gradually replaced by Universal Credit which fails to recognise irregular work patterns and payments as legitimate.<sup>13</sup> Add into the mix central funding structures themselves, which focus on short-term grant support for one-off projects and in social reality do not function with low income state support.

13. [https://www.artistsunionengland.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2015/11/Universal\\_Credit\\_guide.pdf](https://www.artistsunionengland.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2015/11/Universal_Credit_guide.pdf)

30 Echoes of MEANTIME continue to resonate, and I'm reminded of the free soup that accompanied exhibition openings, as Asda declare they will feed children for free in their supermarket cafés.<sup>14</sup> We have been writing this document during the pandemic of 2020, mostly under restrictions that mean we are not able to leave our homes except for essential reasons. Just as MEANTIME was witness to the corrosive effects of austerity following the financial crisis of 2008, we are currently witness to new forms of undoing and remaking of social and financial structures and dependencies. No one knows how this is going to play out.

14. <https://www.thegrocer.co.uk/asda/asda-to-allow-kids-to-eat-free-in-cafes-to-help-pandemic-affected-families/650855.article>

MEANTIME modelled a community being formed, a community that understood its precarious temporality but had arguably just hit its stride at the point of departing. It represents an in-between space between studio and gallery, between art school and artist, a portal between past and future. This document has examined what remains of the project six years after closing its doors and suggested how the practice of spontaneous collectivity engendered by MEANTIME might continue to circulate, both hyper-locally and in other corners of the world. MEANTIME is not a model of exceptionalism, it is a 'modest proposal' demonstrating that people working together can resist structural hierarchies to shape culture and realise ideas. This understanding has been key to establishing Hardwick Gallery<sup>15</sup> at the University of Gloucestershire. Hardwick Gallery replicates MEANTIME in that it is a one-person endeavour, however the project is stabilised by the institutional framework and entrusted with the autonomy to extend into the university (Speculative Art School, Bad Ideas Study Group, the Forest Residency) and work on long-term projects with the communities of

15. <http://hardwickgallery.org/>

St Peter's and St Paul's (We Create), that have already benefitted from the time-span committed to MEANTIME and are its legacy.

MEANTIME aspired to the condition of a *Pirate Utopia*, Hakim Bey's formulation for intentional communities, 'whole mini-societies living consciously outside the law and determined to keep it up, even if only for a short but merry life.'<sup>16</sup> There is a paradox at the heart of the mission that is a history of MEANTIME: it was difficult, exhausting, and reached too far. But it offers a model of hope, even as everything is stacked against us.

16. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/hakim-bey-t-a-z-the-temporary-autonomous-zone-ontological-anarchy-poetic-terrorism.a4.pdf> Pg.23

*Chie Konishi: Your text felt as if I was again being inside MEANTIME. I remember you telling me about Roy Harris, the printer, several times, but reading your story about Roy was a different experience. It somehow felt really important, and I was glad to know that this was written down so that it became a part of an important history. These moments of encounters built up to form MEANTIME, the sequences of encounters that might not be recognised as important history but are very important for those who take their initiative to create what they need. Your way of building a good relationship with neighbours was also something I admired, and very important in a history of MEANTIME.*

*I always thought of MEANTIME as your project, and you needed it in order to live where you live while being a mother, when you don't have choice of moving around different cities. I think this is such an important reason why MEANTIME existed in Cheltenham. And you managed to form a community of people who shared something in common, and people who also needed a place like MEANTIME for whatever reasons that might be. What I really like about MEANTIME is the project was both your very personal project and everybody's. It became both in the end.*

**Martin Wooster:** MEANTIME had afforded from the beginning a brief messianic moment to dream, as much a desire not to be moved as a means to interrogate its moment and ask questions of what we do with our time, yet with something of a squatter's spirit at its heart, it knows its time is counting down even before it has begun. Thus, it starts with a romantic disposition to linger

and welcome those wishing to mangle among the ruins of what is most vulnerable, unintelligible, and unknowable in the human condition. It knows its existence, not in a purely political or instrumentalist way but rather as a site for artistic gestures that afford opportunities to unlearn, knowing that to see requires experimenting with forms that prohibit our seeing. In this respect it enacts a series of short circuits to disrupt the smooth transition from philosophy to reality and thus lay bare the symptomatic void at the heart of the social.



Text is available as a download from: <https://www.meantime.org.uk/>

Many thanks to everyone who contributed visibly or invisibly to this text:

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Patrick Lowry	Stuart Wilding
Jane Lowry	

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### Further refs:

Group Material at Raven Row  
A History of Irritated Material  
25 February to 2 May 2010  
<http://www.ravenrow.org/exhibition/irritatedmaterial/>  
APG/Barbara Steveni at Raven Row  
*The Individual and the Organisation: Artist Placement Group*  
1966–79, 27 September to 16 December 2012  
[http://www.ravenrow.org/exhibition/artist\\_placement\\_group/](http://www.ravenrow.org/exhibition/artist_placement_group/)

Critical Practice

Grizedale Arts

*Up In The Air* – Neville Gabie

*A Certain Lack of Coherence* – Jimmie Durham

*An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* – Daniel Spoerri

*Museum Highlights* – Andrea Fraser

*Six Years: The Dematerialisation of the Art Object* – Lucy Lippard

*The Ecstasy of Communication* – Jean Baudrillard

*The Field of Cultural Production* – Pierre Bourdieu

*Mutual Aid* – Petr Kropotkin

*Free Exchange* – Pierre Bourdieu & Hans Haacke

*Hornsey 1968* – Lisa Tickner

*The Revolution of Everyday Life* – Raoul Vaneigem

*Dark Matter, Art & Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* –

Gregory Sholette

*Histoire(s) du cinema* – Jean-Luc Godard



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