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Introduction

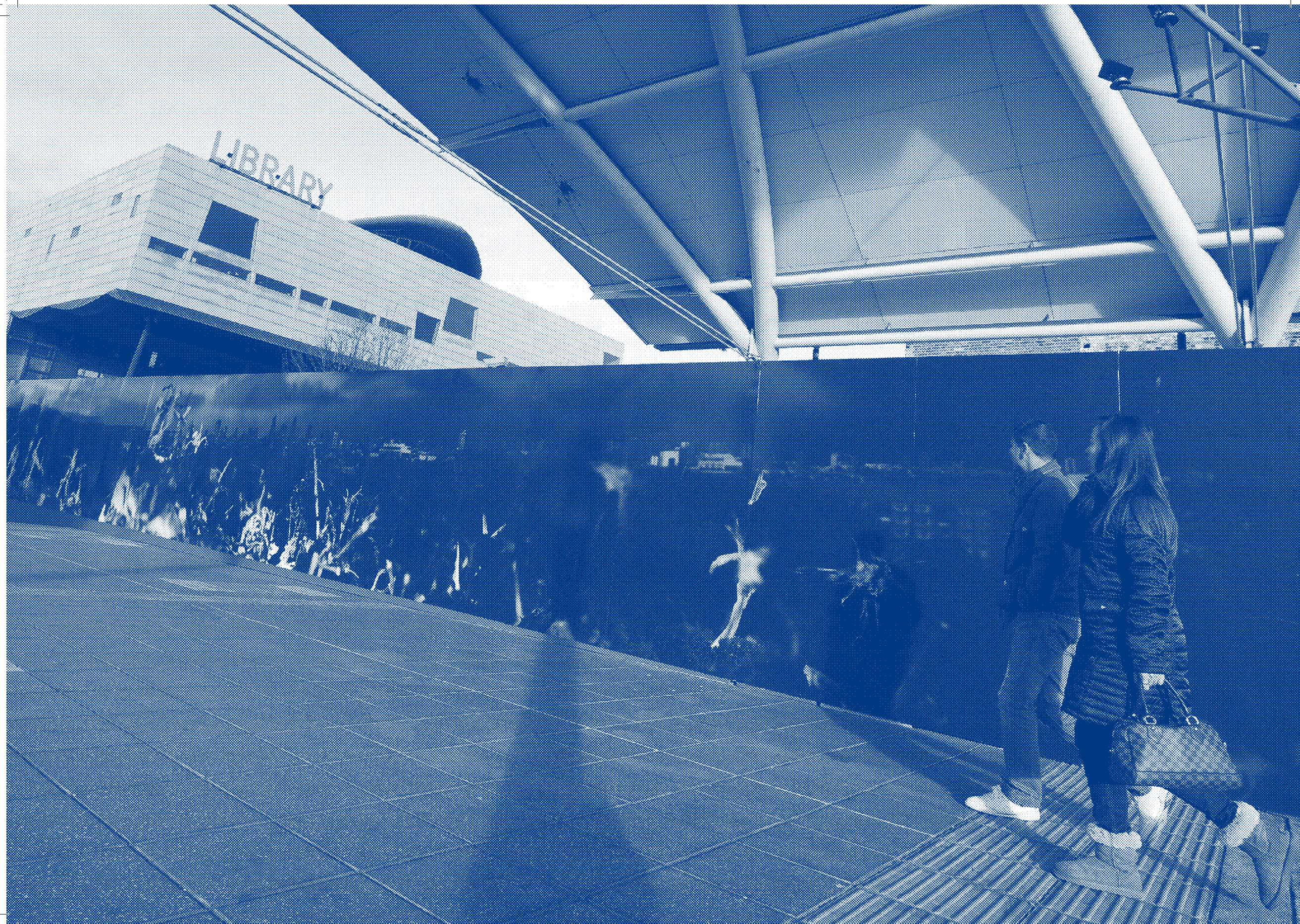
Welcome to Peckham Space. This publication marks the launch of our new venue and another chapter in the development of our artistic programme which launched in June 2008. Peckham Space is an arts organisation that commissions established artists to produce new projects by working with young people and local residents. Peckham Space has been initiated by Camberwell College of Art, University of the Arts London in partnership with Southwark Council. With an ongoing programme of free events, the venue will significantly enhance Peckham Square, establishing it as part of south London's visual arts route.

We would like to take this opportunity to show you our artistic programme to date. Over the past 18 months, Peckham Space has delivered five commissions, showcased here through an essay by the think tank Demos and on the DVD enclosed. In the future we will be delivering three exhibitions per year. Each will be the result of a unique commissioning process that ensures we work closely with our project partners, comprising of community groups, local schools or residents to select a lead artist with whom to produce each project. Working with our project partners from the very beginning of each project is central to the way we intend to establish our commissioning policy in the future.

In developing our exciting new programme, we hope to engage you in an open ended conversation about the production of art in the public arena, not only through this publication but also through our free events and online content.

In the essay that follows, 'Expression in Peckham and Beyond', the think tank Demos invite us to consider the Peckham Space artistic programme to date as well as the wider relationship between contemporary art and political participation.

Emily Druiff, Director Peckham Space



Expression in Peckham and Beyond

Next time you are near a computer, perhaps in Peckham Library, try an experiment. Search Amazon for 'Maxim Gorky' - you'll get over 4,000 items. Visit Tate Modern's website and search for 'Joseph Beuys' and you'll find over 200 works.

Gorky was a Russian author and Beuys a German artist. At first, they seem a million miles away from Peckham. But they tell us much and help us to approach the things we see every day a little differently.

Gorky once wrote that 'an artist is a man who digests his own subjective impressions and knows how to find a general objective meaning in them, and how to express them in a simple form'. In other words, an artist is someone who finds ways to express his or her ideas in ways that convey meaning to others. Today, we would object to Gorky's phrase: artists don't have to be men and it's a little theoretical and philosophical. Beuys would agree: 'everyone', he said 'is an artist'.

Actually, Beuys and Gorky would agree on quite a lot. They were both talking about expression. The choices we make in what culture we consume and what cultural forms we create say something about who we are and what we value - this was Gorky's point about knowing how to find meaning. This expression must be seen in its widest sense: that was Beuys' point about everybody being an artist.

'Consuming' culture can mean anything from downloading music to listen to on our walk to school or work or going to Tate Modern to see works by artists like Beuys. Creativity can be seen as everything from drawing, painting or making, to personalising a list of the tracks that you do download. Ultimately, each is an expression of what you are feeling at a given moment and a reflection of the values that you hold. Every moment of every day, we are surrounded by different forms of expression from which we can draw and to which we can add in many different ways.

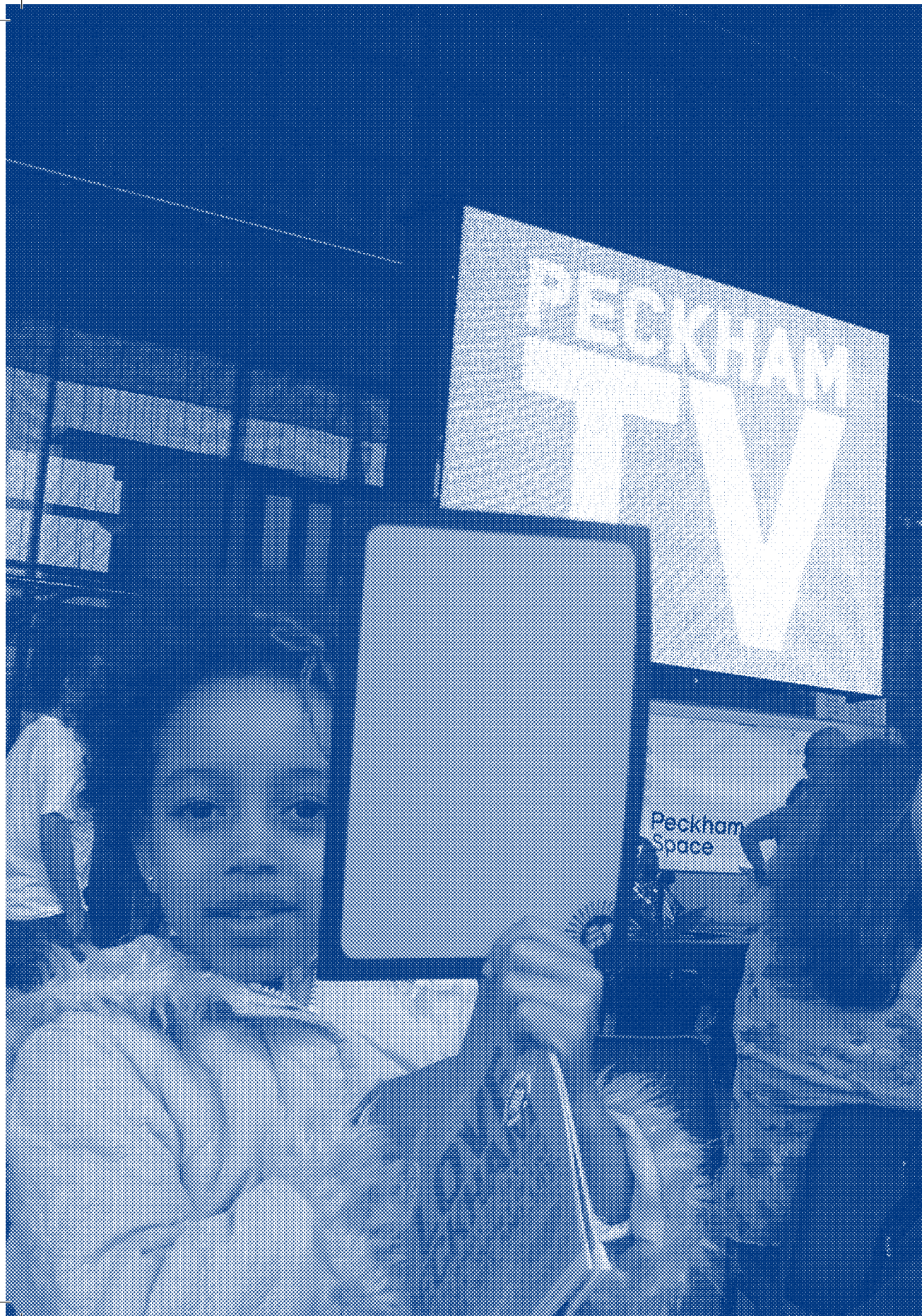
But there are barriers too. Limitations like cost, time, location, and even the basics of our educational system, exclude many from the idea of expression itself. The term 'art' can be exclusive, 'contemporary art' still more so, recalling the abstract work and trendy galleries of Hoxton, or huge museums like Tate Modern or the National Gallery. Beuys and Gorky remind us that this is just one side of art.

Peckham Space sets out to be more than simply an art space. It is an attempt to connect art with the everyday world around it.

Its projects look to encourage people's involvement and engagement with the world in which they live. It is an attempt to find an artistic channel for the expression of people's opinions about Peckham.

Walking the short distance from Peckham Library to Peckham Rye station, lots of objects, colours and designs, posters and flyers convey meaning and message. The world is made up of signs, sounds and symbols. Often, these are in the background, the backdrop to everyday life. But we also have the ability - as well as the right and responsibility - to contribute to that backdrop, to use signs, symbols and sounds to make a statement about things that we value to others. Not only does this mean that we have got our opinion out there, but it also means that others have the chance to respond to it: our values become part of the backdrop to others' lives and vice versa.

This sets a challenge for artists and organisations like art galleries and museums. How do they reflect and show this expression, demonstrating the meaning in our everyday culture and creativity? There will always be a place for professional artists and the great masters of the past, like Beuys, but how do we work from the inspiration that they provide to enable and provide for the expression that enlivens our everyday lives?



Peckham TV

The People Speak & Harold Offeh

The artists involved in the Peckham Space projects were themselves learning. Working with people from Peckham, they learned more about life in the area and its history. As Harold Offeh, one of the artists who worked on the first project, put it they also learned about 'compromise and dialogue' that can quite often go against the artistic impulse to create and own a project.

Harold collaborated on his project with The People Speak, a collective of practitioners working with a range of media to facilitate deliberation and debate between members of the public. They worked with young people from Ledbury Youth Centre on the idea of a positive future for Peckham. One young person, thinking about his daily experience, suggested an advert for Peckham that would speak to the wider world. This idea took off, and six months later the artists returned to Bells Garden Community Centre, Leaders of Tomorrow & Gloucester Primary School to provide opportunities for people to create adverts for Peckham. Three proposals were generated from these workshops and then screened at an event in Peckham Square in which the wider public could vote for their favourite advert.

In the adverts, people young and old described what they valued most about Peckham, like its vibrancy, mix of communities and heritages. As well as being statements of pride, the adverts were also statements to an audience that comprises both people in Peckham and people visiting the area.

The artists worked with groups of people, from primary schools and youth centres to refugees. They created a space in which everyone's different values could come together. This basic principle is central to society. We get a sense of who we are by relating to others, by finding out who shares our values and by creating new ones as we come into contact with different opinions. This is conversation, and the artists at Peckham Space remind us that it doesn't have to be verbal.

However, the artists began to recognise a tension between their role in facilitating and enlivening expression and other aspects of the lives of those children and people with whom they worked. They needed to be clear about what they were trying to achieve and the limitations of what they could do. While the project helped to start conversations, they also had to manage people's expectations of what they could achieve.

In particular, organisations like schools, community groups and so on are vital to people's experiences of the communities

around them. The artists soon realised that while artistic engagement can enable expression, it must also exist alongside and cooperate with these existing and trusted organisations.

Cultural engagement and creative production are vibrant and enlivening additions to – but not a replacement for – the means by which we form and support communities. They open new avenues for expression and can help people to recognise new values and form groups as they do so. By doing so, they also allow us to challenge and provoke prevailing assumptions: for instance, the people working with Harold and The People Speak used their creativity to rail against the media image of Peckham as a threatening place. This space for challenge is a vital part of democracy, even if it can on occasion be uncomfortable.

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Street Training

Lottie Child & Furtherfield.org

Conversation is the foundation of the public realm. We live together by balancing different opinions, realities and attitudes. As we write, it is mid-Summer – London's public spaces have come into their own. Suddenly more seems possible. People populate the city's parks, canals and streets for picnics, games of football and musical jamming sessions. At the same time, we are going through the worst economic recession for decades. Unemployment is rising, shops are shutting and many are struggling to keep up with mortgages and daily expense.

Summer and the recession underline the importance of public space – a shared resource that benefits our quality of life in ways which private resources alone cannot. Without cost, the square, local park and playground provide spaces in which we can remain active and healthy. They are also where we meet others, exchange ideas and express our opinions.

But problems like litter and vandalism to the dominance of cars, chain shops, and overly strict responses to peaceful protest are eroding the quality and the freedom of these public spaces. Too often we get mixed signals: one MP even suggested deploying the army to combat knife crime. He was exaggerating, but few would deny that there is a problem: people often feel too unsafe to enjoy streets and parks.

But in avoiding unpleasantness, we risk losing the opportunity for being pleasantly surprised. We rely on cars to go from A to B, we avoid contact and fewer parents let their children walk or cycle to school. Children often feel they cannot play outside for fear of strangers or traffic.

Like the canary in the coalmine, children are sensitive and vulnerable to bad environments: we should worry when they retreat into the home, the school and the car. The thinker Pat Kane described the opposite of play: depression. Our cities are depressed indeed.

Peckham Space invited Lottie Child to work with Furtherfield.org, a web-art organisation, to create an online platform upon which young people Peckham could record how they use public space in a safe and positive way. 'Peckham Street Training' examined the effects that our thoughts and behaviour have on our surroundings. The project was about walking the line between creative and antisocial behaviour, using the streets joyfully and creatively and demonstrating ways to interact with the city and the built environment.

Lottie worked with local children from Gloucester Primary School, first to see how they approach and explore public spaces when no adult is telling them off. They roll down hills, climb trees and lamp-posts and echo under the viaduct. They jump as far as they can off the fence with the notice that says 'no climbing'. Their playfulness is creative, immediate, unpredictable, and subversive. Then Lottie invited the young people to lead the adults on a tour of Peckham. Adults too can let go and rediscover how to enjoy the local park without their usual hang-ups – finding unexpected new ways to use familiar and unnoticed spaces, rediscovering the potential they have.

This is just one example of how an artist can work with public spaces and with the public itself to counteract the erosion of public spaces. However, the impact of such approaches can only go so far: structural change is needed as well. In the recession, public funding for new public spaces will be less. Now, we need to focus on the culture of our public realm instead. When can people use and enjoy their everyday public spaces freely and when not?

We need to ask how and when children and others can play in the public realm; whether town centres are for more than just shopping; and how we can reclaim the street from ever-larger numbers of cars. Government, councils, planners, designers and artists cannot do this alone. We also need to voice our ambitions and aspirations for a better everyday environment. Perhaps we all need street training – police officers, planners, transport engineers, shop-owners and the public. Then, we might regain the street as a place of meaning in our everyday culture and creativity.





Limitations Permitted

Manu Luksch & Neal White

Our freedom to act is often limited by more than just people and signs that say 'no'. Do you ever get the feeling you are being watched? It is a difficult sensation to escape. When you walk the streets, go online, use your debit card or phone, somebody or something is probably noting it down. Reels of CCTV footage, bank statements, credit ratings, internet histories and public service records create intimate stories of our lives. The trails of personal information we generate each day make it easier for people to make decisions about us without our involvement. They help organisations amass information about us like never before.

Looking like any other security booth, *Limitations Permitted* was a kiosk outside Peckham Library. But instead of enforcing rules, it invited you to question them. Instead of making sure you conform to the way space is regulated, it encouraged discussion about how that happens.

What point were they making? Personal information helps people or organizations make ever-more particular decisions or judgements about us. Our bank statements and credit history can help a bank decide whether we are likely to pay back a loan. Our internet habits can inform what advertising is shown to what kind of person. As it become easier to collect information about our everyday behaviour, more decisions are taken in this way. This is not always a bad thing. Amazon can recommend us books, organisations know more of what we like or need, and sites like Facebook and other social media are creating new ways for people to connect and share ideas.

However, the decisions taken using personal information can have very important consequences. So it is really important that people have a say over when and where and how their information is gathered and used.

In this light, *Limitations Permitted*, was about more than CCTV. It was about what laws govern our behaviour, and the new ways that are available to enforce them. In the kiosk, members of the public could watch 3D videos made by FLIX with Manu Luksch. The artists researched the by-laws that are active on Peckham Square and invited young people to interpret them while over-laying sign-language reinterpretations of the laws. For instance, sign-language itself was once banned because the dominant medical view was that deaf people should fit in rather than develop their own form of expression – with evident negative effect on the wellbeing of generations of deaf people. This story

helps us question who claims to 'know best' and who decides how we should behave.

Limitations Permitted showed that there is no escape from the watching – just thoughts and debates about the power and intentions of those doing it. The installation emphasised the distance between the 'watcher' and the 'watched' in public space. At the moment surveillance seems to be something done to us because we do not know enough about how the rules are made, or how things like CCTV help to enforce them.

The legitimacy of surveillance depends on how much of a say we have over how we are governed – the legitimacy of our democracy. So the challenge of our society is not really to stop surveillance happening. It is to make sure we recognize when and where the 'watching' is happening, who is doing it, and what power it gives them.



Provoking Democracy

Art has never been truly separate from politics. Each is about the expression of values. The projects at Peckham Space emphasise this connection. They do so not by using art to make political statements but by seeing creativity as a form of expression.

Famously, the French artist Marcel Duchamp once exhibited a urinal in a gallery. He called it Fountain and a replica is now in the Tate. People laughed at this and they still do, but that was one of the many points that Duchamp was making. Just like Beuys, he believed that the ideas and values of what many then thought of as being the 'art world' had distanced it from the idea of expression, which is where the idea of art starts out. He was mocking the art world by pointing out that everyday expression – in whatever form – was what mattered.

When we spoke at the launch of Peckham Space in July 2008, we referred to an American book by Caroline Levine called *Provoking Democracy*. In it, she emphasised the importance of art in challenging the status quo. She referred to Duchamp, and she also referred to the US hip hop group, 2 Live Crew whose work challenged censorship laws in the 1990s. Both examples show how professional artists use their work to challenge convention and make their point of view heard. Over the last year the projects at Peckham Space have done the same and we hope they continue to do so once the new building is open. More importantly, they provided the participants from Peckham with the space and opportunity to do so as well.

The artists working on Peckham Space are the first to recognise that contemporary art has its limitations, and it cannot address all of the social challenges that they encountered along the way. However, they are clear that their creative work in many cases gave people a voice that they might not otherwise have had. This is about more than simply putting out ideas; it is about taking part in shaping the world around you. This varies from the way that people use public space, to the way that we take pride in different aspects of the material world around us, from the everyday vibrancy shops of Peckham High Street to the famous architecture of its library. The projects were also a chance to tackle and question some of the assumptions about life in Peckham, from the stereotype of knife-crime to the implications of the measures taken to stop it.

Creative practice – art – is a means of expression. Being able to express ourselves and our opinions freely is part of what it means to be a citizen. And a healthy society depends on it.

For further information about
Peckham Space:

Sign up to our mailing list by
going to www.peckhamspace.com

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On the DVD

Peckham TV
The People Speak
& Harold Offeh
Video, Images & Podcast.

Street Training
Lottie Child & Furtherfield.org
Video, Images & Podcast.

Limitations Permitted
Manu Luksch & Neal White
Video, Images & Podcast.

*The eyes see more than
the heart knows*
Gayle Chong Kwan
Video, Images & Podcast.

