

UNDER MY SKIN: CRITICAL ART AND ITS IMPACT

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*Marbles of the dancing floor
Break bitter furies of complexity,
Those images that yet
Fresh images beget ...*

W.B. Yeats, *Byzantium*

Abstract This article explores the relationship between criticality, art and curatorial practice, and the condition of migration. Focussing on curated events in Lincoln, London and Liverpool, the argument centres on how the destabilizing practices of curation might provoke sensorial and social connections and disruptions between and across art and lived experience. Furthermore, it is suggested that the ways in which art irrupts into urban sensibility may be - both intentionally and surprisingly - powerful, violent, and mournful (or ‘radioactive’). Finally, the article comments on the curated work as a pathway to impact, noting both the irony and the serendipity of social consequences in an audit culture of knowledge production.

Keywords. Migrant cities, port cities, arts and criticality, borders, resistance, impact

In July 2015, a year or so after moving from Sydney in Australia to Liverpool in north-west England, I was one of the curators of an exhibition and symposium about migration and the affective traces it leaves in port cities, along with Elke Grenzer and Alan Blum from the Culture of Cities Centre at York University in Toronto – a third port city – for whom this was the latest iteration of their peripatetic ‘Scenes of Urban Innovation’ conferences.¹ The third partner was Liverpool’s Foundation for Art and Creative Technology (FACT), where the event was staged. Liverpool has played a long and not unproblematic role in the history of British imperial trade and it has functioned as a liminal and indeterminate zone through which thousands, probably millions, of migrants have passed, each driven by own their dreams or despair. By giving our event the title *Libidinal Circuits* as a riff on Francois Lyotard’s concept of ‘libidinal economy’, we wanted to examine desire as the motor of the movement of people as well as capital accumulation. We therefore invited artists and academics to explore in their own way elided histories of such journeys, in particular the imagery and poetry of migration, arrival and discovery.²

In this article, I reflect on two lessons that I took from *Libidinal Circuits*. The more substantial argument is that there now exists a body of critical artworks that address the manifold experiences of migration in thoughtful, committed and affecting ways. To borrow Pierre Bourdieu's terms, such works can be seen as individual 'creative projects' that draw on, and give imaginative expression to, a shared 'intellectual field': a networked structure that, 'like a magnetic field', is made up of 'a system of power lines'.³ The artists who make these works can then be seen as *contemporaries*, in the sense that they implicitly share 'a whole code'. They are bound together by 'themes and problems of the moment, methods of argument, manners of perception, etc.'. In the works discussed here, those 'themes and problems' are well expressed by Imogen Tyler in her 2013 book, *Revolting Subjects*. Rather than treating them as geographical boundaries identified by lines on a map, suggests Tyler, *borders* are better understood as 'unstable, dynamic and embodied *practices* which have to be continually re-made and re-affirmed'.⁴ In its compulsion 'to constitute itself and its borders', state power 'relies on the production of abject subjects' – refugees, asylum seekers, 'illegals', the victims of slavery and trafficking, and so forth – whom borders are designed to exclude. The borders are always *unstable*, because the subjects being abjected will inevitably resist and contest their silencing and exclusion. Tyler's coordinates of state power, the abjection of subjects and the revolt of the abjected helps to map the field of art practices that address forgotten or hidden histories of colonialism and racial hierarchies. For Bourdieu, such a shared perspective explains how intellectuals and artists are 'socially and historically situated' as contemporaries (*Intellectual Field*, p112). In her chapter on critical art and agonistic politics, Chantal Mouffe makes a similar argument about art's social context. To understand 'the different ways in which artistic practices can contribute to unsettling the dominant hegemony', she suggests, it is necessary to scrutinise the creation and dissemination of such practices 'in the public sphere' – which means, for her, a diversity of spaces that, like Bourdieu's networked intellectual fields, 'are always striated and hegemonically structured'.⁵

This insight into the social organisation of critical art leads to my second lesson, which is an observation rather than an argument. In part, it concerns the institutional forms in which 'intellectual fields' and 'the public sphere' are embodied at any given historical moment. Beyond that, it also addresses the ways in which such institutions make artworks possible, helping to define the limits of what they can imagine and how they are received. As well as sharing themes, problems and ways of seeing, the projects considered here have emerged from a field that has itself been brought into being, to a significant degree, by the type of dialogical collaboration between artists, academics, activists and curators in cultural institutions that was evident in *Libidinal Circuits*. Everyone involved in that event was committed to an effort to destabilise bordering practices through arts-based debate and critically informed art. For the academics, however, certainly those based in UK universities, one unanticipated and ethically problematic – but not unwelcome – outcome was the realisation that this kind of practice-led, outward-looking research activity

could be recognised for its ‘impact’ beyond the academy in assessment exercises. ‘Counter-hegemony’ may not be one of the official criteria for measuring ‘impact’ when evaluating case studies, but it is fair to say that political activism, arts practice and academic scholarship have been both usefully highlighted and worryingly appropriated through this aspect of audit culture, whose largely baleful consequences have also been mitigated, to however limited a degree, by a greater appreciation of art-based research within universities.⁶ The implication is one that Chantal Mouffe has drawn when dismissing the tendency of some artists to shun museums as compromised institutions. ‘To believe that existing institutions cannot become the terrain of contestation,’ she writes, ‘is to ignore the tensions that always exist within a given configuration of forces and the possibility of acting in a way that subverts their form of articulation’ (*Agonistics*, p100).

What can then be inferred from an event like *Libidinal Circuits* is the existence of an intellectual field quite different in conception from audit culture’s cause-and-effect model of ‘impact’, and yet not wholly incompatible with its demands. The ‘power lines’ of this field are made up of shared and contested public spaces, unexpected connections and outcomes, the forward and backwards motion of creativity in practice and the folded and erratic movements of revelation that come from a multi-disciplinary commitment to knowing more and doing better, with and alongside other people from many walks of life. I return to the ‘impact’ of critical art practices in Liverpool at the end of the article. Before that, I look at the dissemination and reception of creative projects in different institutional contexts, and suggest some possible terms for understanding aesthetic responses to critical art.

DETAINEES

In April 2019, after the detour of a fellowship back in Sydney, I was working at the University of Lincoln. While in Sydney, I had become involved in efforts to publicise the plight of asylum seekers being detained in a prison on Manus Island, which was run for the Australian Government by the private British contractor Serco. The then Government’s border policies offer a paradigm case of Imogen Tyler’s model of abjection and the dynamics of border-making. The Australian Border Force (ABF) abjects refugees not only by having Serco incarcerate them in demeaning and dangerous conditions, under the pretext of the need to process claims for asylum, but also through a systematic rhetoric of dehumanisation that is enthusiastically amplified by sections of the Australian media. At the same time, the Government arbitrarily adapts and redraws its borders in support of this process, excising islands previously integral part to the national territory at the same time as disavowing its possibly illegal regime of incarceration by offshoring it to impoverished neighbours like Papua New Guinea.⁷

One response to these strategies was a campaign to reassert the humanity of the detainees on Manus Island in PNG by insisting on their individuality and identity. The most prominent representative of these ‘revolting subjects’ was the Kurdish journalist, author and poet, Behrouz Boochani, who was detained on Manus from 2013 until its closure in 2017 and remained there until his escape to New Zealand in late 2020. While incarcerated, Boochani used his mobile phone to create images and sequences that were edited into the film, *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time* (2016), and to send out short texts that built up into his memoir, *No Friend But the Mountains* (2018).⁸ He also collaborated with the Iranian-born, Melbourne-based photographer and filmmaker Hoda Afshar on her two-channel video work, *Remain* (Australia/PNG, 2018), acting as co-producer as well as appearing on-screen.

Back in England, the experience of Boochani and his fellow detainees, and Afshar’s depiction of it in *Remain* and in a set of black-and-white photographs, became the centrepiece of *There’s No Place Like Home*, another event that engaged with migration, borders, abjection and state power. *There’s No Place Like Home* shared the conference-cum-exhibition-cum-workshops structure of *Libidinal Circuits* and was organised by a similar coalition of academics, critical artists and curators, along with, on this occasion, the participation of campaigners against the incarceration and mistreatment of asylum seekers. The academic component was managed by the newly formed Justice, Arts and Migration Network, led by the Universities of Lincoln and Hong Kong Baptist. The first of its two iterations, in April 2019, took place at Mansions of the Future in Lincoln. Neither a conventional gallery nor a purpose-built arts centre like FACT, Mansions was located in a house opposite the city’s railway station, loaned for a three-year occupancy by the Co-Op, converted with funding from the Arts Council’s Ambition for Excellence programme and rendered an accessible arts and cultural hub through its redesign by artist Katrin Böhm and the imaginative curatorship of founding director Clare Cumberlidge.⁹

[INSERT IMAGE 1]

Image 1. Audience watching Remain at Mansions of the Future, April 2019. (Photograph: Matt Snellin)

Few of the attendees who watched *Remain* in Lincoln had any detailed knowledge of Australia’s offshore detention system. What they saw in Afshar’s video was a disconcerting juxtaposition between the apparently idyllic landscape of Manus Island – tropical beaches, jungle, trees and waterfalls – and its enforced habitation by nine stateless refugees (Image 1).¹⁰ Her camera-eye records these men, their faces and their bare skin marked by wasted years of confinement and disappointment. One man on a beach holds his head and sings in Kurdish of loneliness and frustrated hope; his eyes close and his bare chest heaves with breath. Another walks away from the camera through vibrant green jungle: bare back, long grey shorts, muscular. The mobile camera follows him and every so often he looks round, to see the filmmaker still behind him. A third man walks out from the pale blue sea, face to camera, thin wiry

frame, bare chest, long black wet hair. He is carrying a dead, pale pink fish. This is Behrouz Boochani. When this sequence was shot, he had been detained on Manus without charge for almost six years.¹¹

Chantal Mouffe has stressed that the *critical* dimension of art lies not only in its capacity to make visible ‘what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate’ by ‘giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony’, but also, crucially, in its use of ‘resources which induce emotional responses’ in order to ‘reach human beings at the affective level’ (*Agonistics*, p93, p97). It was on this affective level that the *Remain* video invited people living in a small English city to imagine how a beautiful island in the Pacific could be experienced as a site of systemic humiliation, despair and torture. For the curators of *There’s No Place Like Home*, the challenge was to create a *psycho-haptic* environment to enhance that affect: a *mise-en-scène* of voices, imagery and soundscapes that would provide multiple pathways into difficult subject matter and enable a critical engagement that was sensory and emotional as well as intellectual.¹²

Hoda Afshar’s presence was an important factor in binding together several of the contextual components. As well as engaging with participants in dialogue about her work and the issues it raises, she led a photography workshop. There was also an element of dialogue between the video and still components of her *Remain* project. In creating photographic portraits of the nine detainees, she worked with them to agree on the poses they would adopt. Where another component is present in the image – whether water, a bird, or another detainee – this would have been at the subject’s request. Her collaborative approach is likewise evident in the video. It was this freeing of the eye, the mobile interaction across time between subject and artists, and between digital object, subject and gallery visitor, that the curators attempted to amplify when designing the aural and visual flow of the exhibition. Again, the haptic imbrication of the *rational* with the *sensory* was key. In his study of how history can be present in photographic images, Georges Didi-Huberman insists on the need to embrace the complexity of the ‘perpetually moving experience of the visible’, and to avoid constricting ‘what we experience in the realm of the sensible, be it facing an event that we may witness or facing a visual document that bears witness to such an event’. By this account, it might be said that *history*, in this case the infinitely complicated dynamic of geopolitical forces that led the nine asylum-seekers to detention on Manus Island, is rendered by the interplay between Afshar’s still and moving images. The key, argues Didi-Huberman, is not to *immobilise* images; that is, not to isolate images from their ‘capacity to make a certain instant, duration, memory, or desire felt or sensible – in short, a certain *human time* in which are joined the objective and subjective dimensions of what we call “history”’.¹³

INSERT IMAGE 2

Image 2. Screening of Remain showing Nemul’s back. (Photograph: Matt Snellin)

The *punctum* that best captures this (contextually ironic) freedom in *Remain* may be the moment when a video camera, held by Afshar, is following a man through the jungle (Image 2). He is Nemul, a 32-year-old stateless Iranian Kurd. He turns away and leads her – and us as audience – through the undergrowth of Manus with his bare white back as our guide. His hands trail the foliage on the side of the rough path. As we follow him, Nemul’s voice-over recalls the deaths of men in the camp, his statelessness and his sense of the careless cruelty with which the men have been treated since their arrival. Then he turns and looks at Afshar, at the camera and so at us. His look marks the dimensional confluence of ‘objective and subjective history’. The look says, ‘I am “here”, I was “there” (when men died), and you/the camera/the artist/the spectator are “here” too. I see you. Take responsibility.’ Nemul’s look renders history *felt* and *sensible*; it embodies both the objective and subjective dimensions of Didi-Huberman’s ‘human time’.

Behrouz Boochani’s voice was also authoritatively present, although of necessity in mediated form. In *Remain*, he can be heard reciting his poetry as he walks through the jungle. In Lincoln, a question-and-answer session on Skype preceded the screening of the video. On this occasion, Boochani seemed close to despair. His voice betrayed an extreme weariness. His image on our screen was indeed ‘himself’ in shared time, but it also served as an existential representation of the lived reality of Manus, whose regime of detention and isolation he has always named as torture. The session thus did more than provide information about a situation with which most of the audience had been unfamiliar. As his literary collaborator Omid Tofighian has written, ‘Conveying the lived experience and nuanced interpretation of systematic torture meant that Boochani had to move beyond journalism as a medium and deliver his critique through art, particularly literature and poetry’.¹⁴ The grain of Boochani’s voice, as much as the emotional import of his words, thus became part of the haptic environment of the exhibition, which was further enhanced by the presence of Iranian, Kurdish and British actors in the gallery space where Afshar’s photographs were installed, where they read passages from *No Friend But the Mountains* (Image 3).

INSERT IMAGE 3

Image 3. Actors reading from No Friend But the Mountains. (Photograph: Matt Snellin)

To round out its psycho-haptic soundscape, the organisers of *There’s No Place like Home* held a competition to find an original piece of music that would be premiered at the exhibition. Behrouz Boochani and Hoda Afshar made the final choice. They selected *Dislocation*, by the Lincolnshire-based multi-media artist Simon Le Boggit. The work was his musical response to reading *No Friend But the Mountains* and forms part of a long-term project to ‘distil meaning from chaos’.¹⁵ Each second of its thirty-five minute running time symbolises one day in Boochani’s six years of incarceration on Manus. It

features a 'strange choir' that Le Boggit created 'by electronically stretching and contorting sound samples of Behrouz's own voice, recorded inside Manus Prison while he sang a love song'.¹⁶ *Dislocation* was first heard at a precise time that matched the seconds and days of Le Boggit's concept, and was then played continuously during the gallery's opening hours from a resource room near its front entrance. The music thereby dislocated visitors' sonic expectations as they entered the white house. The sampling of sea sounds and Boochani's singing voice resonated with the voices from Manus in *Remain*, as it screened in the central 'Commons' area, and with the occasional hum of actors speaking and singing in the photography gallery beyond that. Evoking the video's jarring disjunction between the landscape and function of Manus Island, the music was hauntingly beautiful and, at the same time, terrifying. Its crescendo of choral voices often stopped people in their tracks as they moved around the building.

The second presentation of *There's No Place Like Home* took place in London in July 2019, at Community Links, a charity housed in Canning Town Hall that provides services and advice about health and social inequality to the population of Newham. This was a shorter event, with less scope to create a sensory environment around the screening of *Remain*. Hoda Afshar was not present, but Le Boggit's music was played and there were readings from *No Friend But the Mountains* by the poet Lemn Sissay and the actor Anthony Taylor. Here, most of the audience appeared to be well informed about the ways in which detention haunts and deforms the journeys of refugees and migrants around the world, even if they did not know this particular story. The most striking moments occurred during the Skype Q&A with Behrouz Boochani that followed the screening. Three months on from Lincoln, his mood had become darker, his anger more palpable. A fellow countryman engaged him for some time in a discussion about the injustices wreaked on Kurds across West Asia and North Africa as well as in Kurdistan. Then a French musician asked about his feelings towards his captors and specifically about the degree of anger he felt towards them. As they spoke, the atmosphere in the cavernous hall changed. Here were two artists in critical dialogue, a musician and a poet, continents apart, linked by his phone and my computer, his face projected onto a screen for the audience while he looked at his interlocutor through the webcam, and she at him on the laptop screen on a table at one side of the stage. Mediated through technologies that defeated borders, distance and time, their impassioned conversation exposed and subverted the cynical attempts of the ABF and Serco to keep a man hidden from view and to silence his 'revolting' voice. The intensity generated by their exchange was palpable. It was evident in a flush of red I noticed on the musician's neck and in a sudden flicker of engagement in the writer's eyes. This moment prompted a question that is implicit but unanswered in Mouffe's account of critical art: that is, when and how does affective change actually happen?

What I saw in the tingle of the musician's skin and the flicker in the poet's eyes was the triggering of one particular libidinal circuit. It was a moment, or mechanism, best evoked in Laura U. Marks's explanation

of cinema's capacity to be *radioactive*.¹⁷ Marks's contention is that image, sound, the cinematic interval, the exchange of looks, speech, texture, framing, camera movement, editing and design contain between and amongst them the potential disruption of atom-splitting energy. 'Radioactive' affect manifests in the spectator as a shock, reaching out and in through the porosity of skin – the skin of being human as well as the skin of the film. The underlying premise is that cinema is above all a *haptic* medium; that is, it works through a power of *touch* that creates bodily sensations that does not depend on tactile proximity.¹⁸ We humans are always already ready for cinema in that sense. Our capacity to feel without physical touch is a sensation that we should all recognise. When we are disgusted, our skin crawls. When we feel desire or danger, it tingles. With anxiety, it buzzes. Despair or grief can make us scratch at our skin as if to displace the pain from one organ to another. If our company is toxic, our fragile skin erupts and cracks with tell-tale lesions. The sense of touch works over distance like sight, smell and sound. In an analogous account, Oksana Chefranova shows how, in silent cinema acting, the flat surface of a face is brought to life by a 'twinkling' or a 'flickering instability'.¹⁹ Marks acknowledges that 'vision and hearing' are the senses that best 'operate over distance' (*The Skin of the Film*, p199). Nevertheless, my argument is that the analysis of cinema as haptic supports the view that the sensation of touch in the skin, even – perhaps especially – where it is intimated rather than intimate, may be *the* powerful force that creates a resonance between critical art and its audiences. To grasp that resonance as haptic but not tactile is crucial to understanding the 'radioactive' power of such art to explode common sense and to change perceptions, beliefs and behaviours.²⁰ In *Remain*, for example, the skin of all the detainees, whether framed alone or with a companion, is crucial not only to the video's acknowledgement of their individual vulnerability, but also to the way that the spectator might 'feel' that vulnerability.

Soldiers

John Akomfrah's 'creative project' stretches back to his films with the Black Audio Film Collective in the 1980s, such as *Handsworth Songs* (1986), and continues with recent work such as his 'Four Nocturnes' for the Ghana Biennale in 2019. (At the turn of the century, Laura Marks identified him as one of the most formally innovative of intercultural filmmakers.) (*The Skin of the Film*, p10.) Over the decades, Akomfrah has been a defining presence in the intellectual field of critical art practice, engaging with histories of migration and diaspora, the use of state power to produce abject subjects and the recovery and affirmation of those silenced communities. His work may therefore be seen as contemporaneous with Hoda Afshar's *Remain*, not only because the two artists share a concern with these themes and perspectives, but also in the sense that both deploy the disruptive and pedagogic power of audio-visual imagery to evoke that *human time* which, for Didi-Huberman, makes an affective reality of the objective and subjective dimensions of history. Akomfrah's aim has always been 'to invoke narratives that have the possibility of activating the present'.²¹ I have argued that, in *Remain*, Afshar achieves this activation of the present, or of human time, through her tracking shot of Nemul's exposed

back as he walks the undergrowth and his powerful turn to camera. One of Akomfrah's repeated tactics for recovering occluded temporalities has been the juxtaposition of archival images and footage against new material in order to unfreeze their hegemonic significance. 'If you wanted to suggest temporality you had to be the historical relic,' he has observed with reference to *Handsworth Songs*.²² More recently, he scoured archives around the world to amass material for his recovery of the neglected, or repressed, history of the millions of Africans who fought as soldiers or served as porters during the First World War.²³

Mimesis: African Soldier (2018) was jointly commissioned by 14-18 NOW, the UK's arts programme for the First World War centenary, the New Art Exchange in Nottingham and Akomfrah's own production company, Smoking Dog Films. It was first presented at the Imperial War Museum in London between September 2018 and March 2019, a location that indicates 14-18 NOW's determination to raise public awareness of the role of Black servicemen and the Indian Army in Britain's twentieth-century wars.²⁴ Using his customary montage of archival image, reconstructions sequences and elegant tableaux, Akomfrah's three-screen essay explores how the 'discursive gallery' works with onscreen space to communicate colonial and post-colonial experience. He excavates an objective history of Black migration, labour and soldiery that was experienced, subjectively, in individual stories of immense destabilisation and human loss and then reactivates it to disrupt the amnesia of the present. The epic sweep of *Mimesis* evokes the scale of transoceanic travel and the dangerous waters of Empire, as well as the horrific scale of twentieth-century warfare. Equally, however, Didi-Huberman's 'human time' is recalled by the image of a solitary man standing on a beach, looking out to an uncertain sea. *Mimesis* thus places its audience in the dialogic landscapes of imperial militarisation where men and women have felt both connected and estranged by the tides of history.

The second installation of *Mimesis*, in the last four months of 2019, was outside the metropolis, at the New Art Exchange in Nottingham. Here its presence acted less as a comment on, or implicit rebuke to, the legacies of Imperial War, than as an endorsement of the NAE's mission of 'stimulating new perspectives about the value of diversity in art and society'. That resonance was amplified by its collocation with the exhibition, *When the Snow Melts: The World Wars, Empire and Muslim Soldiers*, curated by Jagdish Patel and Farida Makki in collaboration with Himmah, a local grass-roots charity, and specifically with its Muslim Memory Project that seeks to provide historically informed narratives relevant to young Muslim Britons of Kashmiri and Punjabi heritage. Using archival photographs and texts, collages evocative of Mughal miniatures and Islamic calligraphy and large white cotton screen prints celebrating remembrance poets and Muslim soldiers who served under the British Command, the exhibition emphasised personal memory and oral histories of the families of Muslim veterans in Britain. In doing so, it scaffolded a re-reading of the still parochially White dominant narrative of Britain and the

world wars of the twentieth century. The thinking behind the show may be encapsulated in another observation of John Akomfrah's: 'the sense of intimacies that have characterised the lives of people of colour in this part of the Western hemisphere needs to be understood' (*Migrations*, p109).

INSERT IMAGE 4

Image 4. When the Snow Melts, Nottingham, 2019. (Photograph: Jagdish Patel)

On one wall of the long gallery, Farida Makki's finely worked collages incorporated photographs of soldiers, calligraphy and gold leaf detail, the latter drawn from Islamic sacred art and the Mughal practice of highlighting the divine. She also presented painted motifs of prancing war-horses, which brought to mind pre-Imperial pageantry. At the same time, the material textures and softer colours of the collages spoke of domestic comfort and the idea of home as a haptic space of security and pleasure. Makki acknowledges the loneliness of the soldier fighting an Imperial war on behalf of an oppressor, and leaving this softness behind, but also recognises that same soldier's godlike heroism and divine importance to those who miss him. On the opposite wall, Patel and Makki presented 'a history of the Great Wars in 54 frames': photographs, letters, and news cuttings identically framed as archival objects.²⁵ The visitor had to get physically close to these objects to get the *feel* of the history on the wall: the honourable and shameful testimony of letters, the cold logic of bureaucrats and partisan media reports. One particular object gave me a jolt, not least because it struck close to home. It was a newspaper story, including a photograph of the victim, about the murder of a young Black seaman on 5 June 1919. 'The demobilisation of men after the end of the war came at a time of recession, resulting in race riots across the country,' it reported. 'In Liverpool, a young seaman, called Charles Wooton, was murdered after a crowd of up to 5,000 chased and then stoned him in the river.' The report also quoted from a letter the Mayor of Liverpool sent to the War Office, unapologetically demanding that Black servicemen be removed from the city.

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Image 5. Inayet Ali, 2019. (Photograph: Jagdish Patel)

At the end of the gallery the larger hanging pieces, screen prints on white cotton, gave the exhibition the added dimension of a memorial. Jagdish Patel told me how one image, a huge photograph of Inayet Ali, had changed the subject's life. Born February 1920, Ali was nearly 100 years old at the time of the exhibition. Interviewed on *Channel 4 News*, he described the moment when he was recognised on the street by a younger man. 'He shook hands with me and said thank you. You've saved my country.'²⁶ In the discursive space of the gallery, this 99-year-old Muslim man had been re-contextualised as a subject of the Empire with a history of military service, and that led to him being recognised on the streets of

Sherwood, not just as an aged person but also as a veteran. Touched by the feelings provoked by the exhibition, the stranger wanted to shake Ali's hand, skin on skin. Ali had become a living link to a heritage of migration, service and settlement and, thereby, performed an interiority of belonging for the generations who had come after him. This was his moment to look back at his interlocutors, like Nemul in *Remain*, and say, 'Here I am, and I was there'. For Jagdish Patel, as the exhibition's curator, the recognition of Inayet Ali as migrant *and* as citizen *and* as essential to the history of Britain was validation of its ambition to see migration history 'woven into the fabric of this nation's identity'. In this moment, the virtual came into contact with the actual and unsettled it. The image of Inayet Ali was radioactive in the sense that it embodied 'a past that is incommensurable with the present the image depicts' and allowed 'unresolved pasts to surface in the present of the image' (*The Skin of the Film*, p84). The shaking of hands embodied a material *mobilisation* of the imagery within the gallery outside that discursive space. Once again, the encounter reveals how touch can produce a shift in the molecular structure of historical perspective.

Vandals

The creative projects within the field of critical art that I have described so far might all be understood as interventions that reframe global circuits of capital, people and shared histories through an attention to the detail of intimate and psycho-haptic experience. When they are effective, such projects do more than shake a spectator's existing beliefs. They open up new ways of seeing the world and reactivate forgotten histories by creating a new 'human time'. The psycho-haptic experience of a gallery can inform, confirm or amplify how visitors are affected by stories that are *already their own*. This is what I mean by a 'libidinal circuit': it is the switching on of a certain energy through a relay of desire, recognition, ownership and effect that drives 'human time'. The concept thus attempts to identify what is 'critical' about critical art: That it cannot be inferred solely from the perspectives or intentions of the artist. Rather, it must refer to the ways in which an artwork (and its field) is experienced by an audience, its actual affect in a particular institutional setting. In other words, we are back with *impact*. Although the type of impact I have described can be translated into the metrics and discourse of audit culture,²⁷ here I want to consider two instances in which works received an unanticipated and hostile response when they went on show in public spaces in order to emphasise that art conceived as critical does not guarantee a sympathetically critical response. Both were outdoor installations in Liverpool. Recalling the historian Eric Hobsbawm's famous redescription of machine breaking in eighteenth-century England as 'collective bargaining by riot', I present these cases as instances of 'art criticism by vandalism'.²⁸

The first installation was part of *Libidinal Circuits* in 2015. For FACT, the event formed one segment of their *Build Your Own* season and provided an opportunity to showcase their 'Make Your Own' lab.²⁹ Among the contributors to make use of its resources were *chroma.space*, a Brighton art studio

comprising Kate Genevieve, Paul Hayes, Will Scobie and Paul Mason. In response to the brief to create an artwork that engaged with migration and the haptic traces it left in a port city, they turned for inspiration to a pair of poems by William Butler Yeats: *Sailing to Byzantium* (1926) and *Byzantium* (1930). Both poems feature the image of a beautifully wrought golden bird. In *Sailing to Byzantium*, an old man imagines shuffling off his physical body and turning into something that Greek goldsmiths might make from ‘hammered gold and gold enamelling’, and then be ‘set upon a golden bough to sing/To lords and ladies of Byzantium/Of what is past, or passing, or to come’. In *Byzantium*, again, the poet evokes a ‘[m]iracle, bird or golden handiwork’ that, placed ‘on the starlit golden bough’, will, ‘[i]n glory of changeless metal’, mock mere mortal living birds. For Kate Genevieve, Yeats’s golden bird signified ‘how the utopian “perfect” handiwork cannot be realised in our human lives, although it is human to long for it’ and serves as a warning that ‘the technological aspirations of our own society’, with its emphasis on innovation, were not ‘heeding this wisdom or warning against hubris’.

INSERT IMAGE 6

Image 6. Byzantium, chroma.space, 2015.

The group’s *Byzantium* project consisted of an exquisite brass bird fitted with a Raspberry Pi mini-computer and a tiny speaker (Image 6). Before the exhibition opened, Kate Genevieve and Paul Hayes recorded vox-pops over several days from people in Bold Street, a lively hub of shops and restaurants next door to FACT. They wanted to create ‘a sampling of the city’, Kate Genevieve told me in 2020, which the group imagined as ‘the migration of birds in different places on the earth, and all of this is home’. In Bold Street they found a mix of people, from shoppers and students to homeless veterans and, later in the evening, drunken bar hoppers. (In *Byzantium*, Yeats evokes a strikingly Liverpudlian image of ‘night-walkers’ song/After great cathedral gong’.) The snippets of these many languages, accents and dialects were then made available to gallery visitors, who were invited to select extracts which they fed into an installation in the Make Your Own lab. This computer in turn communicated the collage poems to the Raspberry Pi, so that once it was placed outside, the bird could ‘sing’ them on the streets where the words and voices had originated, and by extension have them float to the cosmopolitan port nearby and to the edges of the city where birdsong was still audible. It promised to be a perfect libidinal circuit.

INSERT IMAGE 7

Image 7. Byzantium vandalized, chroma space, 2015

So, bravely and hopefully, on the eve of the exhibition's opening to the public, the miracle bird was placed high on a tree in Ropewalk Square, across a laneway from FACT. That night, however, the bird was vandalised and left dangling, its elegantly crafted body bent out of shape and its Raspberry Pi stolen (Image 7). The story was picked up by the *Liverpool Echo* and the ruined bird had its few days of fame. Shocked by the reports and their implication that Liverpool people had no respect for art, one generous local businessman even offered funding to have it re-made and returned to its perch. Looking back five years after the event, Kate Genevieve took issue with this account. The vandalism had not come as a complete surprise, she recalled. The artists had debated whether to leave their utopian structure unguarded in an open place. Kate had wanted to take it down each night; Paul Hayes argued that it should remain in place. They were encouraged to take the leap of faith by the conversations they had had on Bold Street. When they asked a wide variety of people about the future they would like the most, what they encountered was not violence or antipathy towards art, but a silent fear of hubris and a reluctance to be optimistic. In retrospect, Kate Genevieve wondered whether the bird would have appeared 'as a kind of set up', a 'shiny thing, just a bit out of reach, on an upper branch', 'almost like a trap'. The vandalism might then be seen as the inevitable destiny for a work critiquing technology culture's dreams of perfection and the impossibility of embodying that utopian vision materially, especially when the artists gave insufficient weight to Yeats's 'bitter furies of complexity' as they manifest themselves on the streets of Liverpool at night.

In the *Libidinal Circuits* conference, the destruction of the brass bird brought some of its central concepts into sharper focus: global resonance, belonging, urban transience and the role of the artist. For the academics, the bird embodied other themes as well. For one, it became a symbol of collaboration, not just between the artists but also, 'taking a more (new) materialist perspective', the collaboration 'between the metallic nature of the materials, the silicon chip and the artists who inscribed upon it with algorithmic data', which in turn embodied 'the interaction between the human and the non-human'. In her feedback, this participant suggests there may have been something almost radioactive about the bird, in the sense that it brought to the surface things that had been forgotten or hidden: 'what the bird had accomplished was the "double-back" – a reflection upon the very reflection that has taken place, leading to ever new conclusions, ideas, and evaluations'. This 'double-back' energised a new 'temporality', the kind of 'human time' described by Didi-Huberman. 'The past is not written,' he continues, 'but always in a process of "writing and re-writing"'. As new events and happenings come to fore, new ideas will too accompany it, highlighting the flexibility of the past, disrupting the linear notion of time as we know it.³⁰

Whatever their motives, the vandals who climbed the tree to dismember the *Byzantium* bird at least provided proof of the *Libidinal Circuits* event's impact. It is not just that the broken bird became the

focus of academic discussion. The incident delivered all the media coverage and public engagement a university could hope for. For the artists, the act provided a kind of critical feedback, a violent reminder of the hubris involved in displaying an artwork that critiqued the hubris of human creation. (The bird was subsequently bent back into shape and exhibited at the Festival of Climate Ideas at ONCA Gallery in Brighton as part of ArtCOP21.)

The other installation to be vandalised in Liverpool was Turkish artist Banu Cennetoğlu's *The List*, which was part of the 2018 Biennial. Cennetoğlu had started the work in 2002, shocked by the death toll of migrants trying to reach Europe by boat since the early 1990s. Her aim was to record all their names, along with the date they died and the cause of death.³¹ It therefore shared with other works discussed here the strategy of excavating hidden or inconvenient histories, bringing them to light, and so setting off new chains of association in the present. *The List* was pasted onto a long hoarding on Great George Street, a main road running south from the city centre, which fenced off a derelict site that had been earmarked for the development of a shoddily designed and dodgily financed new extension to the long-established China Town nearby. There had been no attacks on *The List* in its previous presentations around the world. Given the political climate at the time, many people linked its trashing in Liverpool to populist anti-refugee feeling and post-Brexit aggression. '[T]here there is something immeasurably depressing and shaming that this should happen on its first showing in Britain,' wrote Charlotte Higgins in the *Guardian*. 'It is hard to imagine the failure of compassion that would impel any individual or group to do this, especially as the list is so modest: it asks nothing of passers-by other than that it should be seen.'³² *The List* was ripped down not once, but twice. It was defaced again when it was restored on the same stretch of hoardings. Recalling the destruction of the *Byzantium* bird in 2015, it may seem surprising – if this was the case – that neither the artist nor the Biennial curators foresaw vandalism as a risk. Even so, was it reasonable for Charlotte Higgins to protest that *The List* 'asks nothing of passers-by other than it should be seen'? Is that ever really all that activist art in a public space asks, or should ask?

Whether intentionally or not, and whether this had anything to do with the vandalism or not, the location of *The List*'s roll of the refugee dead could not help but evoke episodes from Liverpool's history as a port of destination or transition for earlier migrants. It was a radioactive site, in Laura Marks's (and Deleuze's) sense that it hints at fossilised but unresolved histories: 'it beckons the viewer to excavate the past, even at his or her peril' (*The Skin of the Film*, p81). The hoarding faced onto the city's Anglican Cathedral, a legacy of its sectarian past, and its elegant Georgian quarter, many of whose fine buildings were funded by profits from the slave trade. Less than a mile to the northeast, the University of Liverpool is built over a mass grave in which seven thousand pauperised Irish migrants were buried in the 1840s. The notorious 1981 riots (or uprising) erupted in Toxteth (L8), half a mile to the east. Just a year before the Biennial, in 2017, the collapse of the new China Town development due to be built behind the

hoarding had hurt not just the local Chinese community, but many small investors in Hong Kong and Singapore, from whom Liverpool council officials had aggressively solicited finance.³³

As I say, those histories were latent rather than manifest. Even so, this was a symbolically volatile setting in which to commemorate migrant lives lost. The question that then arises is: Who might have been so threatened or insulted by Cennetoğlu's minimalist record that they felt the need to destroy it? Who would have reacted so violently to its implicit accusation of complicity in those deaths? *The List* was incisive and accusatory but, placed where it was on the road to L8, who exactly was being accused? No doubt it was Liverpool's more comfortable and secure residents who should have taken some responsibility for the rise of the UK's racist migration policies, Theresa May's 'hostile environment' and the post-Brexit rise of ethnonationalist populism. And yet, it seems more likely that the vandalism itself was an act of confused, purposeless and disempowered anger. The mob killing of Charles Wooton in 1919 provokes the same question. Who was more at fault then? Was it the dockers who chased the innocent sailor down to the water, or was it the Mayor who cynically blamed the mere presence of Black servicemen for the violence meted out against them?

INSERT IMAGES 8a-e

Images 8a-e. Great George Street, Liverpool, 2020. (Photographs: the author)

Revisiting the hoardings in the summer of 2020, in the dog days of the pandemic lockdown, prompted a different thought (Image 8a-e). What if the vandalism of *The List* in 2018 had not been wholly unanticipated? Could it have been that the artist and the curators selected this historically radioactive site as (in Kate Genevieve's phrase) a 'kind of trap', a prescient and provocative way of highlighting the transience of the memorial and the spatial vulnerability of those being remembered? Having lured the vandals into their violent engagement, should its desecration then be seen less as a negation of *The List*, than as an intensification of its critical impact? By 2020, Cennetoğlu's work had taken on a new half-life. Torn scraps of *The List* were still visible, but now they had become the first layer of a number of pro-refugee poems, slogans and images. The hoarding appeared, as it were, to have taken on the responsibility of its own history, not unlike the Lennon walls to be found in Prague or Hong Kong.³⁴ Holes had been kicked through it, revealing a wasteland haunted by Liverpool's dodgy speculators and ruined investors in Hong Kong. At the same time, it had become a canvas for calls to welcome refugees, random poetry and flashes of wall art. Three months later, in October 2020, street artists could be seen re-working the hoardings yet again with bright colours and bold shapes, painting over the traces of *The List*, but failing to expunge them from memory or from the possibility of their reactivation in the future.

Covering a lot of ground, from Manus Island to Liverpool to Yeats's imagined Byzantium, this article has tracked the existence and functioning of a field of critical art held together by shared themes, topics, techniques and publics. One danger for such a field is that it can run the risk of producing a paradoxically uncritical circuit of mutual affirmation. It is therefore worth reiterating the point that neither an artist's intentions nor the approbation of peers and critics is sufficient to make an artwork critical. Rather, criticality happens in those occasional radioactive moments when, as a result of their engagement with the work, someone is jolted into recognising a forgotten history or a repressed memory and so comes to see the world differently. However unpredictable, such encounters are almost invariably shaped by the institutional context and physical location of the art. Criticality is a matter of impact, however compromised that term may have become. Even a violently hostile reaction, one that attempts to deny or silence a challenge to established ways of seeing, may attest to a critical outcome. The vandalisation of the *Byzantium* bird and *The List* at least tells us that these works got under someone's skin.

Stephanie Hemelryk Donald

1. See Stephanie Hemelryk Donald and Elke Grenzer, *Libidinal Circuits: Scenes of Urban Innovation*, Toronto/Liverpool, 2015: <https://www.cultureofcities.com/libidinal-circuits-2015>.
2. Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, Iain Hamilton Grant (trans.), Bloomsbury Academic 2015 [1974].
3. Pierre Bourdieu, 'Intellectual Field and Creative Project', *Social Science Information*, 8:2, 1969, pp89-119, p89. (Hereafter *Intellectual Field*).
4. Imogen Tyler, *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain*, Zed 2013, pp4, p70. (Emphasis added.) See also, Nadine El-Anany, *Bordering Britain: Law, Race and Empire*, Manchester University Press 2020.
5. Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*, Verso 2013, p91. (Hereafter *Agonistics*).
6. See, for example, the report commissioned from Rand Europe by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the University of Cambridge: *Assessing the Impact of Arts and Humanities Research at the University of Cambridge*, Rand Organisation 2010; also, Caroline Lenette, *Arts-Based Methods in Refugee Research: Creating Sanctuary*, Springer 2019.
7. Stephanie Hemelryk Donald, 'Shaming Australia: Cinematic Responses to the "Pacific Solution"', *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, 18, 2019, pp70-90.
8. Behrouz Boochani, *No Friend but the Mountain: Writing from Manus Prison*, Omid Tofighian (trans.), Picador Australia 2018. I interviewed Boochani by WhatsApp at the *Refugee Alternatives* conference at the University of New South Wales in February 2017 (see

[alternatives/2017-conference/](#)), and again with Omid Tofighian and Su Goldfish for the 2017 *Sydney Film Festival*.

9. See: <https://mansionsofthefuture.org/events/theres-no-place-like-home-justice-migrations-the-arts/> and <https://mansionsofthefuture.org/events/kathrin-bohm-culture-is-a-verb/>. In Lincoln, *There's No Place Like Home* was curated by the author, Clare Cumberland, Mansions Curator Colette Griffin, and JAM Project Manager, Kaya Davies Hayon.

10. Although *Remain* is a two-screen installation, Afshar generously allowed us to screen it at Mansions on a single screen, in light of constraints of space and equipment.

11. Hoda Afshar, 'A Conversation between Hoda Afshar and Behrouz Boochani', *Collecteurs*, 2020, <https://www.collecteurs.com/interview/a-conversation-between-hoda-afshar-and-behrouz-boochani>.

12. This was not the same as creating an *immersive* environment. The aim was neither to produce a four-dimensional virtual space, nor to create an 'idealised interiority' through which visitors might attain a 'primordial' and 'precritical' experience. See Will Schrimshaw, 'Exit immersion', *Sound Studies*, 1:1, 2015, pp155-170, p155. On psychohaptic research, see the MIT Tangible Media group:

<https://tangible.media.mit.edu/project/psychohaptics/> and, in relation to music, Randall Harlow, 'Keyboard Psychohaptics: A Nexus of Multidisciplinary Research into Kinesthetics, Gesture, and Expression', *Keyboard Perspectives*, 6, 2013, pp1-21.

13. Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Eye of History: When Images Take Positions*, Shane B. Lillis (trans.), Ryerson Centre, 2018, pxvi.

14. Omid Tofighian, 'Introducing Manus Prison Theory: Knowing Border Violence', *Globalizations*, 7, 2020, p7.

15. <https://outsidein.org.uk/galleries/simon-le-boggit/>

16. <https://soundcloud.com/simon-le-boggit/dislocation>

17. Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses*, Duke University Press 2000, p65. (Hereafter *The Skin of the Film*).

18. Antonia Lant, 'Haptical Cinema', *October*, 74, 1995, pp45-73; Vivian C. Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, Princeton University Press 1992; Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, University of California Press 2004; Saige Walton, *Cinema's Baroque Flesh: Film, Phenomenology and the Art of Entanglement*, Amsterdam University Press 2016.

19. Oksana Chefranova, 'Breathing Faces, Twinkling Eyes: On the Cinematic Visage in Russian Films of the 1910s', in Marina Dahlquist, Doron Galili, Jan Olsson and Valentine Robert (eds), *Corporeality in Early Cinema: Viscera, Skin, and Physical Form*, Indiana University Press 2018, pp191-202, p202.

20. I am grateful to Lucia Nagib for clarifying this insight.

21. John Akomfrah, *Hauntologies*, Bárbara Rodríguez Muñoz (ed.), Carroll/Fletcher 2012.

22. John Akomfrah, 'Artist interview', in Lizzie Carey-Thomas and Paul Goodwin (eds), *Migrations: Journeys into British Art*, Tate 2012, pp106-109, p106. (Hereafter *Migrations*).
23. Javier Pes, 'How Artist John Akomfrah Used Archival Film Footage to Tell the Forgotten Story of African Soldiers in the First World War', *artnet news*, 21 September 2018.
24. An ambition absent from the 2020 celebrations of World War Two's VE Day.
25. Jagdish Patel, *When the Snow Melts: The Great War, Empire and Muslim Soldiers*, New Art Exchange 2019.
26. Inayet Ali interview with Darshna Soni, *Channel 4 News*, 10 November 2019.
<https://www.channel4.com/news/britains-forgotten-veterans>.
27. For a report on *Libidinal Circuits* submitted to the University of Liverpool, see:
https://www.academia.edu/37552014/Hemelryk_Donald_Creative_Work_Impact_11_pdf. The Justice, Arts and Migration events in 2019 formed the basis of a University of Lincoln Impact Case Study for REF 2021.
28. E. J. Hobsbawm, 'The Machine Breakers', *Past & Present*, 1, 1952, pp57-70, p59.
29. <https://www.fact.co.uk/event/build-your-own-tools-for-sharing>.
30. 'Jessie', *Libidinal Circuits* evaluation, July 2015:
<https://migrationandart.com/data/Research/pdf/9087cd8bfa9c1968b20d8f6d0b81cbbb.pdf>.
31. Charlotte Higgins, 'Banu Cennetoğlu: "As long as I have resources, I will make The List more visible"', *The Guardian* 20 June 2018.
32. Charlotte Higgins, 'The refugee list's destruction in Liverpool has a chilling significance', *The Guardian*, 16 August 2018.
33. In December 2020, following the failure of a number of proposed developments around the city, Liverpool's Mayor, Joe Anderson, was arrested on suspicion of conspiracy to commit bribery and witness intimidation, along with two senior council officials and Derek Hatton, deputy leader of the council in its Militant days.
34. Jeff Hou, "'Lennon Walls' herald a sticky-note revolution in Hong Kong", *The Conversation*, 17 January 2020: <https://theconversation.com/lennon-walls-herald-a-sticky-note-revolution-in-hong-kong-129740>.