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Focal Point Gallery: A New Institutional Model?

Andrew Hunt

ABSTRACT A description is given of how Focal Point Gallery's (FPG) new building (in Southend-on-Sea, Essex) was conceived in terms of its practical effectiveness in addressing tensions between local and global, utopian, social and political thought, through the commissioning of permanent and temporary artworks – by Marc Camille Chaimowicz, Scott King, Mike Nelson, Elizabeth Price, Allen Rupperberg, Tris Vonna-Michell and Lawrence Weiner – via an ethical curatorial approach involving affirmative modes of criticality. This includes an account of distribution strategies used for FPG's printed publicity as an artistic program in its own right, and the various platforms, channels and spaces of editorial circulation that informed this curatorial approach.

Focal Point Gallery (FPG), a small to medium-sized publicly funded contemporary visual arts organization, was originally located on the top floor of the Central Library in the Essex town of Southend-on-Sea. In late 2013 it moved to its new premises within a purpose-designed complex that includes the gallery and a new regional library, alongside areas used by two educational organizations: South Essex College and the University of Essex. The designs of these two buildings are reflective of two very different architectural eras: the first was built in the early 1970s in a

classic form of late civic Brutalism that contained generous amounts of public space, while the second was designed as an arena in which different partner organizations could co-exist within a single structure. In this paper, I would like to outline the approach to commissioning used during the construction of FPG's new premises on the ground floor of the second building. Between 2008 and 2014, during my time as Director of FPG the gallery's program dealt with critical discussions around local history, regeneration, debates around the idea of art as social healer (concepts gradually distilled from enlightenment philosophy and morphed into bureaucratic terminology via UK central government and its funding bodies), and a discourse that took its lead from what was termed "New Institutionalism"¹ in the early 2000s. Within this setting, and the challenge to reimagine a sustainable economic model immediately after a twenty-year period of National Lottery-funded capital developments, and public "austerity" measures that had started to take hold in the UK, FPG's new home represented the unusual opportunity of creating a transformed working environment for a contemporary visual arts organization.² I would like to indicate what might we take away from the resulting building, the first of its kind in the UK to be commissioned in the 2010s after the 2008 global economic crisis.

Working with architects Manalo and White (M+W), the overall aim of the design process was to create a ground floor space that worked sensitively within a larger complex that, in addition to the gallery, included a regional library, a college and a university. FPG's natural working partners – consisting of these educational institutions, library visitors and a wider local public – needed to be acknowledged as vital participants in the production of critical autonomy along with the artists in FPG's ongoing program.³ One of the ways in which this was facilitated in initial concepts for the building was through the usual process of consultation with all partners, and subsequently M+W, around the layout of the space and its relationship with the visual languages used within the internal décor. These discussions ran parallel with the commissioning process of FPG's selected artists, whose invitations were based on their ability to tease out globally inflected subjects in local site-specific permanent artworks, leading up to the launch of the new premises in late 2013.

As I will outline in detail, the degree to which a synthesis was created between the internal and external space of the building was of great importance. Aside from opening out the gallery plan to maximize accessibility, and using ideologically loaded materials sourced by M+W that referred back to FPG's original 1970s' Brutalist home, this was achieved by a form of artistic commissioning that dictated that works relate precisely to the culture and history of the site. These artworks and visual devices can be listed as follows: a reception desk situated in the foyer designed by Southend-born artist Tris Vonna-Michell – a "sculpture" whose constituent parts connected international moments in political history to local personal experience; an installation of "redundant" library

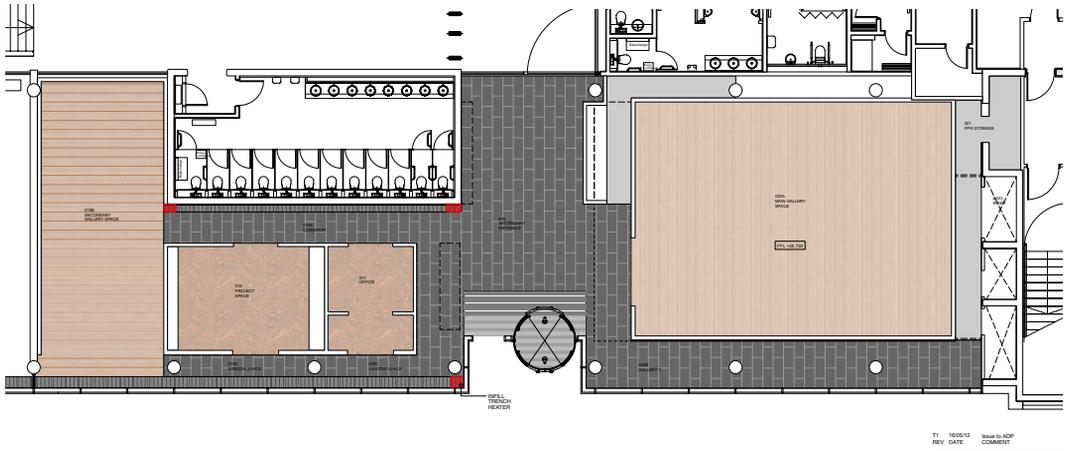
books by artist Mike Nelson that had been saved from destruction during Southend Central Library's move from its old home to its new location in the complex alongside FPG; a series of decorative commissions by artist Marc Camille Chaimowicz that queered the traditional white cube of the gallery and its relationship with the external area via patterned textiles; a window gallery designed by M+W and FPG, whose faux-Modernist design echoed the hessian wall material within the previous library building; a large stroboscopic window-based neon designed by a Leipzig-based graphic design team HIT and FPG; a digital screen constructed in the building's external courtyard/thoroughfare with a permanent artistic commission on its reverse by the US Conceptual artist Allen Ruppersberg; a small commemorative bookmark designed by Lawrence Weiner another first-generation US Conceptual artist;⁴ and temporary signs situated on the high street nearby by artist/graphic designer Scott King, which criticized first-generation Conceptualism's use within large-scale global capital developments (Ruppersberg and Weiner's works are, for instance, increasingly employed as "statement" signage within museum architecture). These related to King's concept of "de-regeneration," or "the democratization of regeneration,"⁵ at the very point the new gallery opened.

Importantly, M+W were hired to act as "design consultants" in the translation of FPG's plans for the new gallery to ADP, the architects procured to design the wider complex within which FPG was to be housed. In essence, M+W drew up FPG's ideas into a standard architectural plan, and liaised with ADP and its building contractors to ensure that the mechanical aspects of the project were on schedule through to the opening of the building. However, they also provided invaluable support in relation to sourcing the fine detail of materials with the commissioned artists, so as to fabricate or bring into being the gallery – including display cabinets, vitrines and printed-matter display cases – as a fully cohesive and integrated meta-artwork, *Wunderkammer* or *Gesamtkunstwerk*. As shown in Figure 1, on a practical level, three gallery spaces were hewn from a relatively small 400 square meter space on the ground floor of the new multipurpose complex, with the addition of a project space/education room and a small office.

Before I go on to outline the specific details and critical impact of the artistic commissions, I would like briefly to discuss various local perceptual hurdles that had to be overcome in the production of this new capital project. Since the mid-1990s, large regional UK visual arts organizations such as Ikon in Birmingham, New Art Gallery Walsall, Baltic in Gateshead, Nottingham Contemporary, mima in Middlesbrough, The Hepworth in Wakefield, Firstsite in Colchester, and Turner Contemporary in Margate had all constructed new buildings, architectural projects whose intention was to benefit audiences and "low-engagement zones" in the UK's regions. With austerity measures in full swing by 2012, the two final large capital projects to be completed

(both of which were commissioned before the economic collapse in 2008) were Turner Contemporary in 2009 and Firstsite in 2011.⁶

Although FPG's building is dramatically smaller in scale in comparison with the above-mentioned projects, its construction came at an interesting historical moment, after the demise of an era of support for publicly funded architecture that reached its zenith in the mid-2000s. Within this setting, and although more modest in scale, FPG's concern was to create an alternative to a dominant generation of capital projects, which one can argue held an unquestioned belief in spectacular architecture's ability to transform disadvantaged areas. Within the UK, as has been discussed in publications such as *Cultural Capital* (2014) by the historian Robert Hewison, we can read the rise of funding for culture during the late 1990s and 2000s as part of New Labour's mission to transform economically decimated areas of the UK.⁷ Claire Bishop's condemnation of capitalist neoliberal forces in the commissioning of new art and buildings, as well as the connected zeitgeist of the biennale and *kunsthalle* programming, criticizes the ways in which the UK under Tony Blair's New Labour government saw culture, and increasingly contemporary visual art, as a cheap way of making visible a sense of "care," a synthetic veneer of social engagement in "hard-to-reach," disadvantaged locations. As Bishop made clear in her



T1 16/05/12 Issue to ADP
REV. DATE COMMENT

- KEY**
- DINESEN WOOD FLOOR Douglas Lye Whitesap
Width 300 mm
 - AS ADP SPECIFICATION
DOMAS TISS SCOTTECH DCC03
800 mm x 400 mm
 - Linoform; FORBO Marmoleum Vivace
Colour TIC
 - AS ADP SPECIFICATION
ENTRANCE BRUSH MATTING
Folco Navy Classic 170cm Double Closed
 - FLOORING STORAGE AREAS
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PROJECT
FOCAL POINT GALLERY

drawing
Ground Floor - Floor Finishes Plan

SCALE
1:100 @ A3

STATUS
Preliminary

DRAWING No. 819/04/02 REVISION T1

Figure 1
Manalo and White Architects, *Architectural Plan of Focal Point Gallery*, 2013. Courtesy: Focal Point Gallery.

Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship (2012),⁸ Blair viewed culture as a cost-effective way of creating the impression of social cohesion, while covering up policies that are actually undermining it. In Hewison's view, the subsequent coalition government's austerity measures represented a relatively "pure form" of neoliberalism in a new "age of lead."

FPG's new design concept was created within this wider brutal economic picture, and within a renewed theoretical, political and socio-economic discussion around visual art's role in small communities, against the collapse of the grand scheme of the twenty-year period of National Lottery-funded capital developments. In many respects, the main issue for FPG was to explore the revised critical potential for a contemporary art gallery to engage in real terms with its audience within a very specific regional setting. Our concern was to synthesize architecture, graphic design, literature and storytelling (the latter being relevant due to the gallery being housed within a complex with a new regional library), and theatrical curating with the legacy of Conceptual Art and Southend's local histories that contain global significance.

M+W had previously worked on a small sensitively designed extension to the original FPG (a project space that echoed elements of the early 1970s' Brutalist civic Modernist structure within which it was housed). They were approached to draw the plans for the new gallery, advise on materials, and as part of this design process we settled on four major artistic commissions by Chaimowicz, Nelson, Vonna-Michell and Ruppertsberg.⁹ The decision-making process around the permanent artworks was drawn out of an attempt to inject the essence of the utopian Modernist architecture of the previous gallery's home into the new premises, as a "pre-post-erous" antagonistic gesture – by "pre-post-erous" I am referring to ideas used by theorists such as Hal Foster surrounding the reanimation of the past ("the pre") in the future ("the post")¹⁰ – combined with hidden local cultural moments surrounding Southend, as a critical viewpoint against global neoliberal political issues, and the increasing erosion of the public sphere.

If ADP's umbrella design of the new building complex formed a "neutral" self-consciously reserved and self-deprecating public space that adhered to a sense of moral responsibility in a new age of restricted public money, this left open the possibility that the gallery could go forward with its commissions as a series of affirmative critiques relating to this situation. The commissions offered the possibility of reanimating architectural histories in the present as a critical device to reflect on local and global contemporary political issues surrounding austerity, the role of visual art in specific communities, regeneration and gentrification, and were enacted through the materials used by M+W within the interior of the gallery that echoed the previous gallery's home and its utopian era (raw concrete, hessian, cork, linoleum, mirrored walls), but also literary genres such as the dystopian science fiction oeuvre of J.G. Ballard and the dark potential of Edgar Allen Poe and Stanislaw Lem. For the purpose

of this paper, I will discuss four of the specifically commissioned works for the new gallery space: Nelson's *An Invocation: Five Hundred and Thirty Books from Southend Central Library*; Vonna-Michell's *Tiles and Tides and Capitol Complex/Ulterior Vistas*; Ruppertsberg's *Questions & Answers no. 1*; and Weiner's *Written on the Wind* (all 2013).

Mike Nelson, *An Invocation: Five Hundred and Thirty Books from Southend Central Library*

The working relationship between Nelson and FPG started in 2011 during the planning of an offsite project for an old military bunker in nearby Shoeburyness. However, this site was soon rejected in favor of a permanent sculpture, one that reversed the usual spectacular tropes of public monuments. Nelson's project, which aimed to save knowledge in an age of public asset-stripping (albeit symbolically), dovetailed perfectly into a constant theme within FPG's institutional narrative of utopian and dystopian literature. Interested in pursuing ideas inherent to his work around storytelling and prose through installation, Nelson's site visits started to focus on the redundant stock of the old library building, which became a surprisingly effective way of creating a dialogue during the problematic loss of local and global knowledge and history in FPG's move between two buildings from different eras. In consultation with the architects, the artist inserted a carefully selected series of publications into a cavity within the new gallery's wall, in a work that references the ideological setting within which each building was created, connecting local historical reference points within literature (seafaring and pirate utopias, for example), as well as revealing global art historical associations between first-generation Conceptualism, de-materialization and science fiction's "cheap cloak of invisibility." Within the context of a hidden installation of saved books, Nelson effectively created a politically motivated time capsule within the walls of the new institution, and performed a critical specter of the utopian in a tragic age of economic restriction through its ability to reanimate fictional and nonfictional signifiers from the old library's stock. In the artist's view, this had a ritualistic essence about it:

At this point, I've probably made around eight trips to Southend, sometimes for a couple of days at a time, and I've spent quite a long time rhythmically gliding on a wheeled stool across the shelves of the books condemned to pulp death, choosing titles. It's a strange process, because on one level you're focused, and on another, a cadenced intuition kicks in. You pull stuff out only to look back at it later and think that it seems quite tenuous, but at the same time, a link grows in your head and you know it's going to work with the different combinations of publications you already have. It's a strange experiment with the power of the object: the imprint of the cat in the fresh plaster of the Poe novel.¹¹

The Poe novel in question is *The Black Cat* (1843), the famous tale in which a cat is accidentally enclosed behind a wall with the body of a murder victim at the killer's home. The incarcerated animal scratches at the wall's interior, which torments the murderer outside, until he breaks down the structure and is revealed as the perpetrator of the crime. Nelson's intention was that the imprisoned books should implement a similar discomfiting presence to the visitor, as a reminder of the destruction of the public sphere and access to knowledge.

However, it remains important for Nelson that all buildings have a lifespan. In his view, when the new gallery and library are pulled down in future, it is likely that his installation in Southend will simply be read as forgotten detritus and lose its captivating power. In the meantime, what is significant is the archive's existence in a specific order behind the walls, which makes for thousands of new connections and associations:

It's likely that it'll only be about 40 or 50 years before the walls are knocked down, so it's not as if the books are going to be very old. Going back to utopianism, there's an invocation at the very beginning of *Cities of the Red Night*, where Burroughs writes, "This book is dedicated to the Ancient Ones, to the Lord of Abominations" This phrase works like an incredible prose poem and invokes a multitude of different Gods from many cultures. In this respect, my collection of books isn't simply a prayer to an idea or a specific belief; it's an invocation of a building [the old Southend Central Library] that embodied many histories. A building that was once very objective in that it was a library; different books passed through it, different people passed through it, and knowledge was passed down. I've navigated my way through the library and had a subjective relationship with it. Through this, there's an invocation of my history in relation to that building within this hidden space.¹²

Nelson includes the audience of the library in his project's equation to suggest potential for future knowledge and the collective production of ideas. This mirrors the gallery's intention to construct a leveled hierarchy of authorship with multiple writers and audience participation in the production of knowledge. This is an element incorporated into the holistic approach to the gallery design, with its synthesis of interior/ exterior space involving audience members as willing participants over time. In a corresponding manner, Nelson discusses how the writer Jorge Luis Borges famously spoke of an armchair describing a person that sat in it for thirty years, and how, similarly, every book in a library passes through the hands of many people to form the imprint of an entire community. In this respect, although there is no individual ownership, the aim of Nelson's project being to connect hidden memories of a specific group of readers' responses to its library's books, via the invocation by Burroughs mentioned above. Burroughs's history of cut-and-paste

literature (*The Third Mind*, for example) points to Nelson's own use of collage of books and words that, in a specific order, contain a particular rhythm of disjunctive elements, so as to point to new possibilities for understanding the gallery and its location's identity.

The second incarnation of Nelson's project came in the form of a single publication, *An Invocation: Five Hundred and Thirty Books from Southend Central Library*, which contained the covers of the 530 books Nelson had rescued. Bound together in a number of "chapters" that were thematically paced and provided new and unlikely connections, the book was "bookended" by two small, stapled pamphlets held within the flaps of its plastic dust jacket (Figure 2). The first contained an interview with Nelson on the subject of his new commission and its relation to his wider practice – a self-conscious devise that enabled us to discuss the implications of his new work in a reflective manner – while the second held a complete bibliography of the books that Nelson had saved from destruction, a practical tool meaning that every object in the archive would remain accessible in a virtual sense.

In Nelson's view, his book was comparable to a work/exhibition that he had made at Matt's Gallery in early 2013, *More Things (To the Memory of Honoré de Balzac)*, which, in turn, emulated another project

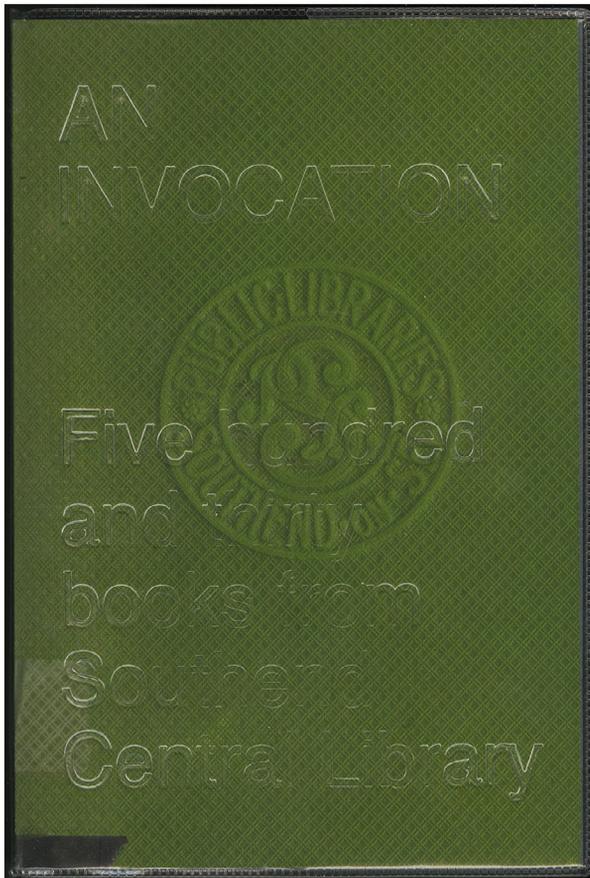


Figure 2
Mike Nelson, *An Invocation: Five Hundred and Thirty Books From Southend Central Library* (Focal Point Gallery, 2013).

by the artist from 1996, *No Can Teach A Dog Old Tricks New*. Both works presented objects that had dual roles containing a constant dance on the edge of meaning. Nelson's aim with this book was for a schizophrenic oscillation between post-Conceptual material reality and imaginative fiction (coming after his previous publication, *A Forgotten Kingdom*, a selection of existing literature that had influenced his practice); with *An Invocation ...* texts and the history of book design react to suggest multiple interpretations, histories or commentaries. In essence, as a public commission, the artist was interested in how this material might justify itself to the local community, rather than simply act as a standard piece of static public art:

That's something that nobody wants to see and the last thing I want to make. I'm quite capable of making large things that exist purely in terms of their own physicality. I think the fact that our project is neat is partly what I'm interested in, and strangely, the book's complexity mines a form of precision. Invisibility within art is pretty well done these days, but I still want people to be able to imagine. There's a given imaginative space that traditional Conceptual work refers to, a standard perception of something that exists in a space beyond. Although this is still relevant, it's an accepted mode of production, and we need to steal away from this with another idea of what invisibility can do. I hope this book will open something up beyond that accepted formula. The work becomes like a cipher into something you can't see.¹³

In a similar way to Nelson's work, which paradoxically (as a hidden installation) became a direct mode of address with Southend's community, the decision-making process with M+W as regards the building's interior design, and the remaining artists' commissions made sure these were prioritized for their ability to fluctuate between direct accessibility with an audience and critical reflection within an overall strategy of constructing a gallery as a discreet and enigmatic meta-artwork. Chaimowicz's and Vonna-Michell's works, for example, were commissioned as part of the architectural structure of the new gallery to represent a form of concealment: the reception desk, curtain, bench and screens are all artistic commissions that self-consciously pretend to be furniture.

In part, the status of these performative or theatrical objects took on a local political dimension; as the commissioner, FPG needed to pretend that the works existed solely as fixtures and fittings in order to smuggle the new artworks into the building. Southend Borough Council (FPG's employers and the managers of the "capital project" or the wider building) viewed permanent public artworks as politically loaded and dangerous to its members (the local councilors), who could be criticized by voters and the local press for spending public money on art in an age of austerity. In an absurd turn of events, this sense of concealment



Figure 3
Mike Nelson, *An Invocation: Five Hundred and Thirty Books From Southend Central Library*, plaque marking the location of a permanent installation of hidden library books, 2013. Courtesy: Focal Point Gallery.

within a local bureaucratic context provided the framework for a radical functional approach to the domestication of the traditional white cube space, and a stylistically accessible resolution for a new model of regional art space. For Nelson, whose archive of books was an alternative answer to making a permanent work, it was one that was perversely engaging. In the artist's view, people would "never get tired of looking at it, because you can't even see it."

In contrast to Nelson's installation, which was referred to by a simple plaque fixed to the gallery's reception wall, his publication *An Invocation: Five Hundred and Thirty Books from Southend Central Library* expands, facilitates and empowers the collection of redundant books by distributing them virtually, beyond the immediate surroundings of their physical primary instantiation, within the structure of the building's interior space. Nelson's publication performs a myriad of associations and allows room for interpretative maneuver. Its portable status means that every time a user or viewer might look through it, there is a sense of hope and comfort (or discomfort) that this actual material exists.

Much like the entire output of FPG's printed matter between 2008 and 2014, Nelson's book was an attempt to distribute information enigmatically through a disappearing form of communication, and encapsulate printed matter's alternative existence as a simulated medium. Against the context of mainstream digital communication, FPG's numbered printed output (consisting of invitation cards, posters, books, records and bookmarks) became a revitalized form of hard communication that served to amplify the institution's program, as well as its location's idiosyncrasies, through a slow postal interaction with a community beyond.

If Nelson's work is symptomatic of FPG's entire printed output, then its doubled status (a hard book as virtual key) also reflects the

duality of the artist's hidden installation, as a virtual device that emanates "spiritual" possibilities that correspond to the hidden potential of small isolated locations (such as Southend):

I find the idea of standing in a gallery, even if the place is empty, and knowing that you're not alone and that there's something beyond the space's walls strangely reassuring, and I hope visitors to the building also get this sensation. I think I should be careful and curb my spiritualism, however; I have very strange or particular view about material.¹⁴

In this sense, Nelson's work enacts a temporal lag or imaginative slipstream that refers back to what *was* a better world, in terms of the social and political Modernist ideals encapsulated by the old library building. This subsequently moves forwards to connect with the huge changes brought about by a recent technological revolution (from print to digital communication), and the fledgling era of the internet. Nelson again:

Its pace [the internet] is like the Industrial Revolution on amphetamines. It's going so fast and we're caught right in its vortex, so we can't see it and we've no idea what's going on. But one thing that's clear is that we're losing our perception of space and time. I remember being in rural Wales in the 1970s, and the sense of isolation and otherness I felt there. And yet, even if I went somewhere 3,000 miles away, I don't think I would feel that form of seclusion now. A place like that just doesn't exist anymore. That perception of space has gone. I might just be nostalgic and romantic for times gone by, but I don't think I am. We were talking earlier about the idea that the library emanates library-ness and knowledge, purely because it's there. The fact that information is around us all the time can also be a bad thing; that sense of remoteness is gone. A Sunday afternoon in the East Midlands in the 1970s could be a very bleak and lonely place, for example, and I can't imagine it would ever feel like that again. The sense that we've lost this is very palpable and strange.¹⁵

In the past decade, if the vast majority of visual art institutions have introduced an online presence as a necessary tool for increasing global visibility and community outreach, then printed material's relationship to this media is increasingly angular and fraught. As the world heads further towards globalization digital platforms have become an essential aspect within the artistic community, yet what has been missed is historical printed communication's ability to re-animate multiple temporalities in the present. In this respect, both Nelson's and Vonna-Michell's work for the new FPG complicate and reassess local history within in era of what has been termed "post-internet art," with

“pre-internet” media, to present forms of the aforementioned “pre-post-erous” political potential. To be clear, this “pre-post-erous” creativity does not begin from an absurd, philosophically ironic standpoint or mode of production. Instead, it is one that takes an opposing “humor” – as a form of experimentation against prescribed ironic outcomes – to produce risk and open-ended ways of re-animating hidden historical and political moments in the present.

Tris Vonna-Michell, *Tiles and Tides and Capitol Complex/Ulterior Vistas*

The second permanent commission, in line with Nelson’s, suggests a way of operating as an imaginative portal onto hidden local and international moments. Vonna-Michell was selected due to the artist’s longstanding engagement with the history of Southend within his work and, after discussions with the artist and M+W, it became clear that he was naturally suited to designing the first artwork that visitors would encounter in the new building: FPG’s reception desk. Much like Nelson’s printed matter disruption of the digital illusion of a static and homogenous global virtual temporality, Vonna-Michell’s permanent desk and subsequent book incorporated redundant and long-forgotten objects from diverse locations to connect Southend’s nonlinear histories to their international counterparts. Vonna-Michell’s commission connects to his personal history, as well as consistent themes such as his family’s émigré status. Previously this had been most evident in his work within a narrative that outlines how his Detroit-born father, Ed (who arrived in Berlin during the Cold War to work as a Red Cross driver, a fact which meant that Ed was one of the only people legitimately to drive across the Berlin Wall on a regular basis) met his Berlin-born mother, Almut, and how they moved to Southend from London.

The story goes on to complicate family connections with major events in world political history (the time of the Vietnam War and the Cold War) with art history. After arriving in London, and starting a family, Vonna-Michell’s parents sought the advice of the French Conceptual artist and concrete poet Henri Chopin, whom Ed was acquainted with through his own practice as an artist and poet. Chopin often left the capital for extended stays at The Grand Hotel in Leigh-on-Sea near Southend, and Vonna-Michell uses this entwined narrative of global, personal and art historical histories (as well as his family’s shift between major capital city and minor regional town) to address the specific location within which he was born and raised by revealing truths through the medium of concrete poetry, photography, installation and printed text.

The hyper-rational thesis on the logic of fiction that pervades Vonna-Michell’s work, and his similarities with a meticulous private investigator, provides another approach to storytelling, performance and authorship, one where artistic research with historical and political subtexts entwine with the construction of an identity around a library-gallery. This is a point of contact where visual art, fiction, historical

fact and global politics meet in the artist's hometown. With perpetual, everlasting and stable meaning being something antithetical to the artist's shifting narratives, Vonna-Michell's permanent commission addresses the politics of building projects and regeneration, in much the same way as Nelson's work examined the natural lack of permanence in any new structure. If galleries always contain political and economic symptoms of the time in which they were built, they also sometimes dismiss the potential of transformation beyond the life of a building. In a temporal move both forwards and backwards, Vonna-Michell's reception desk, *Tiles and Tides* (2013) (Figure 4), draws aesthetic parallels with the distinctive architectural features of the previous Southend Central



Figure 4

Selection of printed matter from Focal Point Gallery's program: (top row, left to right) #1 Alastair MacKiven, "Performances 2006 to 2009," invitation card (2009); #11 Petra Bauer, "Me, You, Us, Them," invitation card and poster (2010); #21 Keith Farquhar, "More Nudes in Colour, Southend," invitation poster (2011); (middle row) #28 *Outrageous Fortune Tarot Deck*, deck of cards and booklet insert (2011); #29 Kai Althoff, "Kaiki," invitation card (2011); (bottom row) #31 Marc Camille Chaimowicz, "*Jean Genet ... The Courtesy of Objects*, Chapter Three, featuring Dan Fox," invitation poster (2012); #46 Dawn Mellor, "What Happened to Helen?," invitation poster (2013); and #51 Elizabeth Price, "*Sunlight/Opening of the new Focal Point Gallery with new permanent commissions by Marc Camille Chaimowicz, Mike Nelson, Allen Ruppertsberg and Tris Vonna-Michell*," invitation card (2013).



Library, equivalents that speak of the functional and imaginative nature of the building's internal space. The desk houses a collection of ephemera, photographs, postcards, photocopies and printed matter used previously by the artist in his temporary installations, some of which relate to the lost tourist attraction "Never Never Land," a fun park that opened in 1935 as an important feature of Southend's seafront until its closure in 2001.

In a functional respect, this points to the sculpture as a paradoxically "useful" first point of contact for FPG's visitors, with *Tiles and Tides* providing the location for distributing interpretive printed material on the gallery's artistic and education programs. Like the majority of FPG's permanent commissions, which are effectively contemporary art objects doubling as furniture, Vonna-Michell's work smuggles in new forms of critical engagement with the locale, and aesthetically tackles educational forms: as we can see in figure 5, *Tiles and Tides* also contains a model or diorama of the now empty site Never Never Land once occupied, positioned here at child height.

Vonna-Michell's artist's book *Capitol Complex/Ulterior Vistas* (2013) developed in parallel with *Tiles and Tides* was produced in three sections: a script (the *Capitol Complex* manuscript as a booklet insert); a photographic project (a bound series of *Ulterior Vistas* photographic montages); and a related sound recording encapsulated on a ten-



Figure 5
Tris Vonna-Michell, *Tiles and Tides*, Reception Desk, 2013. Courtesy: Focal Point Gallery.

inch vinyl record. The publication was a critical response to the wider capital project in Southend, and was launched in August 2014, a year after FPG's new gallery was opened. Designed by Konst och Teknik, the publication provides two narratives: firstly it describes an architectural project designed by Le Corbusier in India alongside the poverty that currently surrounds it (a critique of the parallel ideologies represented by contemporary gallery architecture and cultural regeneration in the UK), and secondly it ruminates on historical landscape gardens, making a contemporary connection with property developers in Essex.

Capital Complex (side A) is a set in the Punjabi city of Chandigarh designed by Le Corbusier, and serves as an underlining blueprint for the entire work. Reflecting the restlessness often connected to commissioning processes, and the alienating effects of large architectural plans on the communities they serve, its aim, in part, was to form a sense of empathy with the new visiting public, with whom we sensed it might intuit similar issues. In turn, *Ulterior Vistas* (side B) is backed by a musical score and follows the journey of a driven estate agent who orates a prospectus based on the grand eighteenth-century English landscape garden. The conceptual framework for this sound work, as well as the book's photographic montages, derives from the work of English landscape architect and fellow Essex resident Humphry Repton (who lived in Gidea park), whose famous Red Books (produced between 1795 and 1816) contain bespoke architectural propositions and landscapes that improved the estates and pleasure grounds of his potential clients. The architect's before-and-after illustrations were a key feature, as were his verbal presentations, and Vonna-Michell's own tribute to Repton's Red Books connects to contemporary questions around property, architecture, city planning and gentrification within the context of a publicly funded regional architectural project. Vonna-Michell's book narrative, through its mechanical score and the movement of the record, literally "revolve" around the government buildings in Chandigarh, and after concentrated listening it becomes clear that the work addresses ideas of extreme urban control that surround this iconic Modernist masterpiece. If the plot is focused on a fantastic journey of semi-fictional fragments similar to Nelson's installation, and addresses analogous utopian and dystopian moments in literature, such as the science fiction of Ballard, or evokes an obsession with bureaucratic obstacles inherent to Franz Kafka's *The Castle* (1926), then the artist's story connects as much with W.G. Sebald's narrative structures and tropes around the UK's eastern region.

In a dystopic sense, the urgency of Vonna-Michell's voice equates the wily estate agent or the Essex market trader with the frantic rapper and the earnest delivery of the concrete poet to suggest that artists are complicit with the UK government's historic use of culture, heritage and architecture to improve its economy. With Southend seeing the largest

increase in UK property prices during 2012 (a 15% rise during the year in an age of “austerity”), and being one of the top ten affordable towns in commuting distance from London in 2015, Vonna-Michell’s fictive system analyzes how cultural regeneration enhances desire and helps to condition the perception of place. Vonna-Michell’s pitch literally promises “the earth” (to property investors and Southend’s incoming residents; invariably and paradoxically the newly displaced, socially cleansed populace of London), as it covers absurd features such as iguanas, hills, swans, castles, casinos as well as unethical advantages, such how to exploit local farmers.

Although Vonna-Michell is known mostly for the autobiographical nature of his narratives and for the mesmerizing intensity of his performances, the less noticeable aspect of his work is how his careful historical observations connect to the social and political dimension of culture. His grasp of the rapport between the stylistic tropes of Modernist design and state power, and that between commerce and colonialism, was developed by FPG to act as a self-critical or reflective device at the moment of the new institution’s inception in Southend. In essence, Vonna-Michell’s commissioned publication foregrounds a new centrality of the political attributes in his own practice, and echoes an urgent message that is held within FPG’s printed matter as a whole.

Vonna-Michell’s inclusion in FPG’s program, in its different manifestations between 2008 and 2014, presented the same meticulous, haphazard, temporal progress appropriate to the specific politics of time, architecture, design, literature, photography and installation, in Southend. By relating this to Bishop’s claims that contemporary art institutions’ and museums’ displays might gain currency through the inclusion of locally relevant issues and historical archives that connect to major international events,¹⁶ *Tiles and Tides* and *Capitol Complex/Ulterior Vistas* creates a productive architectural intervention via multiple viewpoints that were highly appropriate to FPG’s curatorial motivations during the move to the new location.

Allen Ruppertsberg, *Questions & Answers no. 1*/Lawrence Weiner, *Written on the Wind*

Aside from attempting to achieve a cohesive relationship between the interior design of the gallery and the courtyard/thoroughfare outside, the design specification for the latter space was to fabricate a venue for events in their own right. With this external vicinity incorporated into the design of the wider complex, and a large installed digital screen to be programmed by FPG, an opportunity arose to commission a permanent sign for the back of the screen that might synthesize the themes addressed by all of the commissioned artworks.

FPG decided to invite the American artist Allen Ruppertsberg to formulate a design for this area. As a pioneer of Conceptual Art, who began exhibiting in Los Angeles in the late 1960s, Ruppertsberg’s work

employs objects such as magazines, commercial adverts, postcards and vinyl records in a critical response to didactic image-making. His resulting commission for FPG came after his successful High Line Art project *You & Me* in New York during early 2013, and consisted of a series of day-glo posters containing spontaneous appropriated poetry, illustrations and common phrases that aimed to transform the surrounding environment. Printed in black on a hippy tie-dye fade or ground, each phrase arbitrarily addresses the viewers and provokes them to reevaluate their lives. Texts such as “Where Should I Go?,” “What Should I Do?,” “Nostalgia 24 Hours a Day” and “It’s Not Art (That Counts Now)” appear as a series of open directions to spectators within the new public complex (Figure 6).

Within Ruppertsberg’s oeuvre, language is used as a means of expression to draw different sectors of the mass media and the consumer society into a critical viewpoint. His FPG commission aimed at a fragmented analytical perspective cast down on the newly designed public square, with statements attempting to diffuse the imposition of normalized modes of behavior and the manipulation of visitors’ movements, as a foil for the strictly thought-out architectural control of the public square. Ruppertsberg’s use of printed material aimed to connect not only with issues of control surrounding the construction of the new cultural facilities but also it consciously dovetailed with the platforms, channels and spaces of pre-existing editorial distribution that FPG had already activated since 2008: the circulation of the gallery’s identity and its artistic program, including the gallery’s printed distribution of leaflets, cards, posters and books, was used to conceive a broader public, and Ruppertsberg’s printed posters helped translate this

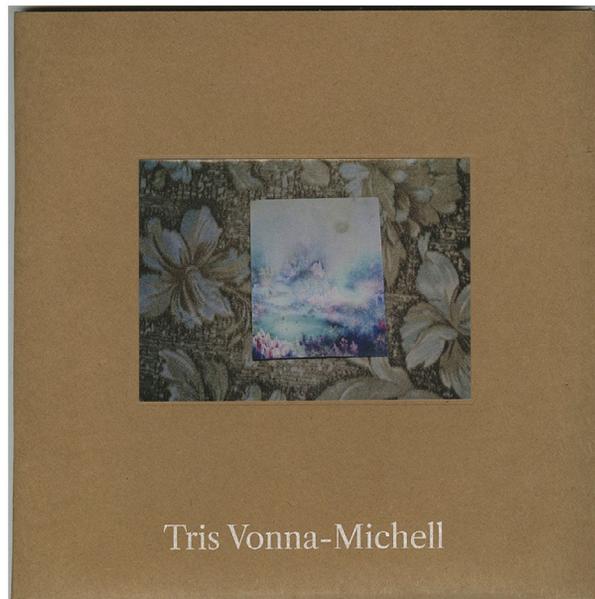


Figure 6
Tris Vonna-Michell, *Capitol Complex/Ulterior Vistas* (Focal Point Gallery, 2013).
Courtesy: Focal Point Gallery.

transience into a piece of permanent public art for the first time. If, as mentioned previously, Ruppertsberg and Weiner's works are increasingly employed as "statement" works within large museum architecture, FPG's commissioning of new works by these artists aimed instead at a reflexive form of brevity and relative incorporeity.

One could equate the fragmented nature of Ruppertsberg's work with Simon Critchely's reading of Friedrich Schlegel, in which the Jena theorist's romanticism, via his *Philosophical Fragments*, is revealed by a conviction that the "crisis of the modern world can be best addressed in the form of art," and that this art is poetry, broadly conceived – what Schlegel refers to as an infinite or "eternally developing book, the gospel of humanity and culture."¹⁷ Similarly, as an "eternally developing book," FPG commissions aimed to use critical literature and poetic forms within the fabric of a library gallery against the crisis of the aforementioned economic, political and ideological pressures on artists, galleries and culture.

In turn, the artist Lawrence Weiner, who has an archetypal historical relationship with multiples and editions, connects to an essential part of FPG's wider development in printed material. With his small landmark limited-edition bookmark artwork (Figure 7) acting as an announcement for the opening date of the new building, three months prior to FPG's imminent shift from one historically and ideologically loaded premises to the next, Weiner's small work formed an polar alternative to a large permanent work, in a situation where first-generation Conceptual Art once again operated in a "pre-post-erous" manner. In much the same way as Nelson's science fiction-imbued installation used traces of the gallery's previous Brutalist edifice (the "pre"), the symbolic ("pre") historical Conceptualism inherent to Weiner's oeuvre was used to announce a future event (the "post"). As with

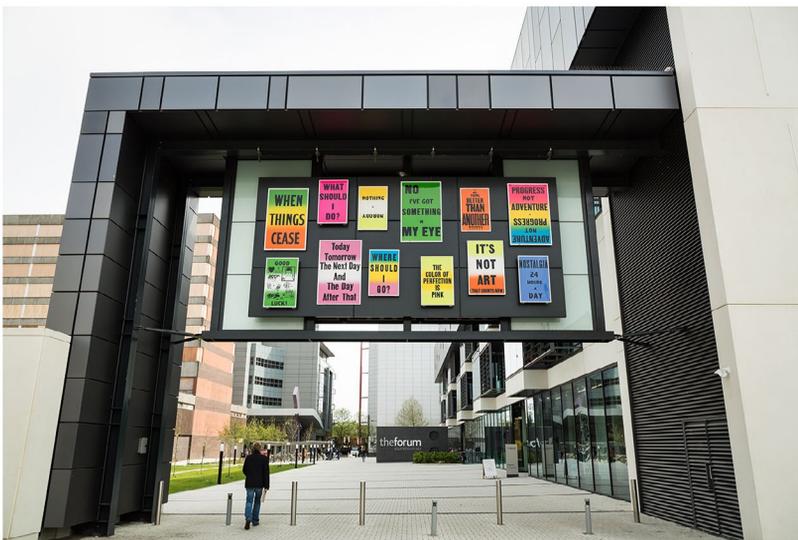


Figure 7
Allen Ruppertsberg,
Questions & Answers no. 1,
day-glo posters printed on
metal, 2013. Courtesy: Focal
Point Gallery.



Figure 8

Save the date invitation card containing Lawrence Weiner's bookmark *Written on the Wind*, 2013. Courtesy: Focal Point Gallery.

Ruppersberg's posters, Weiner's bookmark operates in a temporal and linguistic gap, and one could claim that both works intend to produce a concept outside of words, operating within an asymmetric or isomorphic fold between the utterable and the visible to present new possibilities in language and art. Within the context of public engagement in Southend, their text-works act in an anti-didactic manner to "show" rather than "designate," so as to suggest future potentials in the present.

Conclusions

With the construction of new FPG, a different register of curatorial practice was attempted by commissioning permanent artworks that responded to a specific site, in order to "institute" a new institution. Instead of endeavoring to produce a holistic narrative with an impossible claim to "truth," the visually permeable building was studded with series of architectural and artistic fragments that combined to suggest an infinite narrative progression pointing to future transformation. In my view, FPG exists as radically incomplete curated meta-artwork; in much the same way as the organization's ongoing

numbered series of printed matter forms an enduring and unending system that continues to tell stories and report on the location, the gallery is able to add to its rich narrative through its rolling exhibitions program.¹⁸

Within the context of Nelson's collection of books, Vonna-Michell's fictional essay on Le Corbusier's architecture in Punjab, and Ruppertsberg's Pop-Conceptual graphic devices, one can see an enigmatic, poetic form of practice that reconfigures architecture and meaning in an eloquent way.

The various post-Conceptual representations described in this paper allow FPG to devise a way of providing a relevant answer to the question of how to address issues surrounding visual art's relationship with regeneration, when constructing new cultural premises. The historical and contemporary tropes represented by each artist's work are played out through a deep connection with the locale within which they were installed, in a way that is inextricably and centrally connected to local forms, so as to disrupt ideas around the "metropolitan whole" and the "peripheral fragment," and imagine Southend as the focus of its own destiny. In my view, FPG is a successful example of critical-curatorial programming that acknowledges the need to combat the pressures of neoliberal capitalism.

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Notes

1 "New Institutionalism" was a term established in the early 2000s to describe the growing number of independent curators in the 1990s who moved into institutions and started to bring with them their often unorthodox ways of working. Examples include Palais de Tokyo in Paris, run by Nicolas Bourriaud and Jérôme Sans (1999–2006); Rooseum in Malmo, run by

Charles Esche (2000–03); Kunstverein Munich, run by Maria Lind (2002–04); and Garanti Contemporary Art Center in Istanbul, run by Vasif Kortun (2001–10). These art centers began to work less with exhibition-based practices and more with discourse-oriented curatorial strategies, where new forms of programming adopted hybrid participatory structures that

were part art school, part community centre and part artistic laboratory. In the early 2010s, this form of programming had become a powerful global sign and a standard curatorial strategy. This is a form of working that now pervades institutions worldwide, and an *e-flux* bulletin from 16 July 2015 for the Centre for Contemporary Art's (in Lagos) project "Àsikò Maputo" in Mozambique provides a good example of the rhetoric connected to this tendency. Announcing the discursive model for its project, it states: "Using the format of part art laboratory, part residency and part informal art academy, over the course of 28 intensive days *The History of Contemporary Art in Mozambique in 4 weeks* will focus partially on technique and primarily on methodology, critical thinking, and the implementation of conceptual ideas as well as the development and role of curatorial practice." Within the historical context of New Institutionalism, FPG's intention was to construct a discourse around an experimental return to approaches towards exhibition-making, as well as innovative ways of approaching the commissioning of art in the public realm.

2 There is a difference in the use of the terms "organization" and "institution" within this text. "Organization" usually denotes the English system of regularly funded contemporary visual art organizations in direct reference to the government funding body Arts Council England (ACE) and its terminology of their network of "National Portfolio Organisations" (NPOs). I use "institution" to refer to these same organizations within a broader context of Institutional Critique or New Institutionalism.

3 Although this was the case, it is important to mention that FPG was given complete curatorial control to determine the selection process and decision-making behind all the commissions.

4 First-generation Conceptual artists emerged with a language-based art in the 1960s, during which time US artists such as Sol Lewitt, Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner and the English group Art & Language began a radical interrogation of art.

5 Scott King's concept of "de-regeneration" was developed in his artwork *THE*

TRIUMPH OF DE-REGENERATION – LEE BRILLEAUX 1952–1994 (2012), which was made for the exhibition "Thames Delta" at the original FPG in 2012. In it, the artist imagined erecting a 300-foot gold-plated statue of Lee Brilleaux, former lead singer of the pub-rock band Dr Feelgood, on the foreshore in Southend close to the legendary Kursaal Ballroom where the band played some of their most important gigs. A global figure in musical history and a local hero in Southend and Canvey Island nearby (where the band formed in 1971), King's proposal for a public statue aimed at exploring an absurdist "democracy of regeneration" in opposition to the well-documented cronyism connected to commissioning processes for public art, demonstrated most clearly in the decision-making behind Anish Kapoor's gigantic sculpture *ArcelorMittal Orbit* (2012) in the Olympic Park in Stratford, East London.

- 6 At the time of writing (June 2015), Firstsite is in severe financial trouble as a direct result of cuts to funding and an unsustainable business plan. ACE put Firstsite into a special funding arrangement on 12 February and it was announced that it would not be admitted to ACE's regularly funded National Portfolio for 2015–18. In April, Firstsite's director of two-and-a-half years, Matthew Rowe, resigned and the organization is to be run by Colchester Arts Centre under the leadership of its director, Anthony Roberts, for the next year.
- 7 Hewison's book starts from New Labour's ceaseless promotion of the visual and performing arts, museums and galleries, "as a stimulus to national economic revival, a post-industrial revolution where spending on culture would solve everything, from national decline to crime"; Robert Hewison, *Cultural Capital: The Rise and Fall of Creative Britain* (London: Verso, 2014), outside back cover.
- 8 Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012).
- 9 In addition, the gallery would open with an exhibition by Elizabeth Price. This was the artist's first solo exhibition since winning the Turner Prize in 2012; called *Sunlight* (2013), this new multi-screen film installation dwelt on historical

- images of the Sun in negative form. FPG also commissioned a temporary project by graphic designer and artist Scott King called “*Excerpts From a Better Britain*” (*Southend-on-Sea*) (2013), which, in keeping with the permanent commissions, continued to comment on the politics of regeneration.
- 10 Foster’s discussion of the “preposterous” as a temporal phenomenon and anachronism is outlined in various texts, including “Preposterous Timing,” *London Review of Books* (8 November, 2012); “An Archival Impulse,” *October*, no. 110 (2004); and his essay in *Jeremy Deller: English Magic* (Venice Biennale, 2013).
- 11 Mike Nelson, *An Invocation: Five Hundred and Thirty Books from Southend Central Library* (Southend-on-Sea: Focal Point Gallery, 2013), interview booklet, 7.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 7–8.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 12–13.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 13.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 15.
- 16 Bishop’s *Radical Museology* (Koenig, 2013) examines three European contemporary art museums that have produced “compelling alternatives to the mantra of ‘bigger is better and richer’” in the face of increasing austerity cuts to funding. “Rather than denoting presentism, the contemporary comes to signal a dialectical method: scouring the past for the origins of our present historical moment, which in turn is the determining motivation for our interest in the past. It is an anachronistic action [similar to Foster’s discussion of the “preposterous”] that seeks to reboot the future through the unexpected appearance of a relevant past”; see <http://www.cornerhousepublications.org/wp-content/uploads/book-95317.pdf> (accessed August 6, 2015).
- 17 Friedrich Schlegel, quoted by Simon Critchely, *Very Little ... Almost Nothing* (Routledge, 2004), 100.
- 18 Much like the work of first-generation Conceptual artists such as Sol Lewitt, who famously stated in his “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” *Artforum* (June 1967), that “the idea becomes a machine that makes the art,” in part my curatorial aim was to set up a system through FPG’s ongoing numbering of each piece of print that would continue to inform the narrative structure of the program after my departure from the institution.

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