Stephen Willats

Vision and Reality

Uniformbooks 2016

First published 2016
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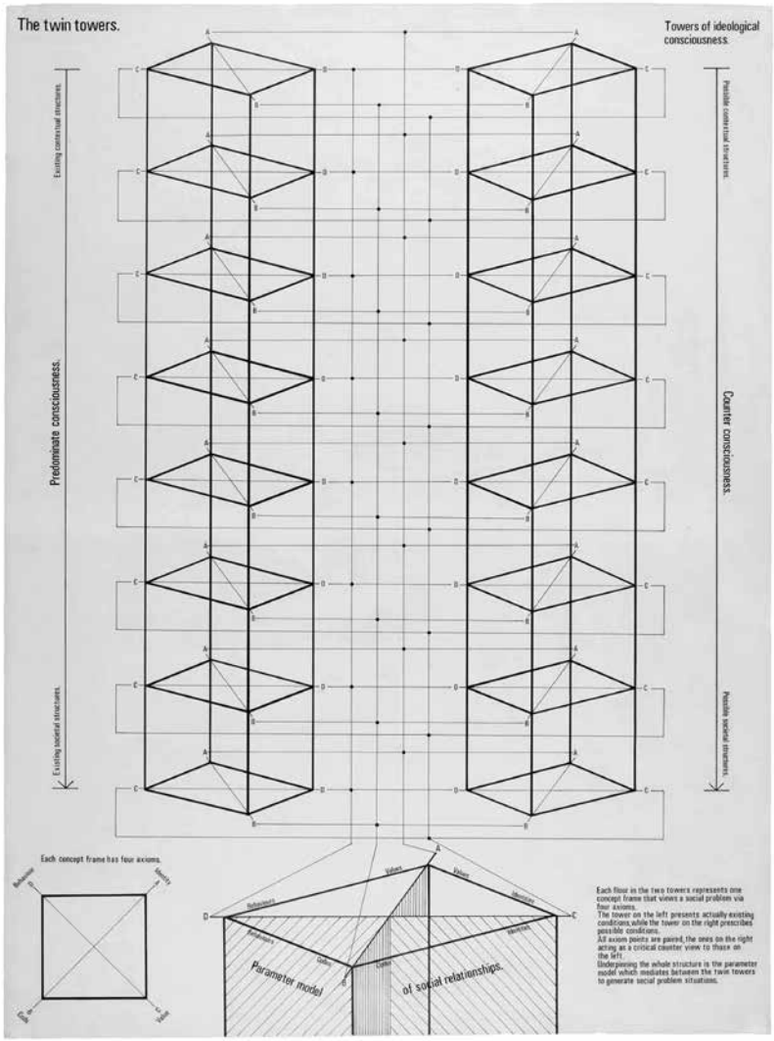
Supported by the Henry Moore Foundation
ISBN 978–1–910010–08–2

Uniformbooks
7 Hillhead Terrace, Axminster, Devon EX13 5JL
www.uniformbooks.co.uk

Trade distribution in the UK by Central Books
www.centralbooks.com

Printed and bound by T J International, Padstow, Cornwall

Contents



The Twin Towers, 1977.
Letraset and ink on paper, 102 x 76cms.
Collection: Tate, London.

Vision and Reality

My association with the tape recorder started around 1974, when I needed a tool that would enable me to work directly with people and to articulate the actuality of peoples' perception of the world in which they lived. This was a key factor for me in order to move forward with my art practice.

This came about by the realisation I had a decade earlier that a work of art exists between people, and only has meaning when it in some way addresses their society. Thinking further about the functionality of art between people, its intervention in society, I came to another realisation: it is the audience of a work of art that gives it meaning. They are the crucial variable in the artist-society relationship.

To enable this to work, the audience needs to find a relevance in their 'encounter' with the work of art. It seemed to me that either the audience could acquire the language and understand the polemics that preoccupied the so-called art community, or the artist would have to look at the languages and preoccupations that connect to the audience. I looked for a connection between the identity of the audience, their language, and issues that they were already concerned with, and the context in which work was presented and encountered. My feeling in the mid-1960s was that the artist and art practice had become divorced from the reality of most people's lives; art had effectively become academic being preoccupied with abstraction, and projecting idealisations of property and exclusivity. The wall- mounted, object-based, tendency of art galleries at the time seemed archaic, in contrast to the ideological ethos prevalent amongst radical thinkers outside the art bubble, which was concerned with concepts of mutuality, self-organising social networks and the opening up of society to the possibilities of lateral thinking. I could see, through this new vision of society, that I could develop my own art practice in ways that would look at a new function and meaning for art, and that the artwork could then become an agency for transformation.

In the early 1970s I started to look for polemics that would be meaningful, relevant, and attention-focussing for an audience outside the art community. On the one hand I had the desire to take art practice beyond the art-institutional confines of the gallery/museum space, not only to represent issues that concerned people, but to physically locate itself

within the fabric of their community. And on the other, by presenting within the museum polemics affecting daily life in the world outside, I wanted to change the dynamic between inside and outside, to open the museum up as an agency or tool of the community for the transformation of perceptions, attitudes and beliefs that they flt were relevant.

This meant that the search for polemics was coupled with one for relevant contexts. I noted that most people lived in a suburban type of setting with accompanying lifestyle, and that these were the projected idealisations being made at that time. I persuaded a friend to drive me out to West London in a reconnaissance for symbols that I could embody, and I immediately noticed the proliferation of housing estates, many of them social housing. In amongst these seemingly endless estates was the occasional tower block, at the time a very powerful symbolic signpost to a future way of life.

In response to what I came across, I became interested in the idea of encoding the language of these environments and the lives of their residents, so as to create presentations of what I call a 'Symbolic World'. This is a world of photographic and text references encoded so as to be familiar, and therefore relatable to the viewer of the work. The viewer would be aware of the issues presented, even if they did not directly concern their own personal experience.

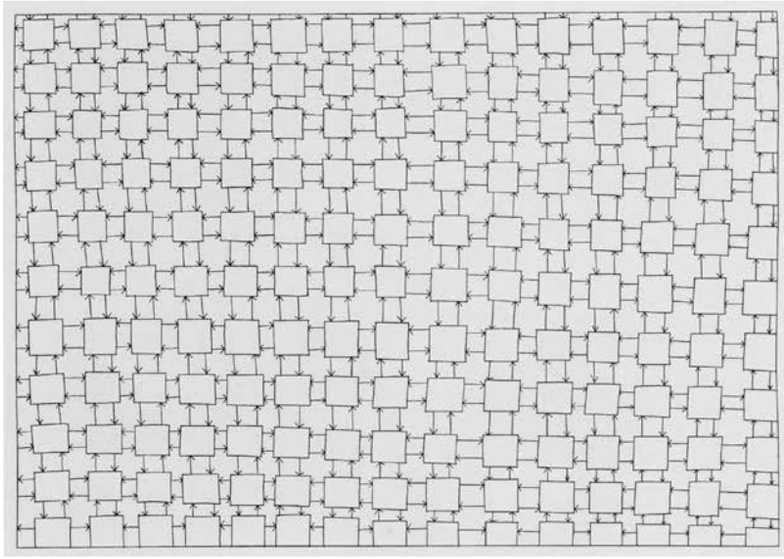
These thoughts led to me to invite residents of the estate or building to develop the work with me, in co-operation, and in the process encoding aspects of themselves into the creation of a symbolic world. It was this desire to present the viewer of the work with a polemical 'modern life' problem—articulated as personal testimony directly by the person who had experienced it—that started my use of the portable tape recorder.

The tape recorder became the encoding-decoding vehicle between two people, and the means by which participants externalised implicit representations and thoughts about themselves and their circumstances, stimulated by my asking a series of questions. The reply, encouraged to be lengthy, was transcribed, so that extracts, phrases or sentences, could be used in the fabrication of the symbolic world being developed.

The question is a fundamental vehicle for social exchange between two people. It signals that the picture of some area of reality in your frame of reference is incomplete, and invites the respondent to complete that picture. Of course if the picture is not quite complete, the frame of reference not all there, further questions will be asked in an attempt to achieve a shared picture. For the person responding to the question, having to externalise thoughts in an exchangeable coding, a language, means organising them into a tangible coherency, communicated to the other person through the process of being recalled, formed, encoded, transmitted, decoded, and fitted into or compared with existing thoughts.

I bought, at considerable expense, a Uher 4000 Reporter IC portable interview Tape Recorder together with an Electrovoice RE50 Microphone, standard issue at the time for the BBC roving reporter. Nowadays, its size and weight make it an anachronism, but I continue to use my Uher to this day, and have taken it with me in my work all over the world.

The making of a tape recorded interview was, and largely still is, an adjunct to making photographs with a participant, which always come first. The photographs would usually take the form of portraits, interiors, exteriors, and objects, the participant directing the selection and composition of each. Moving from the general to the particular was how the photographs, and also the interview, would progress, so that gradually we could head towards talking about more complex and possibly difficult conceptual territory. Each interview had the same format and lasted sixteen minutes, the length of a reel of tape. It would always start with me introducing the participant, the location and time, and then move on to general descriptions of the environment—the world as it exists—before moving into specifics and how the world could be changed, could be made different. It is important when making this kind of interview with someone who has not done anything like it before not to appear professional, not having a set plan, not knowing the next question, but letting one thing lead to another, at the same time gently guiding it forward into the area to be covered. Often people's initial descriptions of their environment are very similar, they bring up the same topics in the same kind of way, but closer listening and further questioning reveal different personal angles, thus the outcome is always different.



Homeostat Drawing, 1969, pencil on paper.

Over the years the general tone of the interviews has gone through a cycle of changes. When I first started, people on the whole seemed quite optimistic about their 'modern' surroundings, which were often new to them, but gradually as the 1970s progressed, with the media's stigmatisation of social housing, and the withdrawal of essential services such as maintenance, the mood in most of the recordings turned more negative with a critical, sometimes even depressed, tone prevailing.

This changed in the early 1980s when I made a series of recordings with a younger generation, the so called post punks, who were reacting against the political turn to the right, a new conservatism. They had moved into difficult-to-let housing on Council-owned estates, either squatting or more usually taking on the tenancy of an inner-city low rent flat. They created interiors consistent with and reinforcing the attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of their DIY community, largely based on a night culture of small self-organised clubs that they had created. Their improvised, purposefully tacky, visual language of alienation and the rejection of mainstream norms and values, gave a positive fresh thrust to my recordings. These recordings are distinctive in reacting to a determinism in mainstream culture, which propagated a reductive perception of people and the rise of a social ethos of possessive object-based power.

Since the 1980s, there has been a slow change again in the perception of tower block and estate living, especially amongst a younger generation seeking somewhere affordable to live in the increasingly expensive inner city. The stigmatisation of the 1970s is in decline, and this again has been reflected in my interviews with the new residents.

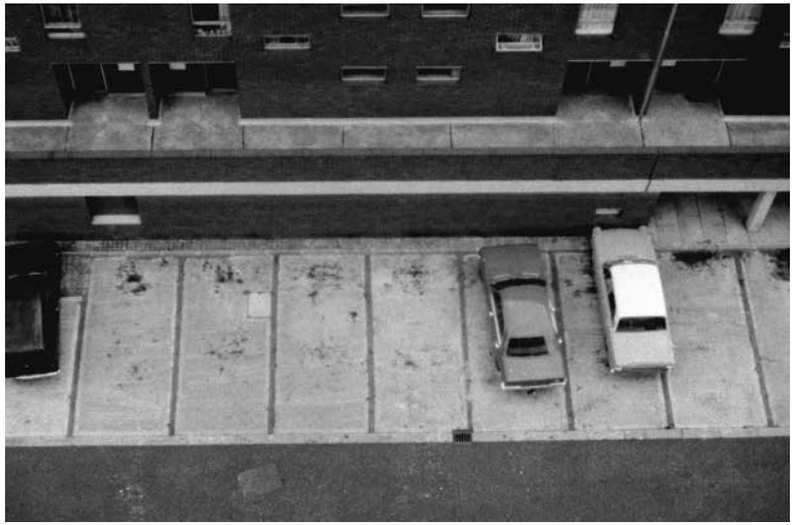
Essentially I made a series of workshops with each participant, firstly to photograph and tape record their perceptions to their environment. Secondly, usually some two weeks later, I would sit down with the participant in their environment, living room, etc., to discuss the work's direction, and to select photographs and extract text from the transcribed tape recordings. This is when the work was composed, and if anything was not resolved, there would be another taped interview that narrowed down the discussion, or opened it up, taking it in another direction. These workshops went on, usually at two week or more intervals so as not to pressurise participants, until together we considered the work finished.

The intention of my working with someone was not descriptive documentation, but the extraction of those elements of their reality that in turn gave a reality to the meaning of the work. So when I was working with a single mother on the Friars Wharf Estate in Oxford in 1978, the process was directed towards her experience and perceptions as a single parent, there being a strong polemic about such families and their dependence on benefits at that time, one which still persists. The mother's own voice describing her personal reality made the work an authentic testimony, to which the viewer can relate, and also defined the questions, the problems being posed to the viewer.

The relationship between physical reality and personal and social consciousness is what links the selected images and texts presented in this book. The physical reality of the social housing that proliferated in the '50s, '60s and '70s forms the focus of its content.

The images and texts are all extracted from my archive of participations with residents of various social housing schemes in the UK. It is worth mentioning that what is recorded here is very similar to material I made with participants in comparable housing schemes in other European countries. The physical and ideological context of social housing creates a polemic: on the one hand, the reductive thought and perception of the environments created for living within 'the plan', on the other, the actual complexity of people's lives. This was expressed to me personally in some way or other every time I made a tape recorded interview.

The selection of edited interviews and photographs presented here is meant as a tool for exploring the daily relativity in residents' outlooks on their lives in social housing, the reality of living in a vision of someone else's planned utopic future.



Skeffington Court, HAYES, MIDDLESEX.

Ocean Estate, MILE END, EAST LONDON.

Friars Wharf Estate, OXFORD.

Brandon Estate, WALWORTH, SOUTH LONDON.

Charville Lane Estate, HAYES, MIDDLESEX.

Queen Caroline Estate, HAMMERSMITH, WEST LONDON.

Avondale Estate, HAYES, MIDDLESEX.

Tottenham Hale Estate, NORTH LONDON.

Brentford Towers, HOUNSLOW, MIDDLESEX.

Dobson Point, NEWHAM, EAST LONDON.

Sandridge Court, FINSBURY PARK, NORTH LONDON.

Farrell House, WHITECHAPEL, EAST LONDON.

Marlborough Towers, LEEDS.

Homecourt, FELTHAM, MIDDLESEX.

Lovell Park Towers, LEEDS.

Warwick Estate, PADDINGTON, WEST LONDON.

Saffron Court, SNOW HILL, BATH.

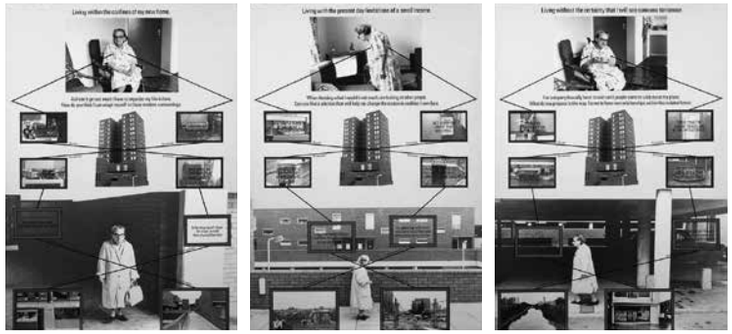
Kelson House & Topmast Point, ISLE OF DOGS, EAST LONDON.

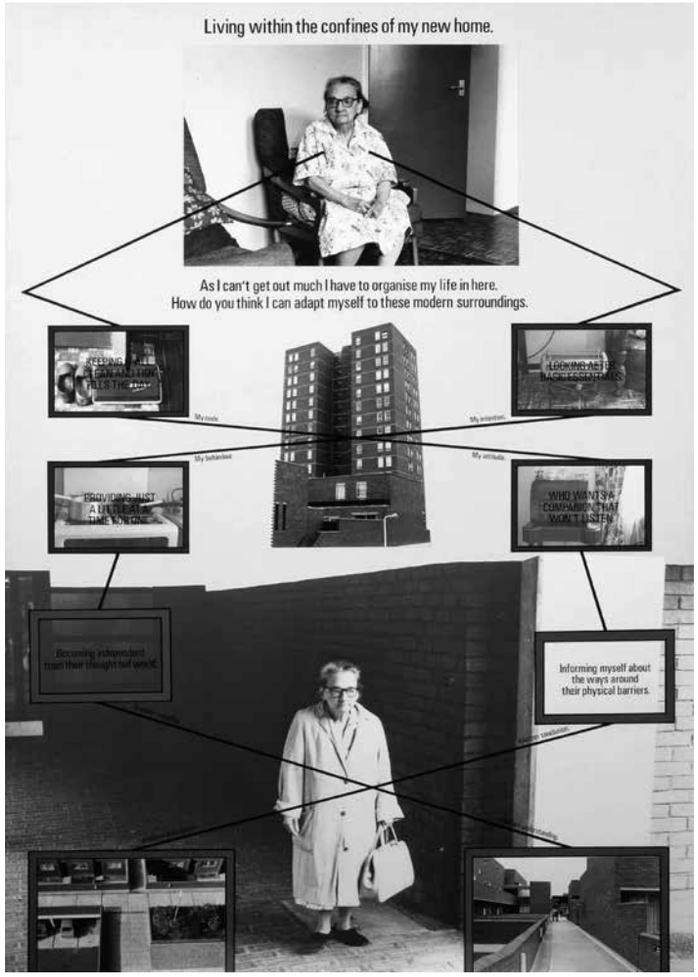
Linacre Court, HAMMERSMITH, WEST LONDON.

Heston Farm Estate, HOUNSLOW, MIDDLESEX.

North Peckham Estate, SOUTH LONDON.

Coffee Hall Estate, MILTON KEYNES.





Living With Practical Realities, 1978.
Photographs, Letraset, gouache and ink on card. Three panels, each 109 x 76cm.
Collection: Tate, London.

Skeffington Court

In the mid 1970s I was looking particularly for a tower block, to represent a highly symbolic and polemical context for my work, one that was at the centre of a 'modern development'. Ideally it would have a consistent environment around it, and a friend told me that her mother lived in a tower just by Hayes Station, near to The Lurky Place, the large area of wasteland where I had been working for a number of years. Built in the early 1970s, Skeffington Court was a well kept building, with tenants that had been there since the beginning, who appreciated being given the chance to occupy 'modern' and fairly spacious flats. I contacted the caretaker and he became interested in the idea of me being an artist and making a work inside the building with the residents, which was to be called *Vertical Living*. As a result he introduced me to a couple of likely residents and it went on from there, they in turn introducing me to people they knew. I was working with residents of the tower block for about six months, making photographs and tape recorded interviews to create a series of Display Boards, each centred around a practical concern for life in the tower environment, such as: the nature of local shopping amenities, contact between residents, and distance from the world outside the window. *Vertical Living* was based on the diagram and conceptual model *Twin Towers*, and as an installation it gradually progressed from floor to floor, up the tower, over a two week period, each installation on a particular floor being created as a partnership between myself and one of the residents on that floor.

The work drastically altered life in the tower and when the work was eventually terminated and taken away, residents created their own display boards and set up a residents' association meeting point in the foyer.

'The Counter Consciousness In Vertical Living', *Control Magazine Issue Eleven*, London, 1979.

After three years living in the tower she didn't know whether she had adjusted her life to the special environment there, or whether she had just developed a different way of life. At the moment she felt that her flat was very personal to her, and was "very much me". The tower was considered to be removed or remote from normal living, which was considered to be "one or two floors up at the most". You rarely met someone to form a relationship with beyond exchanging views about the weather.

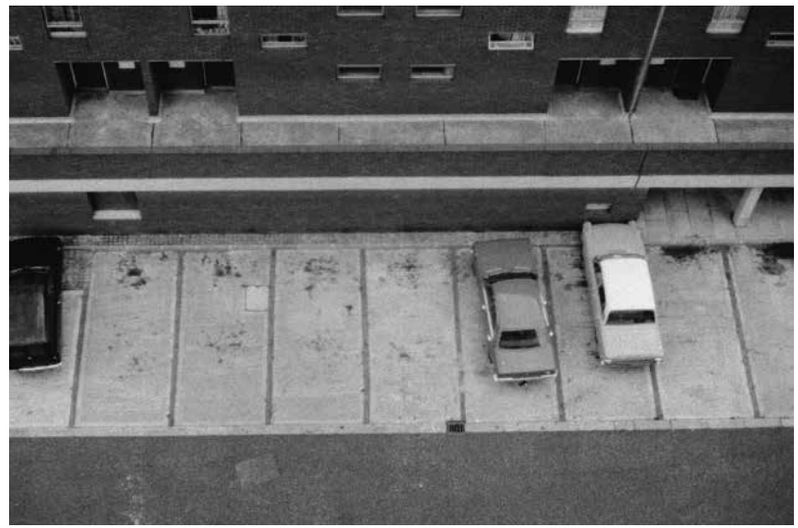
The bad patch she went through when she arrived at the tower was because, previously, she had lived in very close family and neighbourly surroundings. There were neighbours behind her, and on every side that she talked to every day, "because they were there". But at the tower there was no one, during the week you might see the same person once. "You never get to know them, it might be me. I never really went out looking for neighbours as friends."

While the flat was again thought to be very comfortable, she missed not having anywhere to walk outside or sit, especially in the summer. There was nowhere nearby to sit. Once the front door was closed you could be in your shell. She never hears noise from neighbours, or from above or below, which gives her the feeling of being quite on her own. The soundproofing of the walls reinforced the feelings she had of being isolated.

The noise coming into the flat from the trains, was considered to be disturbing, though other people who she had spoken to in the tower didn't have this problem. She thought that children must create a big disturbance for residents, and had particularly noticed this early on Sunday mornings. The biggest problem for her was the trains, and if she opened her window at night "two inches" it seemed as though the trains were only two hundred yards away.

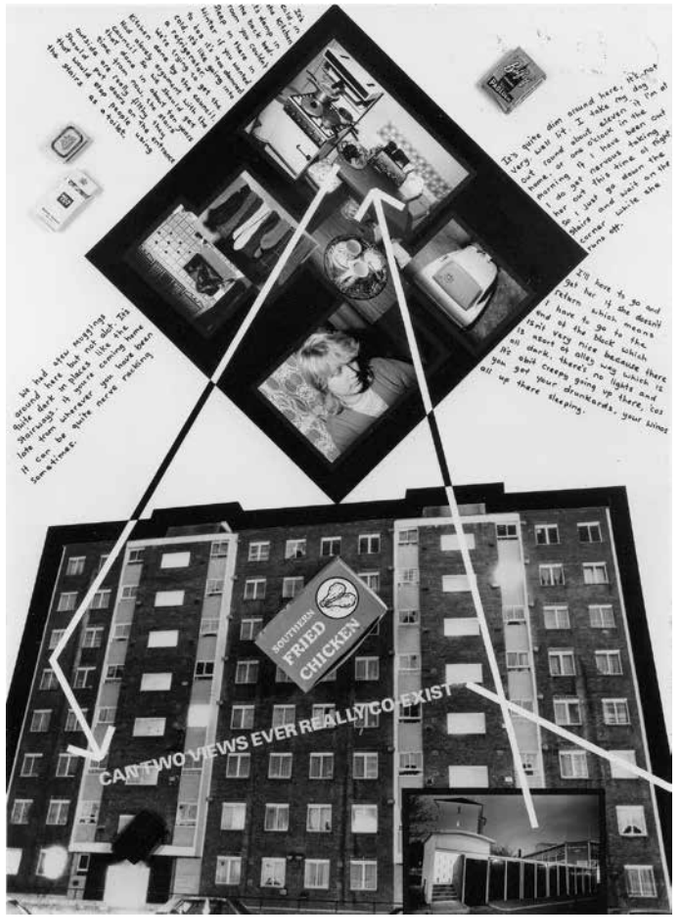
They considered that the problem was getting out for a lot of people, making the first move. He then came in and said that he found that when he was in the flat on his own, it took on a different atmosphere, it was not really a home anymore you might say. “I think you could very easily say I just can’t be bothered to go out, because I have got to go X number of floors down before I can get out there.”

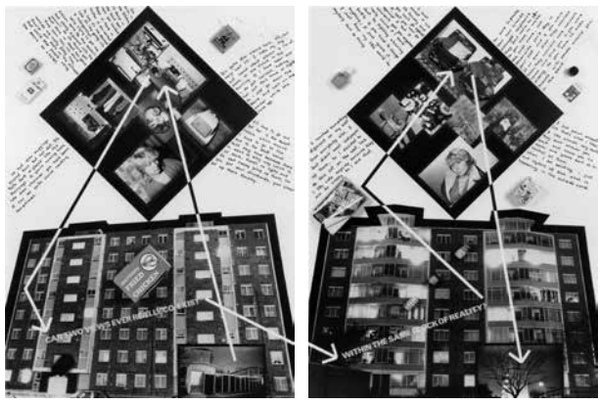
He thought people who lived in tower blocks should be a special type of person, possibly single, and “people who enjoy living in them, there must be people who do”, and possibly young couples who have children and move on. “You should never have to suffer living in a tower block all your life.” “It can become a prison.” He didn’t think the council took enough interest or were selective enough about the tenants going to live in a tower. “They say there is somewhere to live, take it or leave it.”



Most elderly people wouldn’t open their door at night, or use the lifts. The lifts were seen as the major reason for people’s isolation, and for the elderly it was seen as completely the wrong kind of dwelling. A carpet shop now closed and empty in Crown Close, could be used as a community centre. The shop belonged to the council and you would still have to raise the money to equip it out. It was seen as ideal for bridge tables, darts, etc., but she didn’t think the council would wear the cost.

He then came in and said that next to his playgroup there was an old district rent office, which the district management committee of the residents’ associations had taken over. Money had been spent on it, but he had doubts as to whether it would get off the ground, “because when you ask people to give you a hand to do this or do that, you don’t get a response”. It always came back to the same few people to do everything.





Can Two Views Ever Really Co-Exist, 1983.
Photographic prints, photographic dyes, gouache paint, Letraset text, ink, felt tip pen and found objects. Two panels 102 x 76.5cms.

Queen Caroline Estate

During the early 1980s I made an exhibition entitled *Another City* at the Riverside Studios Gallery, situated next to Hammersmith Bridge. The exhibition was a collection of new works I had made that centred on different groups of individuals that were associated with the new night culture of alienation. The exhibition followed on from *Inside The Night* which I made at the Lisson Gallery, involving the members of four self-organised private clubs, each of which expressed a separate identity, sensibility and social group.

The new exhibition was focussed on works I had made with individuals I met at the Cha Cha Club, but at the same time I wanted to connect with the local estates that surrounded the Riverside Studios.

I met Lizzie who lived in one of the older-style open walkway, brick-built slab blocks, and who was also part of the post-punk culture of the period. After discussing with her the idea of a work contrasting her view of life in the day with her view of life at night, she agreed to participate and work with me.

We made walks around the estate at night photographing various things Lizzie had pointed out, and also worked in her flat documenting objects that she felt were important to her way of life and personal expression.

From my two tape recorded discussions with Lizzie we found texts which she could write directly onto the two panels that made up the work; the panel on the left was associated with the day, the one on the right was associated with the night.

Means Of Escape, Rochdale Art Gallery, 1984.

"We moved here a year ago and we've done it up 'cos the council wouldn't do anything, it's cold, and in the kitchen it's damp. The back bedroom, you couldn't sleep in there in winter 'cos it's too cold. We're trying to get the kitchen done by the council, had a lovely argument with them, so we should get that done ten years from now. The stairs outside are filthy, the porters wash them once a month. They should have doors to stop people going to the toilet up the stairs and the kids running up screaming."

It seemed to me like you're surrounded by aggravation from what you talk about? "Well it is mostly. You get the noises from people, they're not very considerate about who's living below and people come in and break the lifts, and screaming at night, shouting out for their friends 'cos they can't be bothered to go up the stairs."

Would you say it was like a village here? "No more like a madhouse, you can go out and always meet somebody that says hello and wants to chat. They want to know how you are and how your mother is, and God knows what else, it gets a bit annoying, 'cos you don't always want to stop for a chat. People upstairs used to throw anything they didn't want into your garden: cigarette butts, clothing, jewellery, and then come down and knock on your door and ask for it, which was quite funny really."

Do you feel separate from the surrounding parts of Hammersmith? "If you stayed in here all the time and never went out you'd feel cut off, but the shopping area and your tube station and your bus routes are always right next-door to you really, so you're not cut off." *Do you ever feel isolated here?* "If I go into my room, and shut the door, yes. It just seems so far away from the rest of the estate and all it looks upon is a school, nothing else, except the flyover, and then in the distance you can see the other estates."

Living Tower, 1992.

Linacre Court

Standing like a sentinel or megalith by the side of the Hammersmith flyover you can't help seeing Linacre Court every time you take this route into London from the west. Not part of a larger development, the Council built tower block very much stands on its own, isolated by the environment around it, by being cut off by the main road and quite difficult to reach down a long road from the other side.

Unusually I was supported in the initial development of this work at Linacre Court by an Arts Officer from the local council, normally I am told to stop wasting my time, but here the council provided a small amount of funding and helped with publicity.

The isolated nature of the tower from the outside was replicated to a certain extent inside, the dark landing and concrete stairwells, old lifts that banged about as they went up and down, could have made for a very grim experience. But somehow it wasn't, the residents I met were long established in tower block life and had created quite personal and expressive environments. The distance from the ground or lack of local shops did not seem to worry them, because maybe, even though the tower was isolated in the immediate sense, it was within a thriving and improving part of London.

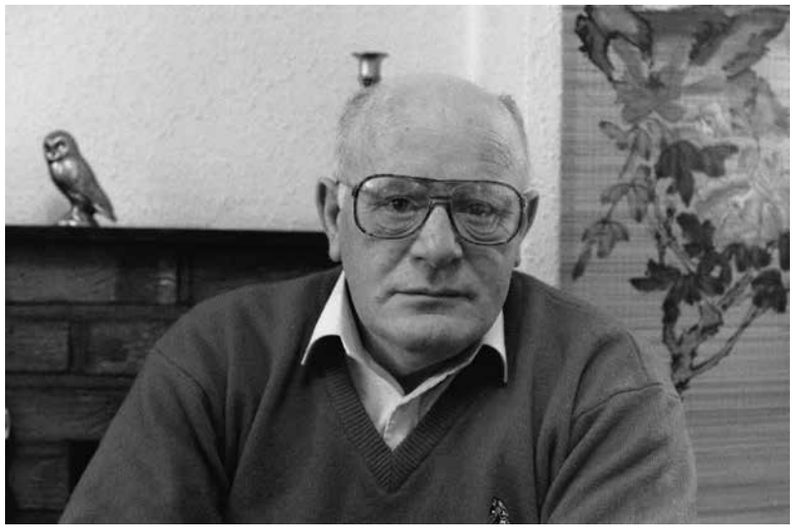
The installation consisted of individual, personally made Display Boards located on the landings, and a large collectively made Display Board located in the foyer on the ground floor.

Did it strike you that the estate was like a symbol of modern life? "I think it is the way things are going because the population is growing so quickly, the only way to house everybody is to go up. So it is a modern way of life. Although this block itself has been up twenty-seven years. It is of things to come, because the population is so vast and there's no more ground space in London, so it's got to go up."

What about these objects here? They are very dominant in the room. "They are my hobby. They're Pendelthin, hand-painted rabbits. The first one, I was bought when I was nine and I've been collecting them ever since. My children use to buy me one because they are quite expensive; they use to buy one between them and they make up a family of rabbits. I think I have got about sixty, but the houses I've only got two. The large one my husband bought me on our honeymoon so that's very special to us."

What do you like about them? "Oh they're just so cute. They've all got their own characteristic, they're very down to earth and they're just so different, you can look at them and see different things in them each time. You make up stories of what they are saying, and when the grandchildren come, they put them all into different positions." *So you can actually put them in different configurations?* "Yes, you know, there's mummy rabbits and baby rabbits, and you just move them."

"We've always got plenty of visitors. Plenty of people are always here. Either for the evening or for weeks on end they come and stay. They come down for two days, and then they've stayed three weeks. But we love having them, so it's something to do when they're down here." *Are these guns, the antique guns on the board, they, what remind you of your past activities?* "Yes, I've always collected guns, and I were in the army for ten years."

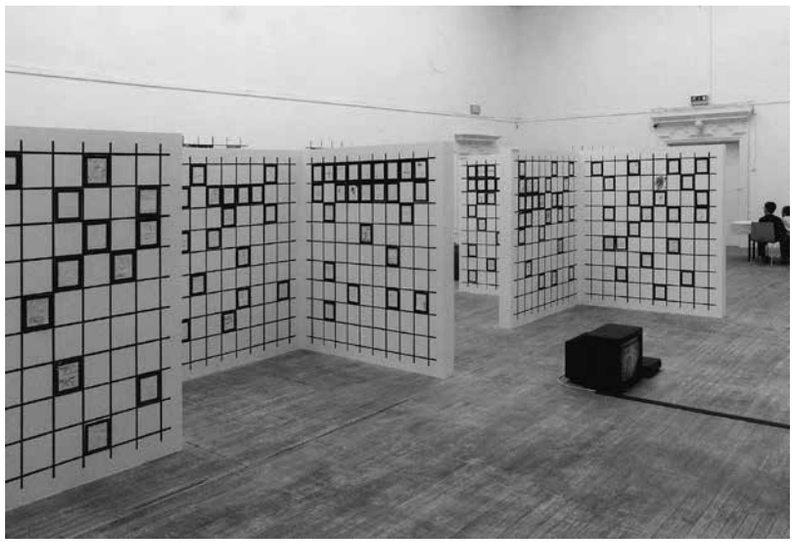


So you felt that these rooms didn't have any focal point? "Well the trouble was when I got the sofa and a couple of chairs, I didn't know which way to turn them around. I didn't know which side of the house you'd have them facing, because all we had was an electric fire screwed into the wall, which was very clinical looking. Once I had built the fireplace it gave it a bit of character, and I could adjust everything around to that area, and start building from there."

What strikes me with the fireplace is that it connects with another way of life other than this modern building. "Where I was brought up we sat in front of an open fireplace. It hasn't got that tower block effect when you are inside anymore, I could be on the ground floor for all I know, especially at night when the curtains are closed, I don't even realise I am in a tower block. The thing I do like about being here is I feel very secure, it's well protected with caretakers, everything is an advantage here."

A lot of things are very Celtic, is it important to have that around you? "Oh it is, it's part of my birthright, I can be at home anywhere really. I think the first thing is to be at home with myself, and this is it, so I can feel at home here as well. I don't feel that fear any more or anything, and we've got a good kind of communication here. I do a bit of gardening out here as well, getting involved keeps it good, and sometimes it's nice to be on your own a bit, I need that as well, we don't have to be treading on top of each other."

"I like my tape recorder there, I make some nice tapes." *Do you play a lot of music?* "I do quite a bit, yeah, also other kinds of tapes, other things about life, spiritual things as well, sort of keep me in touch with myself. Music, some of them are gospel, some of them are more about living, a kind of programme for living."



Changing Everything, 1998.

North Peckham Estate

In the mid-1990s I approached the curator of the South London Gallery with a proposal to set up a model of practice whereby the gallery became an active agency for the community directly around, while also involving a secondary audience of visitors from outside. The resulting project/exhibition work had the title, *Changing Everything*, for that is indeed what occurred in the way the work was conceived, developed and presented.

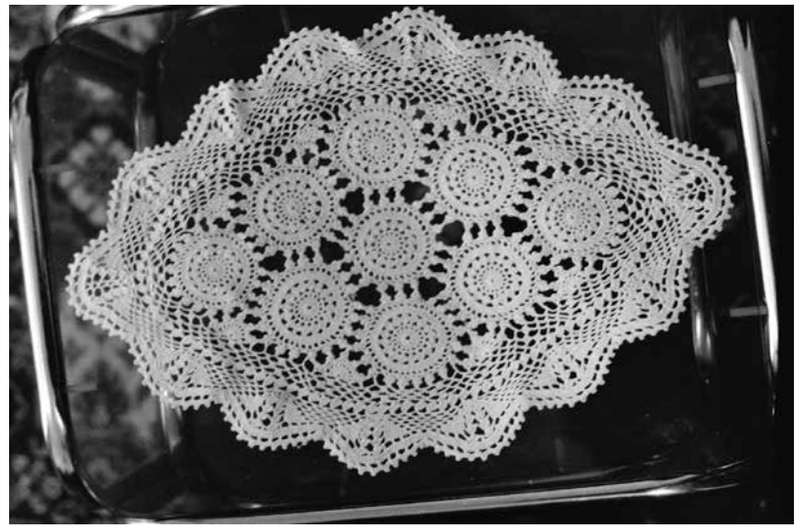
The immediate area next to the gallery was the North Peckham Estate, before it had been reconstructed, and initially I set up a series of public meetings to present my ideas and to invite people to become participants in the development of the work. I went to a variety of places, ranging from the local library, the Women's Centre, the Kicking and Punching Club, the Vietnamese Centre, and the Baptist Church, and from these meetings I got together a hardcore of people who wanted to work with me. I devised a walk from the gallery through the estate, and each participant was invited to make the walk for themselves using a Super 8 camera to record objects, signs and textures, that through their associations, they could imagine transformed into something else. They then recorded these associations in a tape recorded discussion with me. Each participant had their own take on what they encountered and recorded, so one person looked at windows, another pipes, etc. These workshops went on for nearly a year, each participant suggesting someone else, until in the end I was overwhelmed with people wanting to take part. The North Peckham Estate was a very edgy environment, you had to watch it, and people certainly watched you, but I didn't have any actual problems.

The participants later edited their films into a sequence of stills, which they presented in a large mosaic grid in the gallery. This was organised and viewed in association with a problem—a question around an issue that affected residents on the estate. Peoples' responses were made on Response Sheets that were displayed on mosaic grids. The work was administered by the participants, who organised their own rota so that there was always someone in the gallery to advise people about the work and how they could also participate via the Mosaic Grids. It is interesting to record that a completely different audience came to the South London Gallery from the local area than had been there previously, or perhaps since.

Changing Everything, South London Gallery, London, 1998.

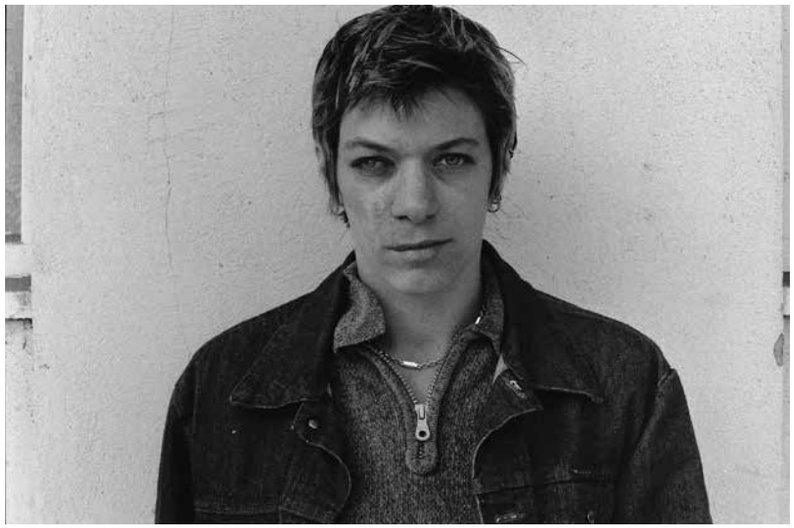
Do you feel there is a community in this environment? "The feeling is there, but I created my own space, my own community and I leave my space and my community in here when I go out. Just some people to talk to really, but otherwise I prefer this community I created indoors." *When you walk around the neighbourhood, do things reflect that interest?* "Yes, every time I go and look at gardens, I'm always on the lookout for shapes and lines, sometimes I stop to absorb what I see, which is interesting."

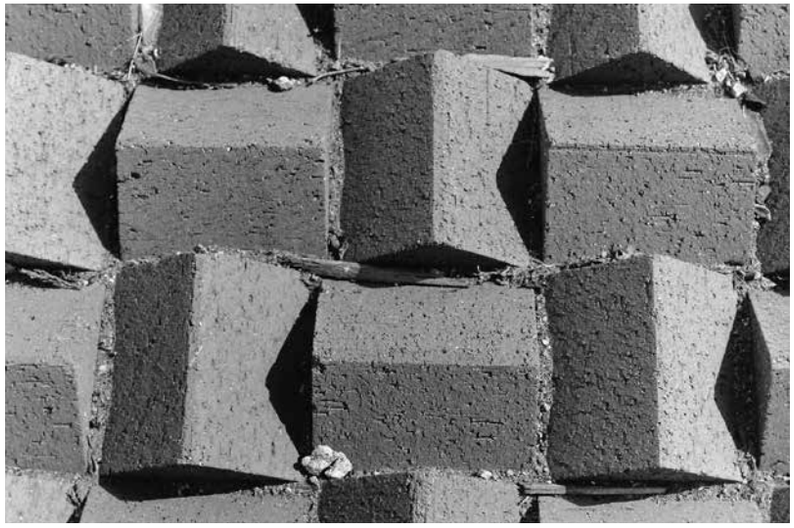
As the environment around here has transformed itself, what do you feel about the changes? "It is quite exciting because people are more proud of where they live." *Can you tell us a little bit about your garden?* "Yes, well, I'm a failed gardener, I visualise it to be tranquil, kind of somewhere to sit down and get lost in or draw a bit here and there some of the things that interest me, interesting things. When summer comes along, summer I am looking forward to."



Another thing you filmed quite a lot of was the children's playground objects, brightly coloured things. "Yes, that's more nursery things, gives little ones a chance to learn feeling, touching, seeing bright colours, big, different sizes as well, it just gives them something for their imagination, something to grow up into, experiment and explore really. They use them a lot, and it has changed the area, quite nice to look at during the day, you look at all the children playing and using those bright coloured things there."

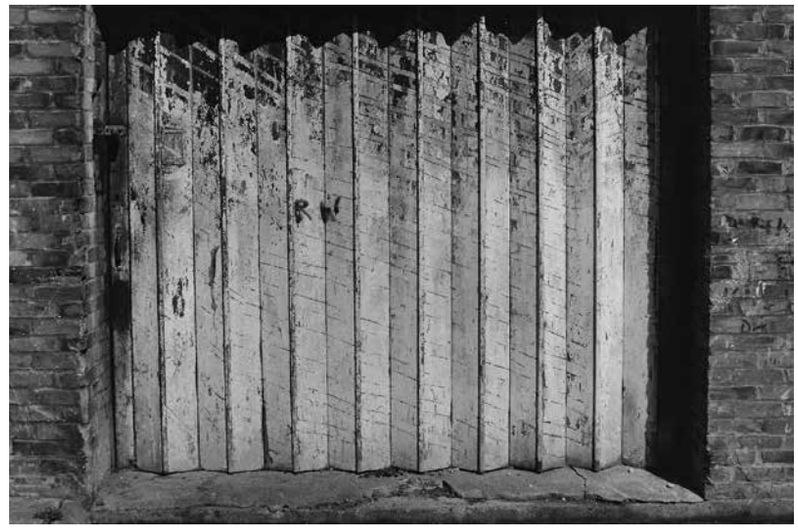
Do you think that when you walk through there and it's all urban, there are signs of a different world? "Oh yes, definitely. Especially when we went from the new bit to the old building and you could capture that difference straight away. The broken windows and that feeling of desolation and a different part of an era. Whereas the new part of the buildings felt lively and people around, just a feeling of wanting to be on that side, than on the other place, it's just on the border of the old and the new."

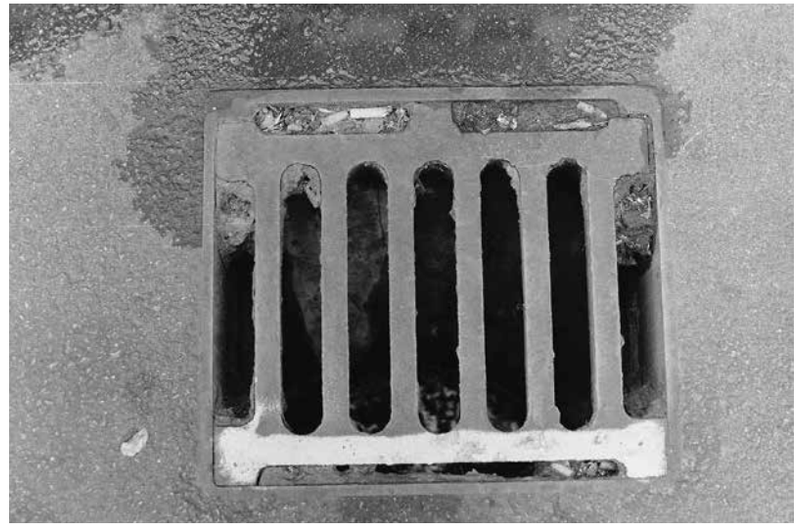




There was that great big burnt patch on the corrugated iron. "That had very personal references. It made me. I had friends who used to live in the North Peckham Estate and they had a motorbike, a very nice motorbike and they left it outside. The next morning the whole thing was burnt to a cinder, which is quite a common act of vandalism in this area. They moved immediately after because they were so pissed off. That reminded me. It looked like something like that happened in that area."

We came across that garden with the little lion sculpture in the porchway. Those people were expressing quite a different message. "They've tried to transform their home by sticking strange things on their walls. It's also a very English thing with the lion, and the architectural details that they have chosen to stick on their walls. Lots of very English references, like the crown." *Almost nationalistic you thought?* "Yeah, though you don't know if they are doing it deliberately or if they just like the object."





We went to those cars. "I'm a bit of a car person. That's a status symbol I think. Hub caps and stuff that's very ornate, the car wasn't particularly flash. Someone had obviously chosen these really expensive hub caps and shoved them on there. I think hub caps, the type of car, the way you look after your car, there's a lot of status. Signs of wealth. I always look at cars."

So you think they are expressing signs of wealth? "I think it's an aspirational thing as opposed to already having wealth. People who aspire to wealth or acquisitional things, they tend to demonstrate where they have got to. It is a status thing in life, their property, the way they dress, what car they drive, that kind of stuff."