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Becoming Part
of the Architecture:
Embedded Artistic
Research

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Stu Burke

Julia McKinlay

Victoria Sharples

James Thompson

This conversation took place between five researchers who have been embedded in different artist-led organisations in the north of the UK (GLOAM, Threshold, The Tetley, East Street Arts). We came together as friends, creative peers, and members of Plant: Embedded Research Network, a network to support and analyse embedded research within arts and architectural organisations.

Embedded research is often characterised by an individual moving into a non-academic host organisation to undertake research as ‘some kind of team member’. Within arts organisations embedded research can produce uncertain or unstable positions – for example in her lexicon entry for ‘embeddedness’ (in the publication *Making Matters: A Vocabulary for Collective Arts*) Pia Louwerens describes her experience of entering an art institution with the role of Embedded Artistic Researcher as follows: “I would be embedded as an artist in an institution, but not working at the institution as an artist; it would be different. How, I didn’t know yet.” In response to the theme of vernacular, we reflect on the type of team members we have become, and the different languages we use and script, in the process of undertaking embedded research in artist-led organisations.

Julia McKinlay (JM): Stu and Victoria, is your work as organisers of GLOAM adding something to your individual research and practice?

Stu Burke (SB): Personally, for me, I think it is. I’ve always seen my studio

practice intertwined with curating. Some of the other responsibilities of running the space have possibly hindered this. It’s taken up capacity that would otherwise be used on my own practice. However, it has provided me with the opportunity to experiment as a curator, supportively and safely, as well as a consistent space to practice. It has also put me in touch with so many more artists, curators, creatives etc., which is important to me as the energy, passion and sense of community that can be found within this makes me feel like I’m in the right place, it motivates me to keep pushing.

Victoria Sharples (VS): When we took on GLOAM, we didn’t really know what we were taking on. We were artists working in the space as studio holders and an opportunity presented itself to run the building, including the gallery, under a new co-operative structure and we agreed. For me, the project has gifted so much; it has allowed me to see the otherside, the infrastructure – or, in our case, the small team running the programme and maintaining the building. So many of our co-director meetings are about energy and ethical responsibilities: how can we keep GLOAM a safe space for all (including making it manageable for ourselves), and how can we keep it afloat. Because of this, many of our conversations are about sustainability; because if we fold, GLOAM folds.

JM: Are these considerations impacting how you work with artists?

VS: Yes, very much so. Because we are an artist-led space, I have to

remember that we are two artists meeting; not an institution meeting with an artist, and so it's a different kind of exchange. For me, there is a relationality and an understanding of what is possible, and so it feels much more like a partnership. When we work with artists that have shown in larger-scale organisations (with permanent staff on payroll), we need to be transparent with what we can do. We often start with introducing them to the building: "This is the gallery and our studio spaces; this is what is achievable with the resources available, and we will support you with how you want to use GLOAM." It is not a transactional commission, but an opportunity for them to work in a less established space with fewer guidelines which often feels more productive.

James Thompson (JT): When you show at another artist-led space, or if you show artists who have been involved with running artist-led spaces, does your approach change? Do you try to forget that you run one?

SB: Every year, we do an exchange with another artist-led initiative. Our first one was with General Practice (GP) in Lincoln, and then Two Queens in Leicester. Our approach with the GP exchange was very much: "You come to us, and you can use the gallery space and install, and then we'll come to you and use your gallery space." With Two Queens, we had more of a dialogue: "What's beneficial for you and what is beneficial for us? And how can we work together on that?"

VS: Whenever I go into another artist-led space, I always try to go in as an artist, but I find it hard not thinking about how the space is run, or how people work. I think about what they are doing that GLOAM isn't. Or what is GLOAM doing they aren't – it's like a regulation or temperature check. As a co-director/curator, I try to figure out the way in which they are operating. As an artist, I think about how I can operate in the space: how embodied/embedded do I feel in the environment? In both, I am trying to figure out how are they approaching me: as an artist, or as a representative part of GLOAM?

SB: Even if you look at Instagram, you ask how are they marketing? What language are they using? There's always that kind of investigation into how they are operating across different platforms.

Jonathan Orlek (JO): Thinking back to the opening quote by Pia Louwerens, about being an artist and a researcher embedded in an arts organisation, but not working as an artist, I think what you have described has shifted or expanded on that a little. You have introduced additional dynamics, from experiences of being embedded within artist-led organisations. Victoria, you spoke about artists relating directly with other artists. Stu you mentioned ways that artist-led projects interfaced with other artist-led projects. This can result in a process of regulating, or stepping back, and in and out, as your artist-curator-researcher roles change or meet. James, in terms of these different dynamics of being embedded and being an artist-

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researcher, could you say a bit more about your position? Before we hit record you spoke about becoming a member of staff almost?

JT: I suppose that's how they see me now. I think the reason that I've been able to gain this kind of unofficial access to work in response to The Tetley is due to the nature of my practice as they saw a relevance to the situation with the building closing and the value of me taking a snapshot of the space. I often work in response to architectures that are in-between states, usually in transition between re-development and ruin. I had also done a lot of research into former artist-led spaces in Leeds for a previous project, which connects to my current research exploring the precarity of art spaces and urban development in Leeds. In the act of recording The Tetley building while it's going through this process of closing, I am documenting its disintegration of place as an art space. It was initially intended to be just a couple of days. But then it got to a point where actually I had more ideas. Can I start to work there for an extended period? I was quite conscious of not hassling them or interrupting their working routines. I think now the gallery staff don't even notice I'm there and I've become almost part of the architecture! I think they realised that I was not going to be much trouble and can work independently of them. So, I've gradually built my role. The fact that I've been based there for such a long time is why I'm starting to take on these new positions, associated with being almost like a member of staff. I've been looking after the door for

deliveries and visitors, whilst I am recording the ground floor reception area. They have also started to teach me how to use the coffee machine. When the bar staff left, they taught a few of the gallery team how to use the fancy Italian 'La Marzocco' coffee machine, which the gallery actually owns, skills they are now passing onto me.

JM: I find that really fascinating. The building is no longer being used as a public gallery space, and as a consequence, a barrier has been lifted to you as an artist to give you access to the space but also the organisation. It is interesting that the roles of employed people within the building itself are merging and shifting.

JT: Yeah, the bar staff, when they left, taught the curators and other members of The Tetley staff, how to use it. And then they started teaching me how to use it; a kind of collateral upskilling, I guess. The former rules of the space have changed. I was recording the bar the other day, and the gallery staff have all moved out of their offices on the upper floors and into the bar and have taken over the sound system. And it was like, Steps *Tragedy* super loud. The space is morphing. We drunk the last of the soda stream in my first week.

JM: To me that sounds like a far more enjoyable working environment! Feeling comfortable enough to play Steps on the radio and make each other coffees and, work in a more visible or open area of the building... Is this just the natural impact of no longer having the public in the

building anymore, which necessitates becoming more removed for privacy, or more formal in their interactions with the public? I don't know. Would it even be possible for The Tetley to operate in a way that the mechanics of the gallery were more visible? The scale of the gallery is different, but something I like about visiting GLOAM is that I see the show, but I also have a peek around the corner and see what's going on in the studios and often have a chat with one of the directors who are invigilating.

JT: I think the reason that The Tetley could do that – present themselves as a more established art gallery, if that's the right term, rather than an artist-led space which it started out as – is because they had a sense of permanence in that building by having it for 10 years. Also, the scale of the building and uniqueness of the gallery architecture meant there was a lot of scope to do quite ambitious large-scale projects. I presume they're having to reassess. We don't have that space anymore. What kind of spaces are we going to have access to? How might that impact the programme?

JM: With Threshold I don't have that because it's in my front garden, it's private, I'm lucky enough to be a mortgage holder. As long as I pay the mortgage, that space is protected, which is precisely why I set it up to begin with, because I wanted to curate shows and to contribute something to the artist-led scene in Leeds, but I couldn't do it using meanwhile spaces. It was too stressful. I'd had too many bad experiences of being successful in

getting funding and then the spaces pulling out at the last minute. So literally off the back of one of those bad experiences, I was like, "Okay, well, my front garden is protected. I'll use that". The use of private space rather than rented space means that I'm never going to be able to fully hand it over to somebody else. I'm always going to be involved, even if someone else is essentially leading a project, because they would need a key to my house and access to my private space. I've had to take a break from Threshold for other work in the last few years, and to bring it back I would ideally share a lot of the work of running Threshold, with other people. But whoever might come onboard as a team member, would basically become an unofficial housemate almost. Previously Threshold was funded by an ACE Project Grant, and artists were financially supported to produce an outdoor sculpture, an edition, and a publication. They also received marketing, technical, and curatorial support. The next phase could go the opposite way though, rather than increasing the number of people running Threshold, it could be like more light touch: perhaps I offer less as a platform, and less is expected, and it can be more flexible as a resource. There are very few mid-level exhibition spaces in Leeds for the size of the art community that live and work here, so I would like to make Threshold available again, in a way that is manageable for me.

JO: I really like that it is in a back-to-back terraced house. Vernacular architecture! As you say, the thing that's interesting isn't the creation of an organisation. It's the fact that



things are popping up in a space which is familiar to many residents in Leeds. A space that everyone on your street has and occupies and uses (or not) differently.

SB: I think Threshold travelled further afield as well, beyond the local community.

JM: I think part of the reason why it travelled well, was because we were using the more formal language of an arts organisation in our marketing of the project, which I had become more fluent in through my embedded research with YSI, and I also brought a marketing consultant in to help. I think as a result Threshold came across very confidently as a project and was understandable to the wider art audience nationally. I basically think we talked ourselves up really well, but also the quality of the exhibitions was high. As an artist-led space, we didn't need to talk about the project in this way, but we chose to. At times I was a little concerned that we were being way too formal with how we communicated through Instagram. But the end result was that we were connecting with artists, curators and other arts organisers around the country and further afield. We gained reputation quite quickly for doing high quality stuff. So that's the advantage of using that kind of more institutional language. Even if it's harder work at times to do things spontaneously. We had arts professionals including Threshold on tours of northern galleries which was amazing! But we also had people stopping in while taking their recycling out or walking their dog.

JO: James, have you thought or speculated about the future of your involvement with The Tetley building and those yet to move in?

JT: The fact that time is running out in terms of access to The Tetley means I'm gradually doing more ambitious projects. I feel it's totally because they now care less about the building and previous gallery structures. It's sort of a role reversal, in that the rules of the space have been broken and new understandings are being formed. Because I've been there for such a long time and have gradually built this rapport it has given me the freedom to suggest more outrageous and ambitious ideas...I've been getting less resistance.

The relation I have with The Tetley is gradually morphing. I'm now speaking to the developers who will be taking over the building soon, and I've known the site manager from a previous project in 2021. Over Christmas I was able to access the surrounding building site to collect a pile of earth they had dug for me. I've since used the earth to create clay which I'm now using to record architectural details from the building. I feel my use of language is shifting again to keep working and to open access to other surrounding spaces like the new development.

I've begun to see my position as becoming like a bridge from the old art gallery version of The Tetley, with the hope that maybe I will be able to continue working in the

building once the developers take over. I have already started to form these relationships with the site manager, who was in the building the other day, and caught me while I had some contact mics attached to the lift and was like, “I’ve got that earth for you. It’s on gate two of the construction site”. I suppose it’s just that awareness of my role as an embedded artist researcher and how it’s shifting as the space changes and having this ambition to keep working. They’ve offered to shoot some drone footage for me of The Tetley because, you know, developers, they like the drone image don’t they for new developments, it’s their language.

VS: What you’re doing is operating in the liminal space; shepherding the resources and the remains of what the gallery has left, and through your practice making provision for working in the space after the takeover.

JT: Well, yeah. And get free earth to make clay!

JM: But you could get free earth anywhere, that’s the great thing about clay. What’s exciting you is where it’s from; the context that you’re drawing it from and doing something with it. ■

Jonathan Orlek has undertaken embedded ethnographic research within East Street Arts, Leeds. This research explored the provision of housing by artist-led organisations (discussed in Sluice, Spring 2020). James Thompson is conducting place-based research situated in The Tetley art gallery in Leeds, while the building is in the process of closing before its planned re-development into a food hall and luxury office spaces. This research is being undertaken as part of a practice-based PhD at the University of Leeds. Victoria Sharples and Stu Burke are co-directors and curators at GLOAM, an artist-led gallery and studios in Sheffield’s Cultural Industries Conservation Area. Victoria is an artist and researcher whose work mediates on site-specific architectures, post-humanist performativity and necro-ecologies. For Victoria, GLOAM is a space to build research networks and contribute to artist-led ecologies. Stu, an artist, curator and researcher, uses GLOAM as a site to explore art making through a process-led studio practice and an experimental space to develop curatorial research and methods. Both strands of this research at GLOAM inform his practice-based PhD at Leeds Beckett University. In 2021 Julia McKinlay founded and curated Threshold, an outdoor exhibition space for sculpture in the front garden of a back-to-back terraced house in Burley, Leeds. Julia was also an embedded practice-based PhD researcher within Yorkshire Sculpture International (YSI) between 2018–21.

Please get in contact if you are interested in being part of Plant: Embedded Research Network!

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