

Translating the street



Translating the street

Brigitte Jurack

Alan Dunn

Chris Dobrowolski & Kitstop Models & Hobbies

Kwong Lee & Birkenhead Central Library

Casey Orr & The Hive, Wirral Youth Zone

Alternator Studio & Project Space and Oxton Road, 13 April 2019

The work shown in this publication has been produced in three artist micro-residencies during which the artists spent time with businesses and community facilities in the vicinity of Alternator Studio & Project Space.

Founded by Brigitte Jurack and Alan Dunn in 2012, Alternator is located in The Old Bakery at 57-59 Balls Road East, Birkenhead CH43 2TZ and leases spaces to artists. It has an additional outdoor building awaiting upgrading and the wider plan is for a dedicated space that is available all year round for micro-residencies for local and international artists, especially those seeking a large making-space close to the docklands and a multicultural neighbourhood. Alternator sees a future for the *Translating the street* project model using the Oxtan Road neighbourhood as the key location for further micro-residencies.

Front cover: location shoot for Casey Orr *Our Birkenhead; Portraits with The Hive*.

Back cover: still from Kwong Lee *Grzegorz's Zurek*.

Illustration on p6: The Old Bakery circa 1905.

The residencies and this publication have been supported by:



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INTRODUCTION

Brigitte Jurack

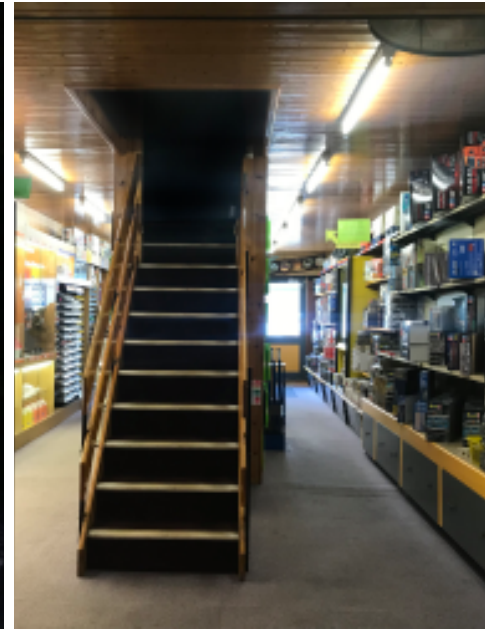
In 2012 I took over one of the three remaining buildings on Balls Road East in Birkenhead. The linked buildings that flank the left-hand side as you come up from Borough Road were originally built in 1900 to house the Disbury Bakery and shop.

Nestling on the junction with Oxton Road, the buildings are now occupied by a wood stripper, picture framer and Alternator. In the immediate neighbourhood, I discover a diverse range of independent businesses, some of which become my regular haunts. These businesses serve a culturally diverse community, not only in relation to ethnicity, but also professions and pastimes.

But how to unlock this treasure-trove of stories, cultures and customs? Each door could open hidden worlds of clients and shopkeepers. The idea for micro-residencies was thus born! Just like the dough rising in the bakery, the studio

is once again used to transform the small into the substantial. International artists have been invited to translate the stories of the street, build bridges and make visible the hitherto hidden.

In this second round of *Translating the street*, we welcome artists Chris Dobrowolski, Kwong Lee and Casey Orr to work in Birkenhead and to listen to the stories from the Oxton Road corridor. *Translating the street* is about providing artists with time and resources to engage in acts of translation through the development and creation of new work. The works themselves are on display within the hosts' sites for one day only and besides the general public and participants, this year we also invited two writers, Bob Dickinson (Manchester) and Mike Pinnington (Liverpool), to share their thoughts.



Chris Dobrowolski *Goat Train*, installation in the upstairs space of Kitstop, comprising motorised postcard of *The Scapegoat* (1854-6) by William Holman Hunt, model of Kitstop, goat skull, model railways and soundtrack.



Translating the street Bob Dickinson

The longer I've lived in the north west of England, it seems the more there is to learn about it. I do not know Birkenhead very well, although, for most of my adult life, I've lived not very far away, in Manchester. Unlike Liverpool, whose docks and city centre have undergone a dramatic regeneration in recent years, Birkenhead has not received anything like the same amount of attention and investment. I am not about to present an argument suggesting the same kind of redevelopment ought to have happened, or should yet be made to happen in Birkenhead. I am more interested in seeing what places like Birkenhead might actually have to offer to the rest of us.

These thoughts have been sparked off by recent visit to a contemporary art event, entitled *Translating the street*, in mid-April, 2019. Arising from a series of artists' micro-residences, it's the second such project to have been organised in Birkenhead by artists Brigitte Jurack and

Alan Dunn, who are based locally, in Alternator Studio, a converted bakery. The event revealed some thought-provoking work in unconventional settings, collectively suggesting contemporary art's ability to put forward new possibilities, as well as to remind us of already-present abilities and resources, for the furtherance of a healthy and happy city – minus a great deal of the politics of corporate commerciality. But how do you go about translating a street? And which street do you choose?



In this case, the choice was Oxton Road, a busy thoroughfare containing many independent shops, many of which cater for a multi-ethnic clientele. At one end, the street takes you towards the Hive, a big, well-resourced youth centre, while in the other direction, at the junction where Alternator stands, you can wander up Balls Road East to Birkenhead Central Library, which is where I started my day. It didn't seem very library-like, at first, though. When I opened the door into the main entrance, I smelt a mixture of delicious culinary odours. And I was immediately offered what people have been telling me for years does not exist: a free lunch. This, I rapidly discovered, was part of an artwork by artist-curator Kwong Lee, who had been exploring local food shops, looking for people who love to make food, talk about it, and demonstrate their skills.

In the Library's reception area, Kwong's twin video installation showed two of these local cooks at work. Making a traditional Polish dish called Zurek was a young man called Grzegorz.

This was one of the lunch options on offer at the Library, and it looked great, a big bowl of white sausage in a stew. In the video next to him, the manager of a very busy food shop, Kazem, from Iran, was preparing shakshouka – a spicy assemblage of tomato and vegetables dotted with poached eggs. I chatted to the real-life Kazem while I tried some of the East Asian vegan stir-fry made by Kwong himself. Kazem told me he came to live in the UK before the Iranian revolution, in the 1970s, and that he has children and grandchildren here, and occasionally he goes back to Iran, just to visit, regarding Birkenhead as home. He has developed his shop as a meeting place for people, as much as a business selling the kind of specialised fruit and vegetables that local restaurateurs rely on. In the shop, his radio is tuned to a classical music station, because Kazem finds the sound encourages visitors to stay longer and return regularly. So, we talked, and I ate, and then Brigitte arrived, and she began telling me what to expect next. It looked like being a busy afternoon, and it was.

On the way, walking with Brigitte, we passed Alternator Studio, and shortly afterwards, Kazem's shop, full of fruit and vegetables beautifully displayed, a riot of colour that opened out on to the pavement. I liked the way the street seems to decide for itself how it will behave: sometimes loud and a bit brash, at other times somewhat modest and mysterious. No big overall plan. Very different from the worlds of "cultural quarters" or "business districts" you find in city centres like Liverpool or Manchester. But this is a more self-sufficient situation, too. More do-it-yourself.

How appropriate, then, that the next location for a new artwork was a shop the likes of which you seldom see any more. Called Kitstop, it sells plastic model kits, of cars, aeroplanes, military vehicles, and model railways with all their attendant buildings and figures. But upstairs, there was a surprise: a performance for audiences, limited in size to three at a time, each person perched at the top of the same set of wooden steps, their heads poking up into

the dark, loft-like space. Here, artist Chris Dobrowski presented something quite profound but also strangely funny: a tribute to the figure of the scapegoat. On a previous visit to the Wirral, Chris had seen William Holman's Hunt's painting of that name in the Lady Lever Art Gallery (a smaller, preliminary version of it hangs at Manchester Art Gallery), and Chris thought about the implications of this Biblical metaphor, in today's similarly bleak political landscape. The point about the scapegoat is that it has to be sent away, as a figure of blame, so here, in the model shop, we suddenly encountered it travelling, into and out of darkness, transported around on a model railway. Beginning in what looked like a wrecked village featuring a miniature replica of a local ruined church, Holman Hunt's lit-up image moved off, while sound effects, taken from YouTube, of goats that sound like humans screaming (and yes, they do exist) created a disturbing mood. Shortly afterwards, the model train delivered a goat's skull, approaching inexorably, disturbingly. And, accidentally, the railway carriage got stuck, because

of a bump in the floor, and Chris had to leap up and jog it into action, which I liked, because it added humanity and imperfection to the whole bizarre ritual.

Earlier, at the Library, I'd been introduced to Delaware-born photographer, Casey Orr. Things were busy and she'd had to rush off. But the time now came to catch up with her, at the Hive, where, in one sizeable room, a series of large-format colour prints portrayed local teenagers, individually facing the camera and all full of character. In one, for instance, a girl in school uniform stares proudly beneath a fringe of dyed hair, in blue and white stripes, resembling the look of a character in a manga cartoon. In another, a boy's goth-style, silver-ringed fingers interlace beneath his stubby chin, while his eyes glance, half-quizzically, half-jokingly, directly into the camera. I asked Casey how she managed to capture those faces, looking so lively, without posing. She told me she talked to them a lot, asking them about what they like doing. "I love connecting," she said, "And it's interesting for



them, too. It's different from them taking selfies." A second series of photos, mixed together on the walls with the first, showed groups of the same young people, re-photographed in notable locations nearby, including Birkenhead Park, and the Priory, the latter's medieval stone walls overlooked by enormous, modern, dock-land cranes. Here, examples of the giant single portraits were held up by hand, by their friends. The positioning of these photos, and the attitudes of the young people holding them up, clearly announces to the viewer that these are the faces of people they're proud of. Casey told me they selected the locations together, driving around in the Hive's own van.

Chatting to youth worker and arts co-ordinator Lizzie Watts, I found out there were 150 young people aged between 13 and 25 who go regularly to the Hive, which is run by an independent charity, to participate in a choice of twenty activities. Glancing around what had, for this event, been transformed into a real exhibition space, she said, "I've always wanted the place to look

a bit different, like this." Some of the teenagers in the photos began to arrive at this point. Two of them, Scott Caplin and Sunny Davies, stood in front of Casey's larger-than-life portraits to be photographed by their families.

Walking up to the roundabout, and returning to Oxtou Road, I joined visitors assembling at Alternator Studio, where another group of teenagers from the Hive was getting ready to perform. Brigitte showed me around the building, where many of her sculptures, based on the human form, are stored on shelves in the bakery's disused ovens, and in the old stables. Upstairs, a big, light-filled space makes a perfect location for studio work. After a brief soundcheck, the vocal group, Edge of Seventeen, three girls and one boy, sang a set of modern pop ballads. They were brave to do that, in front of an audience of (mostly much older) artists and journalists. And they got a warm response for their harmonies. From all that work and enthusiasm, I got a real sense of warmth about the Hive, as well as the whole event.

And as I travelled home, I thought about the day - a day of artistic interventions that had all explored some essential element of everyday life – including food, play, the expression on a face, a favourite landmark, and the bringing-together of voices. In a region where regeneration is a persuasive metaphor for the future - and for the survival of the north, in its ongoing, long-running, unequal battle for financial resources with London - there still exist, nonetheless, numerous places untouched by much hint of renewal. It's complicated, and in current circumstances, much uncertainty surrounds what will happen, investment-wise, to places like Birkenhead. But maybe if more artists got the opportunity to offer ideas, more urban areas could explore and nurture the potential of what's just out there, on everyone's street. Because cities are more than just shiny buildings.



Above:
Electric Lighting Station, opposite The Hive.
Previous page:
Kwong Lee's video installed in Central Library.



International cook books left by Kwong Lee as permanent collection for the Library and serving Grzegorz's Zurek in the Library during launch day.







Previous pages:

Location shoots at Woodside Ferry Terminal and Birkenhead Town Hall as part of Casey Orr *Our Birkenhead*; Portraits with *The Hive*.

Facing: Chris Dobrowolski upstairs at Kitstop.



Translating the street Mike Pinnington

Have you read China Miéville's *The City and the City*? In it, the city of Beszel and the city of Ul Qoma overlap, and in some cases occupy the same physical space; citizens of each adhere to a collective understanding that they must 'unsee' the other. One, Ul Qoma, is rich and vibrant. By comparison, Beszel has been somewhat left behind; additionally, the two cities have different dialling codes. Reviewing the book for the Guardian in 2009, Michael Moorcock said: "Subtly, almost casually, Miéville constructs a metaphor for modern life in which our habits of 'unseeing' allow us to ignore that which does not directly affect our familiar lives."

Sometimes – though not ordinarily to such extreme lengths as explored by Miéville – the relationship between Liverpool and The Wirral can feel strangely similar. Both are constituents of Merseyside, and from the window of my flat overlooking the River Mersey you can see the north-eastern side of Wirral. Yet, for all

our close proximity, similar accent and shared love and/or hatred of certain football clubs, as a concept, it can sometimes feel quite vague. Close, but far away. And while we have much in common with our neighbours separated by so narrow a stretch of water, we have different postcodes – CH and L; the accents, meanwhile, though discernibly of the region, have sometimes markedly different inflections. Even for those of us with ties both old and recent to the place – friends, ex-colleagues, an ex-girlfriend – there remains studied, if almost imperceptible differences.

All of which was pertinent, if on the periphery, of my thoughts as I headed to Birkenhead for the latest iteration of *Translating the street*. The one-day-only presentation of a trio of micro-residencies initiated by artist Brigitte Jurack, it intended "to allow artists to explore and reflect on the multicultural community in one Birkenhead Street". Jurack, who runs the nearby Alternator, had invited photographer Casey Orr, sculptor Chris Dobrowolski and artist/producer Kwong

Lee to respond to a cluster of three nearby settings along Oxton Road to decode and explore an aspect – or aspects – of what they found there, in whatever means they saw fit. None of them being from or residing in Birkenhead, they would provide a crucial, true outsider’s perspective to see beyond any local specificities, observing things taken for granted afresh.

Kwong Lee, situated in Birkenhead Central Library, chose to mine the locale’s rich and diverse cuisine. We can all agree to sharing an appetite for good food. Inspired in-part by Oxton Road’s small independent shops, restaurants and greengrocer, which cater to a variety of Central European, Asian and Far Eastern palates, Kwong – often using Google translate on his phone to speak with the shops’ proprietors – determined to transplant and represent some of those flavours to what is traditionally a communal space, free and accessible to all. Following my nose, a good welcome was ensured even prior to entering the building (a grand space, it was opened by King George V in 1934). I then

sat down with Kwong and was promptly served a warming garlic and ginger-infused Asian fusion vegan stew, with some green tea to wash it down. Behind us was a video installation of men (Polish and Iranian, respectively) that Kwong had befriended during his research, cooking. They looked like they should have their own TV shows. Indeed, could have; an alternative to James Martin and his assorted cronies would be nice, I mused. Over our lunch we chatted about his project in the library, how it was manifested and how art and food have always been twin concerns of his – here, the challenge was how to connect them to make something meaningful during his short stay. “The communicating agency of cooking and sharing food has always been something that I’ve worked with,” he said. Crucial, too, were the library’s resources, which helped him work out the town’s demographic – predominantly white, who else lives here, and what languages do they speak? He collected together thirteen non-English language cookery books to donate to the library, testing a theory about modern-day library usage. “It’s a bit of a

punt; however, I ran with it!” He had books, off the top of his head, in Persian, Farsi, Bengali, Hindi, Chinese, Thai, Polish and Romanian. To me, it sounded like an idea born of quiet generosity to neighbours we might not yet know, may never know. Kwong said that one artist donating 12/13 books can’t change much. But a new arrival to Birkenhead from another country, were they to visit the library and stumble into the cookery book section as Kwong had done, and then find something in their own language, would feel immediately welcomed, a part of the community before a word had even been uttered. Art, like food, can in the right hands be a meaningful, powerful tool.

Leaving the library, next stop was another long-standing part of the community, the 40-year-old Kitstop Model Shop. There, up a narrow set of stairs and behind a black curtain, you could find sculptor Chris Dobrowolski, and a much more idiosyncratic response to the brief. Here is a world in miniature – model train track, a real goat’s skull, the local church, and

the shop in which we sit, these final two elements made by gluing his phone onto a long stick and printing the photos out. Alarming, it is also soundtracked with screams taken from Youtube videos (of all manner of creatures, including goats, but also humans). “How did you come up with this,” I wondered. Prior to his residency, Chris had paid a visit to the Lady Lever Art Gallery, just a few train stops away, in Bebington. While there, he had seen William Holman Hunt’s *The Scapegoat* (1854-6), which depicts the titular figure described in the book of Leviticus, sent out into the wilderness for atonement. Gallery interpretation states that “Hunt regarded the Old Testament scapegoat as an equivalent to the New Testament Christ whose suffering and death similarly expunged man’s sins.” Of course, sending the goat out into the snowy wastes in this way puts it out of sight and, therefore, out of mind. This is a strange, imperfect work of world creation – a match, if not simulacrum, of the strange imperfect world in which we live. Stepping back out into the real world, via the display cases of model trains and

cars in the shop proper downstairs, it took time to adjust; for the particular reality we occupy to take hold once more.



The final of our trio of residencies was at the Hive, a new purpose built Youth Zone which opened two years ago. Here, Casey Orr, winner of the 2019 FORMAT19 Photography Prize, has been getting to know the Hive's service users (young people aged eight to 19, up to 25 for

those with disabilities) having set up a pop-up portrait studio there. These young people, so used to taking selfies, have embraced Casey and her project. The walls around us are filled with large-scale portraits. Some of them practically dance and move, fizzing with the energy of their subjects. Others are more thoughtful, windows onto the introspection and uncertainty somehow particular to adolescence. What they all have in common, I think, is honesty. I ask Casey what the subjects think of the results and the relationship they have to the images: "They have a language with photography and selfies and with pictures, but it's different," she says. There is a gravity in each of the photographs that quick snapshots, subsequently edited and warped almost beyond recognition with Insta-filters, rarely capture.

We inevitably, perhaps, then talk about what art should do in these times. Unequivocal in her response, she replies that: "We need poetry and self-expression, and I feel like I'm digging my heels in." Continuing, she explains, "I do

photographs that explore different things that I'm thinking about... being visible in the world. I do really think about teenagers specifically and how they communicate. They're so sophisticated in the way that they are telling you things about themselves through how they want to be in the world." She sees cause for optimism, too: "I have so much hope in them. That they're going to lead us out of this." While we're talking, one of the sitters, Izzy, arrives. I ask Izzy how she feels about the project and her portrait, and whereabouts in the Wirral she's from. She thinks "they're good," she demurs. "I'm not from Seacombe", she says, unbidden, "I'm from Walsley." To an outsider like myself, the difference is negligible. But this is yet more evidence of those fuzzy geographical demarcations; identity defined by and rooted in place, kin and peer group.

Miéville's book, although many things, is ultimately a warning to all of us, no matter where we live. Don't ignore what is in front of you, it exclaims – whether that be the rise in usage of

foodbanks, increased homelessness, child poverty. These are societal problems, and therefore responsibilities we all share. Art can play its role – in spotlighting issues, in bringing people together who might not ordinarily acknowledge their sharing of the same spaces, in exposing victim blaming, seeing people, and turning what we think we know on its head. *Translating the street* gestures towards all of this, and more – in raising questions of local and global, macro and micro, it warns us to be mindful of communities, what they are, and our place within them.

Previous page:

Vintage Pola Kit HO Scale Gantry Crane, Kitstop.

Facing:

BBC Radio Merseyside interviewing Brigitte Jurack:
<http://brigittejurack.de/translate2019.html>











Previous pages:
Installing Casey Orr *Our Birkenhead*; *Portraits with The Hive* and Chris Dobrowolski *Goat Train*.

Facing and this page:
Kwong Lee filming Kazem Kohnechi and Edge of Seventeen from The Hive performing in Alternator during the launch day.



Casey Orr, Lizzie Watts and young people from The Hive.

Special thanks

Our hosts Lizzie Watts, Adam Mellor, Nikki Anderson, Edge of Seventeen at The Hive; Antonella Louisa De Riso and Martin Richardson at Kitstop; Kirsten Hume, Julie Williams, Julie Barkway, Arthur and all at Birkenhead Central Library. Our collaborators Kazem Kohnechi, Grzegorz Olszewski and Kat Miturska. Further support from Alternator Studio artists Wendy Williams, Carol Ramsay and Julie Dodd; Laura Brown (PR), Alan Dunn, Laura Robertson, Pamela Sullivan, Naomi Horlock, Elizabeth Williams, Candice Dehnavi, Simon Ellwood; Maria Percival at Arts Council England and the *Translating the street* partners, Adam Smythe, Laura Yates, Marie-Anne McQuay and Bryan Biggs (Bluecoat), Elizabeth Wewiora (Open Eye) and Colin Simpson (Williamson Art Gallery); Bob Dickinson and Mike Pinnington; Leeds Beckett University and Manchester School of Art (Manchester Metropolitan University).

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