


Article

Cultural Ecology and Cultural Critique

Rowan Bailey ^{1,*}, Claire Booth-Kurpnicks ^{1,*}, Kath Davies ² and Ioanni Delsante ^{1,3,*} ¹ School of Art, Design and Architecture, University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield HD1 3DH, UK² Kirklees Council, Huddersfield HD1 2TT, UK; kath.davies@kirklees.gov.uk³ Department of Architecture and Civil Engineering (DICAR), University of Pavia, 27100 Pavia, Italy

* Correspondence: r.bailey@hud.ac.uk (R.B.); claire.booth@hud.ac.uk (C.B.-K.); i.delsante@hud.ac.uk (I.D.)

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Abstract: In 2015, the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) commissioned John Holden, visiting professor at City University, London, and associate at the think-tank Demos, to write a report on culture as part of its Cultural Value Project. The claim within the report was to redirect culture away from economic prescriptions and to focus on ecological approaches to ‘value’. Holden considers the application and use of ecological tropes to re-situate culture as ‘non-hierarchical’ and as part of symbiotic social processes. By embracing metaphors of ‘emergence,’ ‘interdependence,’ ‘networks,’ and ‘convergence,’ he suggests we can “gain new understandings about how culture works, and these understandings in turn help with policy information and implementation”. This article addresses the role of ‘cultural critique’ in the live environments and ecologies of place-making. It will consider, with examples, how cultural production, cultural practices, and cultural forms generate mixed ecologies of relations between aesthetic, psychic, economic, political, and ethical materialisms. With reference to a body of situated knowledges, derived from place studies to eco-regionalisms, urban to art criticisms, we will consider ecological thinking as a new mode of cultural critique for initiating arts and cultural policy change. Primarily, the operant concept of ‘environing’ will be considered as the condition of possibility for the space of critique. This includes necessary and strategic actions, where mixed ecologies of cultural activity work against the disciplinary policing of space with new assemblages of distributed power

Keywords: cultural ecology; mixed ecologies; environing; cultural critique; art; urban design; cultural policy

1. Introduction

The State of Art Criticism, edited by James Elkins and Michael Newman, and first published in 2007, emerged out of *The Art Seminar* series; a collection of seven books featuring scholars engaged in open-ended conversations on a range of topics, including art history vs. aesthetics, photography theory, global art history, renaissance theory, landscape theory, and re-enchantment. Volume 4, *The State of Art Criticism*, brought together contributions by Stephen Melville, Irit Rogoff, Katy Deepwell, Whitney Davis, Julian Stallabrass, Guy Brett, and others. In the envoi to the series, featured in Volume 7, Elkins reflects on his intentions for the project and the outcomes of the scholarly conversations. He explains his ideal scenario for the books; that they “would be full of concerted critical encounters in the manner of, say, *Critical Inquiry*, but more wide-ranging” (Elkins 2008, p. 306). Instead of ‘disagreements,’ Elkins describes the misreadings and sometimes deliberate avoidances leading to “divergent discourses that cannot be compared or adjudicated” (ibid.). Within the series, Volume 4 had busied itself with the histories and ahistoricity of art criticism; a preoccupation which Elkins suggests concealed a deeper embedded problem at the core of the exchange. He writes:

[...] *The State of Art Criticism* harbors an even more difficult difference, which most every contributor notices but hardly any think is worth pursuing: the difference between critics who see their purpose as rendering judgment, and those who take art criticism as a place to meditate on the conditions under which critical judgments might be made. To me that is an astonishing gulf, and it is not bridged by anyone in the book. (Ibid.)

In the spirit of Elkins' ambitions for *The Art Seminar* series, and in response to the envoi out of which the above quotation is drawn, this article proposes to consider the "astonishing gulf" between "rendering judgment" and "the place to meditate on the conditions under which critical judgments might be made" in the context of two conceptual formations: 'Cultural ecology' and 'cultural critique'.¹

On the one hand, our consideration of 'cultural ecology' is located within the specific discourses of cultural policy and research-funded initiatives in the United Kingdom, and to an historical moment of conflation between cultural/creative production and its contribution to the economy. In the late 1990s, under the directives of Tony Blair, then Prime Minister of New Labour, a task force (Creative Industries Task Force) was established to map the creative industries so as to better inform government policy on its economic growth potential. The development of the new Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) wanted to know the makeup of the creative industries and what contribution these sectors were delivering to the overall economy. Following the publication of *The Creative Industries Mapping Document* of 2001, the DCMS committed to providing up to date and consistent data on the activity of the creative industries (Department for Culture, Media and Sport 2001). This has included annually updated statistical bulletins estimating the creative industries contribution to the economy through gross value added (GVA, export of services, employment, and number of businesses). In 2005, the total contribution of the creative industries to the UK GVA as the measure of the values of the goods and services it produces was 7.3% and employing over 1,824,400 people (Department for Culture, Media and Sport 2007). Comparatively, the 2016 GVA report published by DCMS, detailed that the creative industries were a £92 billion sector growing at twice the rate of the economy (Department for Culture, Media and Sport 2016). Further figures from the Department for Digital (newly added), Culture, Media and Sport indicated that in 2017, the creative industries had contributed £101.5 billion in value, with the addition of £130.5 billion from the digital sector (Department for Culture, Media and Sport 2007). Accounting for the overlap between sectors the latest statistics show that what is represented in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport now accounts for 14.6% of the UK's GVA at a value of £267.7 billion to the UK economy (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport 2017).

The steady growth of the creative industries means that it is now a much larger and more complex infrastructure and as a result, new ways of communicating what it is and does as a macro-industry has subsequently transformed the language and discourses used to understand it. This is the point at which the term 'ecology' starts to enter into government cultural policy reports in the second decade of the 2000s (2010 onwards), perhaps as a way to reconcile the disparate aspects of the creative, cultural, and digital sectors. It is important therefore to track the semantic changes at work in this particular context with the aim of understanding the cultural formations arising from it, including those that are less visible and/or which offer an expanded approach to 'ecology' and its meanings within the milieu of 'culture'.

On the other hand, our understanding of 'cultural critique' stems from a conceptual and political grounding of criticism evolving out of philosophy (of the eighteenth century onwards) and critical theory (of the Frankfurt School in particular). The term 'critique' is famously associated with Immanuel

¹ The methodological framework for this piece of writing is informed by the principles and practices of the arts and humanities; both as art history and as cultural studies. Both disciplines read culture and its forms using the tools of critique. In this respect, the examples presented in this paper are part of the act of reading and writing through cultural phenomena, using historical and theoretical references to think in, with, and through ideas about art, culture, and the modalities of lived experience. Cultural critique is as much a tool for thinking in this paper as it is an 'object' of investigation alongside the term 'cultural ecology.'

Kant's three *Critiques* (*Critique of Pure Reason* [1781], *Critique of Practical Reason* [1788], and *Critique of Judgment* [1790]) and famous essay 'Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment' (1784), out of which the critical theorist Michel Foucault establishes an approach to 'critique' through questioning the imposed limits of scientific reality on the historical conditions and power relations of lived experience. For Foucault, critique is "an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at the one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed upon us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them" (Foucault 1997, p. 132). Critical social theory, as it evolves historically as a field of discourses, includes reflective assessments of society and culture, using the tools of the social sciences and the humanities. In particular, the Frankfurt School was a school of social theory and philosophy associated with the Institute of Social Research at Goethe University, Frankfurt. It developed in the Weimar period, between 1918 and 1939. The School was concerned, to some extent, with the political, economic and societal conditions that collectively generate cultural forms of expression (both good and bad) and the ways in which art and culture can instigate social change. Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, Jürgen Habermas, among others, were interested in scrutinizing how cultural forms are part of larger structures, generating meanings that either reinforce dominant ideologies or produce counter-formations so as to critically question existing orthodoxies. These meaning-making activities helped to problematize the ways in which values and norms are produced and established in our daily lives. The evolution of these ideas has played a key role in the development of cultural studies as a set of approaches for investigating and analyzing culture and its modes of production. Cultural analysis and its modes of critique are thus focused on how cultural practices relate to wider systems of power; how cultural forms are manifestations of and responses to different social and societal structures. In this respect, it serves as an important tool for thinking about 'cultural ecology' and its formations.

This article will put these two conceptual formations—cultural ecology and cultural critique—to work by locating them firstly, within cultural policy and academic discourse, where the terms 'ecology,' 'ecosystem,' 'placemaking,' and 'network' are used to describe a broad and varied context of and for cultural production. Secondly, we propose 'environing' as a term that renegotiates 'cultural ecology' in, with, and through different cultural forms of 'critique'. The purpose of which is to show, with the aid of several distinct and specific examples, how value judgments, and the conditions for critiquing value-determinants, may be critically negotiated in and through acts of enviroing and as part of an ecological approach to culture for our times.

2. Cultural Value and Cultural Policy

Our discussion begins with cultural policy-making and large scale research funded initiatives, including the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Cultural Value Project, out of which the term 'cultural ecology' is investigated and explored by John Holden in his famous report, 'The Ecology of Culture' (first published in January 2015). This is an important context to consider because it represents the many dimensions of cultural value attached to experience (as both receivers and producers of culture). The trickle-down effects of thinking about culture as an 'ecology' has entered into knowing consciousness, whether as an art practitioner applying for funding, as an academic seeking out new ways to research the tools and mechanisms of cultural production, as a civil servant working to deliver cultural opportunities and services as part of local council provision, or as a community member engaged in cultural experiences, for aesthetic, social, political, educational, economic, and even cathartic reasons.

In the early 2010s, the term 'creative ecology' started to springboard into UK policy developments in the arts and cultural sector. For example, in 2011, Ed Vaizey, then Conservative Minister for Culture, Communications, and Creative Industries, gave a speech at the State of the Arts conference; an event organized by the RSA and Arts Council England for discussing future cultural policies in the United Kingdom. The speech was titled 'The Creative Ecology' and in it, Vaizey explains that 'creative ecology'

is “an alliance between the subsidized and commercial arts; the professional and the voluntary arts; and the arts and creative industries” (Vaizey 2011). The content of the speech called for resilience in austere times and for the arts to work with their local authorities to bridge links between funding schemes and services.

A couple of years later, management consultant Mandy Barnett and economist Daniel Fujiwara’s *Towards Plan A: A New Political Economy for Arts and Culture* (2013) and Alan Davey’s *This is England: How Arts Council England Uses its Investment to Shape a National Cultural Ecology* (2014) addressed the ways in which an arts and cultural ecology might be fostered on a national scale.² Whilst recognizing that these ecologies are “full of dynamism, difference and diversity” (Barnett and Fujiwara 2013, p. 9) and that “the metaphor of an ecology, of a living, balanced environment, expresses how nothing happens within this system without its impact being felt widely” (Davey 2014, p. 4), external pressures to measure the impact of culture, resilience, and sustainability of artist networks, cultural organizations, and partnerships, often shapes the ways in which certain values are constituted and made, established and reinforced. The cultural ecology models presented in these documents are situated and embedded within a context focused on the long-term economic development and sustainability of culture as an asset-driven value system. As a result, different methods of evaluation given to cultural activity often take priority over the practices and processes through which culture is generated and the ways in which certain cultural activities or cultural judgements may be valorized over others.

The Warwick Commission *The Future of Cultural Value*, written by academics Eleanora Belfiore and Catriona Firth (published in April 2014), presents a mapping exercise to consider the debates on how to measure the value of culture, including the evaluation processes that have come to inform cultural policy decision making and funding allocation. In this document the distinction between cultural value and economic value is made, outlining their distinct differences, including the blurring of the boundaries between them. Belfiore and Firth write:

[...] how to develop a methodological approach to measurement and evaluation that can reflect, account for and respect these “varieties of value” without falling into the trap of either collapsing all notions of value into a narrow focus on economic value, or the equally dangerous trap of focusing on the cultural dimension of value whilst ignoring its connection to the economic sphere. Either of these scenarios would be reductionist and problematic. The question of measuring the value of culture in the context of policy-making can therefore be articulated as the challenge of a balancing act: how can we capture, measure, quantify and qualify the value of the arts and culture in their cultural, social and economic dimensions to develop a more robust and comprehensive body of evidence in support of policy-making? (Belfiore and Firth 2014, p. 3)

These sentiments are also supported by the objectives of the Cultural Value Project, led by Geoffrey Crossick and Patrycja Kaszynska, and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council between 2012 and 2015. The project sought to further investigate the many dimensions of value to expand the field, through research, and “consider as wide a range of cultural practice and forms of cultural value as we were able” (Crossick and Kaszynska 2016, p. 7). Their report, ‘Understanding the Value of Arts and Culture’, presents research outcomes derived from over 70 projects, ranging from specialist workshops, critical literature reviews, and new primary research activity. The report, over 200 pages long, emphasizes the importance of cultural experience (in creating ‘reflective individuals,’ ‘engaged citizens,’ ‘peace-building and healing,’ ‘urban regeneration,’ ‘engagement and positive health and wellbeing,’ ‘cultural education,’ and ‘economic benefits,’ to name a few) alongside the more measurable and quantifiable processes of evaluating and thus valuing specific cultural forms/practices. Of the

² Davey was Chief Executive of Arts Council England between 2008 and 2014.

70 funded projects, John Holden's report 'The Ecology of Culture' (CVP Research Development Award) provides a context for re-visiting some of the key issues/concerns at work in cultural development initiatives, especially in relation to different modes of approach in the prescription of cultural values within the built environment. To some extent, the Cultural Value Project worked to provide the "robust and comprehensive body of evidence" Belfiore and Firth articulate is necessary to better inform future policy-making.

3. Cultural Ecology

Holden's consideration of cultural ecology evolves out of in-depth interviews with 38 cultural practitioners. It is small in-scale (comparatively with the macro-organization of the creative and cultural industries), focuses on micro-formations, and investigates modes of approach to 'the idea' of ecology, rather than set out to establish goal-driven directives. As Holden explains:

An ecological approach concentrates on relationships and patterns within the overall system, showing how careers develop, ideas transfer, money flows, and product and content move, to and fro, around and between the funded, homemade and commercial subsectors. Culture is an organism not a mechanism; it is much messier and more dynamic than linear models allow. (Holden 2015, p. 4)

Holden digs deep, working with the networks of relations shaped out of a range of contexts and specific circumstances. Furthermore, his understanding of culture is informed by arts and humanities discourses, both historical and contemporary, to consider how and why 'culture' is not fixed, but rather fluid, unstable, subject to change, and more than simply economically derived. 'The Ecology of Culture,' if it were to serve as a counter-formation to economic-determinisms, most certainly values the significance of experience as part of the play of cultural actors in a network of complexities. Furthermore, this is only made possible by the nature of the approach Holden takes: Through qualitative in-depth interviews, historical and comparative literature searches within the fields of philosophy, art history, cultural studies, social anthropology, and so on. When we consider 'ecological thinking' as part of a mode of approach to research enquiry, we frame our objectives differently. As Holden is apt to explain, with a philosophical undertone (note the teleological ends of the system, where culture is only ever understood in terms of financial gain):

It is therefore a category mistake to treat culture only as economy, because the cultural ecology operates in ways, and produces effects, that transcend monetary transactions. The mistake has real consequences. One is that concentrating on only monetary valuations of the system (which the Treasury's Green Book methodology demands, in that it requires all types of value to be expressed in monetary terms) inhibits interactivity, and is likely to reduce the creation of both financial and cultural value. Another is that non-monetary flows in the ecology are neglected, whereas in fact, as Crossick explains: "without an extraordinary level of free-sharing, value cannot be formed". The culture ecology cannot be understood without taking into account free labour and emotional rewards. (Holden 2015, p. 11)

For Holden, 'ecology' presents a mode of thinking in which neither the economic nor the noneconomic takes priority but concentrates rather on the negotiation between the two. Non-monetary flows might seem, when translated into a cultural ecology, all too common place. However, this has been met with criticism from artist communities.³ Concepts of 'ecology' and 'community' need not be

³ The exploitation of artistic and cultural activity is a hidden labour of the eco-system of culture, and a legitimate concern for all cultural producers. For example, as part of a recent Corridor 8 and Yorkshire and Humber Visual Arts Network partnership project, entitled *Resilience is Futile*, Kerry Harker, in 'Seeing Beyond a "False Ecology" for Visual Arts in the North' describes how the "notion of 'ecology' conceals more than it reveals, especially the power dynamics and flows of actual money that structure the everyday realities of practitioners" (Harker 2019, p. 79). Quoting from Arts Council England

incommensurable when the motivation is not to subsume all types of cultural value within a system of economic value. Different ‘communities’ and their hidden labors, relationships, and supportive networks can be considered as dynamic parts of a cultural ecology constituted through hyper-local activity and actions. Further theoretical research is needed to consider these localized forms of cultural activity, or, as Kate Oakley explains in her critical literature review ‘Cultural Value and Inequality’ for the Cultural Value Project, “the relationship between place (of origin or residence) and cultural work” (Oakley 2015, p. 18).

In Section 8: ‘Applying Ecological Concepts to the Field of Culture,’ Holden identifies seven key terms, useful for ecological thinking: ‘Emergence,’ ‘growth,’ ‘complex interdependencies,’ ‘evolution,’ ‘webs and networks,’ ‘convergence,’ and ‘systemic fragility’. They are considered in the context of interviewee responses from commercial, public, homemade, academic, and education arenas, as well as cultural specialisms including visual arts, design, opera, music, theatre, heritage, fashion, museums and libraries, performing and creative arts, local authority arts, film, TV, and creative technologies.⁴ Holden articulates the interrelatedness of these terms:

For example, emergence is the precursor to growth; growth takes place within the context of complex interdependencies that develop through networks; and the evolution of the overall system is a function of the development of its parts. The system itself can, like a natural ecosystem, appear robust in some ways and fragile in others (theatre continues, even though individual companies come and go); and it can simultaneously become more complex, and yet convergent (technology enables new ways of creating images, while artists bring performance into the gallery). (Holden 2015, p. 18)

These interdependencies within an overall system describe the complex weave of entanglements in a play of relations. This is a model of a dynamic ecosystem where components are linked together through nutrient cycles and energy flows. The interactions between these parts rely upon the ways in which cultural activities are structured, distributed, received and sustained. No one component part can be described as independent of the state of the other parts within the ecosystem. In this respect, flows of activity are interactive. A robust component cannot be considered in isolation from the fragility of another component. As entanglements they share spatial proximities. As interdependencies they are part of the phenomena of a mixed ecology particularly within the context of place-based cultural development.

4. Place(-Based) Making

In their 2010 white paper for the National Endowment of the Arts (USA), Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa suggest:

Contemporary placemaking envisions a more decentralized portfolio of spaces acting as creative crucibles. In each, arts and culture exist cheek-by-jowl with private sector export and retail businesses and mixed-income housing, often occupying buildings and lots that had been vacant and under-used. (Markusen and Gadwa 2010, p. 3)

These placemaking activities form mixed ecologies that have wide reaching generative networks beyond the cultural hubs, clusters and districts familiar to urban regeneration and place-making

research (conducted in 2016), she notes that of the artists surveyed, “the average income *derived from art practice* in 2015 was just £6020 and two thirds earned less than £3000 from it” (ibid.). Her suggestion is to move away from engaging with ideas associated with ecology and instead refocus on ‘community’ in the way that artists value and understand it through: “Complex and diverse networks of friendship and care among peers, often hyper-localised, that nurture practice in an essential expression of lived realities and make it possible in the face of an often hostile art world” (ibid.).

⁴ In Section 8 of ‘The Ecology of Culture’ the following interviewee responses included: Jon Dovey and Clare Reddington (Watershed, Bristol), Caroline Norbury (Creative England), Paul Hughes (BBC Symphony Orchestra), Tarek Virani (Queens Mary College, London), Sebastian Conran (Sebastian Conran Associates), Jonathan Williams (British Museum), and Rebecca Salter (Visual artist and Royal Academician).

strategies in cultural development policies (Wood and Dovey 2015). The most recent and perhaps comprehensive review of placemaking in the field of arts and cultural ecologies can be found in the publications of Cara Courage. Both *Arts in Place: The Arts, the Urban and Social Practice* (2017) and *Creative Placemaking: Research, Theory and Practice* (edited with Anita McKeown) (2018) are insightful engagements with placemaking in urban environments, featuring a wide range of case studies and approaches, which carefully renegotiate the gap between cultural studies and placemaking. In this respect, Courage advocates for developing new thematic understandings of “social practice placemaking” which she defines as a necessary “agent in the reinterpretation of the urban realm” (Courage 2017, p. 173). As part of Courage’s research, she develops a placemaking typology to be used by academics and practitioners, stakeholders and the public realm. Furthermore, Courage and McKeown explain how:

The use of ecologies as metaphor and formal construct presents not only the need for an ecological systematic approach to actualise creative placemaking’s generative potential but references the need for dynamic practices that transcend the bi-polarities of top-down or bottom-up, a key discontent within the field, and which are necessary to devolve power, encourage self-organisation and agency and integrate citizens’ existing placemaking practices. (Courage and McKeown 2018)

For Courage and McKeown, ecology-as-metaphor helps to bridge the divide between different kinds of placemaking activity, whether from the top-down implementation of strategy as part of an urban regeneration project or as hyper-localized cultural activity. The generative potential of an ecology is productive in distributing agency and devolving power across actants. However, the question of who does and does not have power to ‘make place’ remains. The gulf formed between placemaking initiatives, and the values given to cultural working, either inside or outside strategic goals, is perhaps a mirror of the very choreography of ‘critique’ Elkins is keen to problematize. Value, the constitution of which makes judgement flow in certain directions, determines how a cultural ecology is not only generated and perceived, but also who can participate within it and in what ways.

However, place-based cultural development is fundamentally different to placemaking, as it does not necessarily lead with top-down tools to address localized issues around regeneration and/or community capacity. Instead, adopting a place-based approach to cultural development is about recognizing a place in terms of the complex activities within it to further understand how these assemblages are shaped out of existing infrastructures, policy demands, and community make-up. In this respect place-based cultural development aligns with Courage’s understanding of ‘social practice placemaking’ as well as being rooted in the historic developments of communities and industries established out of specific geographic locations, including the resources that may be to hand. In this respect, place-based culture is something that develops organically over time, from out of the communities and cultures of people who live within a place and who determine types of cultural functions and formations in a surrounding world. Given the specificity of context, ‘ecological thinking,’ as articulated in Holden’s terms, has the potential to enrich our understanding of place-based cultural development, including the apparatuses, mechanisms, and forms they currently produce. So, what other ecological concepts, beyond those described by Holden, might be deployed to expand this ecological thinking within the cultural milieu of place-based making?

5. Environing and Ecological Thinking

Rather than use ecological concepts to describe a set of existing conditions from within the ecosystem of culture, we are much more interested in developing conceptual formations which problematize and/or help to stage ways and means of articulating the entanglements within an ecology. Or, in returning to Elkins, to reconsider “the conditions under which critical judgements might be made” (Elkins 2008, p. 308). Therefore, we present the ecological metaphor of ‘environing’ as an important conceptual tool within the field of cultural critique; a tool which considers the processes

by which cultural activity impacts on existing environments/ecosystems through the mechanisms of assemblage/assembling. In other words, how might we work with the term ‘environing’ to explore the inter-environmental relations about which Holden speaks—flows of response, affect, action, and neglect within a mixed ecology?

As a conceptual formation ‘environing’ can be understood in a variety of different contexts. For example, Vin Nardizzi in *Veer Ecology: A Companion for Ecological Thinking* tracks the term ‘environ’ in different literary genres and texts in the sixteenth century, primarily in the writings of Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare, Sir Phillip Sidney, and Mary Sidney, countess of Pembroke. Nardizzi concludes that “acts of environing (and so the creation of environs and environments) can persist as hazardous enterprises for the human figures so environed” (Nardizzi 2017). These instances are primarily about acts of military encircling, as a siege tactic, or as a consequence of being encircled (environed). Other citations of the use of the term include the affliction of fiends who environ dreams, or the environed as an impact of sensory deprivation in the human subject. As examples, they are situated as ‘actions’ which establish environments, demarcate space, and impact the experiences of living beings.

In ‘Environing Technologies: a Theory of Making Environment’, Sverker Sörlin and Nina Wormbs discuss how ‘environing’ is a concept which is inextricably linked to technological processes, in the sense that technology provides the tools—writing, sensing, and shaping—by which humans impact nature to form environment. They write:

Technology is one of the central means through which humans exert their influence on the world. Environing, like technology, is formative both in the material and the immaterial domains. The environment is therefore not only the material world “out there” that human activities impact on. The environment is also increasingly a word to signify the knowledge-based representation of the material world in which humans and their actions are embedded. Hence, we suggest that environing consists of processes whereby environments appear as historical products, and technologies as the tools required for the environing to take place. (Sörlin and Wormbs 2018, p. 103)⁵

In this context, environing technologies are part of the ways and means through which the world is perceived and transformed. Environing is deliberately deployed here to differentiate from ‘environment’. For Sörlin and Wormbs, the material environment is in a state of constant flux and change, as humans are constantly engaged in environing activities and are thus producers as much as recipients of the world. However, ‘environing’ should not only be thought about as a human centric set of actions. There are ways to consider the term as an opening for receiving different viewpoints, perspectives, and relations between phenomena within a system. How are these eco-diversities represented within an ecology?

One example of ‘environing’ in the context of the life sciences (biology in particular) can be found in the work of Jakob Johann von Uexküll, whose consideration of biosemiotics and ecology influenced the ideas of Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, and Giorgio Agamben, among others. In *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans: Picture Book of Invisible Worlds*, first published in 1934, Uexküll works with the term *Umwelten* to articulate the ‘surrounding world’ (or ‘environment-world’) all living organisms negotiate through their unique modes of perception. His consideration of diverse worlds of entanglements between different life forms, including their ways of perceiving and acting upon the environments within which they are

⁵ We accept the term ‘technology’ as used by Sörlin and Wormbs in their article, where they state: “Rather, the environing technologies that we discuss here are better considered as aggregate technologies that can be loosely or tightly coupled, assemblages of technologies and practices,” p. 106. The term, whilst understanding advanced technological tools or methods, also includes the notion of technology as making, or crafting. The latter refers to the pre-modern (or pre-technological) notion of *technique*. Non Anglo-Saxon languages keep the two terms distinct, at least from a semantic point of view.

located, challenged the deterministic and objectivistic orthodoxies of the biological sciences, and introduced a conceptual space for the subjectivities of all life forms, interacting with and upon their perceptual life-worlds and dwelling perspectives.

At the beginning of the *Foray* Uexküll presents a scene of a meadow to articulate “a walk into unknown worlds” (p. 41):

We begin such a stroll on a sunny day before a flowering meadow in which insects buzz and butterflies flutter, and we make a bubble around each of the animals living in the meadow. The bubble represents each animal’s environment and contains all the features accessible to the subject. As soon as we enter into one such bubble, the previous surroundings of the subject are completely reconfigured. Many qualities of the colorful meadow vanish completely, others lose their coherence with one another, and new connections are created. A new world arises in each bubble. (Von Uexküll 2010, p. 43)

The bubble serves as a metaphor to articulate invisible worlds and the horizons of these worlds. The meaning-making capacity of these different perceptual relations is part of the environing activity of all organisms. So, rather than the environment being that which surrounds, it is rather a dynamic process of agencies intermingling within *surrounding* processes which reproduce and transform the ecology of a lifeworld. According to Sara Asu Schroer in ‘Jakob von Uexküll: The Concept of *Umwelt* and its Potentials for an Anthropology Beyond the Human’ (2019), whilst “living creatures appear here as captivated by their physiological structures and corresponding *Umwelten* that—whilst existing within an interconnected web of life—are closed off from each other” (p. 3), Uexküll was also keen to explore the interconnectedness of organisms as a ‘harmony of nature;’ a musical analogy which articulates the comingling of all lifeforms in a world. Schroer writes:

[...] this musical motif [...] helps us to understand his conception of *Umwelten* as interconnected in a broader web or resonance of relations in which one organism and its corresponding *Umwelt* cannot be understood without reference to another. A spider cannot be understood without her net, the net in return also mirrors aspects of her prey, the fly, and so forth. The subject in Uexküll’s theoretical reflections is therefore never alone or isolated but can only ever be grasped in connection with other things and living beings in its world. (Schroer 2019, p. 9)

This description of an ecology, whilst analogous to Holden’s consideration of the ‘complex interdependencies’ within an ecosystem, also opens itself out to the entanglements and shifting perspectives within a play of relations.

For the social and cultural anthropologist Tim Ingold in *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (2000), an ecology of life is not a disassociation of the ecology of mind from the “ecology of energy flows and material exchanges” (p. 19). Taking influence from Bateson (1972) text *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution and Epistemology*⁶ Ingold considers an ecological approach which takes “as its point of departure, the whole-organism-in-its-environment” (p. 19). In other words, the organism and the environment are not separate entities but are part of the comingling of relations, out of which life-processes emerge. This way of thinking about the intertwining relations between organism and environment challenges the idea of ‘environment’ as something out there disconnected from the life forms that give shape to it. In this context, environing is neither that which surrounds nor is the surrounding world of the organism, but rather, the play of intermingling relations between different “hives of activity” (Ingold 2011, p. 29). This extends to the conditions of possibility for experience-dependent formations; to the orientations, attitudes, and intuitions at work in the dwellings of different life-worlds.

⁶ This text features metalogues with Bateson’s daughter Mary Catherine Bateson, anthropological writings and essays on a range of topics, including new epistemologies emerging out of engagements with systems theory and ecology.

Ingold's articulation of the 'taskscape' is useful here for our consideration of how a cultural ecology, rather than being seen as an adaptive set of responses to existing environments as systems of dynamic functioning, is instead, bound up with a perpetual processing of activities where inhabitants—both human and nonhuman—play a role in constructing a given landscape. Landscape is part of the envining activity of the interface between organism and environment. Ingold explains:

Whereas both the landscape and the taskscape presuppose the presence of an agent who watches and listens, the taskscape must be populated with beings who are themselves agents, and who reciprocally "act back" in the process of their own dwelling. In other words, the taskscape exists not just as activity but *interactivity*. (Ingold 2000, p. 199)

All of these instances of envining describe place-based making activity—whether through direct action in the attempt to demarcate, capture, and enclose space, or to welcome in complexity and diverse entanglements between different viewpoints and methods of approach (the de-colonization of the environ). The 'act of envining' assembles in particular ways. There may be instances of place-based making where established networks and systems of power are renegotiated through cultural production; a critical leveraging of the entanglements of forces to shift the modes and means of representation, or indeed, in the formation of an envining critical practice which engages with the environments within which we find ourselves; to environ in, with and through the assemblages of lifeworlds.

By way of some examples, the remainder of this article will consider how these modes of envining manifest new spaces of cultural critique for place-based making and with what kinds of value. These examples are thought experiments for cultural critique. They refer to varied phenomena and offer up differing perspectives. In this respect, they are not examples which collectively homogenize 'envining' as a conceptual formation, but rather, recognize difference in the specificity of the contexts within and out of which cultural phenomena emerges. This is the focal point for cultural critique and the variant materialisms we seek to read and analyze.

6. Example 1: The Envining of Public Assembly: MACAO and the Galfa Tower in Milan, Italy

In May 2012, activists of a self-constituted cultural movement called The Art Workers ('Lavoratori dell'Arte') occupied a very renowned high-rise building in town, called the Torre Galfa (The Art-Workers 2011). A symbol of Italian Modern architecture, the building had been vacant for many years. At the time, the building belonged to a rich and unscrupulous entrepreneur, Mr. Ligresti, who based his fortune on real estate developments in Milan. Once in the building, the activists organized cultural activities such as concerts, art, poetry, and theatre performances, but also workshops, training events, group discussions, and public assemblies.

By occupying a vacant space in the city, "this artist-led movement has been able to stand opposed to globally oriented political choices, acting as a symbol of community values and local resistance" (Delsante and Bertolino 2017). However, the protest aim was two-fold (Braga 2017): On the one hand, they reacted against the logic of capital accumulation and real estate development; on the other hand, they wanted to have a voice and claim spaces (for free) for art production in the world capital of design. The movement, later on renamed MACAO, wanted to raise concerns about the ways in which creative work, and jobs, are valued not only in the city itself, but also globally. So, the action of occupying a building opened up a conversation (with the City Council) on how to make better use of vacant or underused buildings, for example, by accommodating spatial and social needs not yet emerged (Valli 2015). Activists claimed that "MACAO was not simply a space," putting the emphasis on participants and their collective aspirations.

This act of public assembly by an arts-led initiative presents envining as a spacing for occupation and critique. To reshape the environment of the Galfa Tower with cultural activity (its previous function servicing the headquarters of the Popolare di Milano bank) generated by localized and politicized motivations, utilized the tools of cultural critique through direct action—the envining which, through

re-appropriation and re-use, helped to advocate for change in urban policy-making. MACAO was evicted from the Galfa Tower after a few days. An itinerant phase was followed by another occupation: An art nouveau building that had previously served as a slaughterhouse exchange building within the broad complex of Milan's municipal market. Since 2012, the space is hosting all sorts of creative and cultural events, including concerts, art performances, workshops, cinema d'essay, and so on (D'Ovidio and Cossu 2016). In light of the specific governance agreed by its members, it shows the potential to become an urban common (Delsante and Bertolino 2017).

Understanding this, and the implicit power relations at work in its choreography, is key to MACAO's experience. On the one hand, it aimed at having a unique voice towards political actors and institutional stakeholders. Their manifesto, for example, was agreed among members and then spread out through the website (MACAO 2015). Public gatherings and events were organized to better communicate their agenda: In 2017 they advocated to collectively buy the building in an open air assembly held at Parco Sempione. Internal decisions are managed via an assembly and through consensus. The assembly is open to everyone and runs every Tuesday evening. Events can be proposed by both internal and external actors. MACAO members can decide whether to actively contribute or facilitate initiatives. If consensus is reached on a proposal voted by the assembly, then resources are shared (including activists' time, physical and digital infrastructures) and income redistributed both internally and externally. Monetary value is exchanged via cryptocurrencies (Braga 2017). By setting up such an articulated governance, MACAO wants to manage power dynamics in the most transparent and horizontal way. The relationship with other local actors proved to be difficult from time to time (Delsante and Bertolino 2018), however, MACAO clearly stated its agenda was aiming at tackling city wide issues.

We recognize the cultural specificities involved in this example in the context of the infrastructural policy conditions of Milan, Italy. To unfold MACAO's agency in terms of envioning, Sörlin and Wormbs (2018) three diverse envioning technologies—shaping, sensing, and writing—are analogous to how we think MACAO's actions were played out within their wider strategy. Their occupation and re-use of vacant buildings is part of the agency of shaping. By cleaning, refurbishing and making vacant spaces livable again, MACAO used bottom-up and collective actions. This envioning activity was the very spacing of critique needed to create conditions of possibility for public assembly. MACAO's envioning strategy, coupled with agencies of sensing and writing, also occupied different points in time. For example, during the itinerant phase of their protest MACAO activists walked and sensed the city by re-appropriating unusual or forgotten spaces in Milan for artistic purposes (Delsante and Bertolino 2017). These were not accidentally chosen but emerged as part of a collective gathering (including open air and informal assemblies) and in the collation of information. By sensing various places in town, MACAO practically contributed to the envioning of open spaces in offering a new geography of creative production. We also recognize how MACAO's agency of envioning unfolds via writing. The public assemblies held in the slaughterhouse building since 2012 allowed activists to raise an alternative voice in Milan, published through their on-line Manifesto (2015) and in formal proposals to political parties. By unfolding their proposals via policies, which were partially put into action on a daily basis, MACAO allowed envioning practices and creative co-production to continuously emerge as forms of consciousness raising critique. The occupation of space generated an ecology of shared values that collectively communicated from the ground up, a cultural milieu created by actors in a network of distributed power.

7. Example 2: Creative Ecologies—T J Demos and Environmental Matters of Concern

To take ecological thinking into the space of environmental concerns is part of the research center initiatives of Creative Ecologies, UC Santa Cruz, founded by T J Demos in 2015. Its initial aims were to focus on the intersections between visual culture, politics, and the environment, to “develop useful interdisciplinary research tools to examine how cultural practitioners—artists, filmmakers, new media strategists, photojournalists, architects, writers, activists and interdisciplinary theorists—critically

address and creatively negotiate environmental concerns in the local, regional, and global field” (Center for Creative Ecologies 2015). Projects evolving out of this center include artists’ aesthetic and political engagements within environmental conditions and processes across the globe. In his introductory text to a special issue of *Third Text* on the intersections of art-criticism, politico-ecological theory, environmental activism, and postcolonial globalization in the eco-aesthetics of different geopolitical areas, Demos defines political ecology in relation to not only “competing approaches to the environment, agency and social composition” but also the shared “common ground of a scientific-cultural interdisciplinarity and a philosophical criticality, which, when brought together with contemporary art, indicates an eco-aesthetic rethinking of politics as much as a politicization of art’s relation to the biosphere and of nature’s inextricable links to the human world of economics, technology, culture and law” (Demos 2013, p. 2).

Examples of eco-aesthetic thinking in the context of contemporary art include projects which have sought to de-colonize nature by reconfiguring the dominant values of systems of power and inequality, particularly those that subordinate “human and nonhuman difference to appropriation, value extraction, bringing terrible forms of forced labor and slavery, exploitation and economic inequality, which continue under various names in our present” (Demos 2017, p. 20). In other words, ecological thinking for climate change is also a necessary eco-aesthetic thinking where life forms, as governed by the management of biophysical systems and environmental control, are inextricably bound to the social inequalities produced within these systems. Life forms and lived experience are not outside of these structures but shaped by them. As Demos explains, when we consider ‘climate’ and ‘environment’ we must attend to “ecological discourse as a system of representations at the intersection of power and knowledge” (Demos 2009, p. 18).

For example, Ursula Biemann and Paulo Tavares’ *Forest Law* (2014), a collaboration with the Institute of the Arts and Sciences, Mary Porter Sesnon Art Gallery, and the Center for Creative Ecologies, is a video essay which considers extraction practices and local indigenous resistance to the felling of forests in the Ecuadorian Amazon. The accompanying book *Forest Law/Selva Juridica: On the Cosmopolitics of Amazonia*, features the envioning of a decolonizing assembly through its presentation of the historical, political, and ecological dimensions of the legal battles over the ownership of land and the multinational corporations that are extracting natural resources in the area. In the introduction to the book, Biemann and Tavares write:

The project emerges from dialogues—between us and our practices, the camera and the forest, and most importantly, ourselves and the many people whom we encountered while traveling through Amazonia in November 2013. Transcripts and stills from video interviews, along with photographs taken in the field, are joined in this book by archival materials, legal documents, and cartographic analysis, reassembled into a complex mosaic-landscape that integrates multiple perspectives and works across different temporal and spatial scales. Speculative, essayistic, and informed by multiple disciplines, this composition attempts to forge ties that bridge, disrupt and slip through the partitions that define our systems of knowledge and the modes by which we perceive, represent, and relate to the world of which we are part. (Biemann and Tavares 2015, pp. 7–8)

This account is an important eco-aesthetic strategy for critically negotiating current ecological emergencies. These creative practices consider the interdependencies between human and non-human relations within an ecosystem, thus bringing into sharp focus the fragilities and vulnerabilities of an ecology. Such an approach is representative of the decolonizing methodologies Demos suggests we need to create to give voice to and “strengthen the basis of ethico-political solidarity around ecological concerns” (Demos 2016, p. 23). In this respect, our consideration of envioning extends to decolonizing methodologies; to the ways in which eco-aesthetic acts allow for differing perspectives to emerge. Much like Uexküll’s *Umwelten* this is part of a dynamic process of agencies intermingling within a surrounding world to transform the ecology of a lifeworld.

8. Example 3: Cultural Education

In May 2018, the artist Jeremy Deller entered an inter-city school in London to work with A-Level students on the emergence of rave and acid house music culture in Britain. In the final documentary *Everybody in the Place: An Incomplete History of Britain 1984–1992* (Deller 2018), which was first screened at Frieze in July 2018 and aired on the BBC in August 2019, Deller uses the tools of cultural critique to weave a set of contexts together—economic, political, historical, and aesthetic. These contexts provide the ground for thinking through the rise of counter cultural modes of expression, mobilization, and sometimes hegemonic assimilations into mainstream culture. As part of a Frieze and Gucci collaboration entitled *Second Summer of Love* this video project sought to investigate the impact and explosion of electronic music and youth culture in the decade of the 1980s and early 1990s. Artists were commissioned to develop films in response to the manifestation of music and dance culture in nightclubs across the UK and abroad. The artists selected to direct these documentaries included Wu Tsang (New York house), Josh Blaaber (Italo disco), Jenn Nkiru (Detroit and Berlin techno), and Jeremy Deller (acid house).

In *Spaces of Democracy: Geographical Perspectives of Citizenship, Participation and Representation* (2004), Clive Barnett and Murray Low discuss how dance culture became a movement of ‘direct action’ where the repurposing of place, by reclaiming abandoned warehouses for music and dance venues, was built into the infrastructure of cultural democracy and its assemblage formations (fluidity, movement, indeterminacy, and egalitarianism). They write:

In Britain in the late 1980s and early 1990s, dance music and dance culture (or ‘house’), and in particular, the free party movement, provided an entirely different cultural space, one which had to be fought for, but one which represented a new form of sociality and which was, arguably, also a democratic space. House parties consisting of thousands of people, taking place in different locations, were coordinated covertly with no institutional framework or clear leaders. (Barnett and Low 2004, p. 216)

In order for Deller to address the motivations behind these emergent cultural forms and as meaning-making practices, he works with theoretical frameworks derived from critical theory and cultural studies analysis. This is an example of cultural critique being performed by an artist in an educational context. On the one hand, cultural critique is associated with the interpretation of everyday culture in terms of its representations (the formations that generate meaning-making activity). Deller’s analysis of archival material (through video footage, photographs, flyers, and the music itself) as evidence of differing modes of cultural expression allows him to speculate on how and why these acts of formation may have emerged. On the other hand, cultural critique is used to analyze and explain the material forces of everyday life in and through the abstract structures of a totality (the cultural ecosystem for example). Deller’s speculations extend to the wider economic, political, and geographic contexts of the time, to consider in particular, how an era of austerity, de-industrialization, and the rise of neo-liberal forces, contributed to the production of different counter-formations in the free party movement, including the occupancy of vacant spaces, such as warehouses, mills, and factories. Deller’s documentary shows how this transformation was generated out of disenfranchised communities whose attachments to ‘place’ were undone by the dismantling of the mining industry under conservative rule in the 1980s. This detachment produced new modes of cultural expression and engagement with place. A deeper understanding of how these larger systems and structures of power are embedded within the concreteness of experience generates a space for the emergence of a critical awareness of *how* cultural experiences are situated and positioned in, with, and by certain systems at specific points in historical time. In this respect, critical consciousness recognizes that abstract forces do indeed exist within an entangled milieu of relations. Without this critical awareness, the specificities of ‘lived experience’ are denied agency as tools to actively transform minds and mind-sets.

It is with Deller’s consideration of the rural countryside, including its deep Pagan past, ancient religious monuments, and complex tensions, that a different approach to environing emerges. When we

think about place-based making in this context, as a distinct mode of critical awareness of the conditions under which certain groupings are envired, our consciousness of the very entanglements of activity burst the bubbles of human experience. For example, in some of the 1980s archival footage shown, we witness a scene of angry local residents vocalizing their views on the court order edict issued at Salisbury Magistrates Court towards travelers who were denied access to Stonehenge as part of a summer solstice pilgrimage. Mixed views manifest: Some voices recognize a social injustice at work, a denial of freedom of speech, whilst others express their frustrations towards nomadic lifestyles 'living off the state'. The rural landscape of the countryside is transformed by those on the fringes—hunt saboteurs, road protestors, the women of Greenham Common—all challenging the established visual and historical forms of national identity and class distinctions. As Deller explains, the techno sound systems that joined the traveler's movement helped to generate a politicized environment. Spiral Tribe (SP23) was a free party sound system, from West London, who were actively involved. The Castlemorton Common Festival (22–29 May 1992) in Malvern, Worcestershire, triggered the development of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act of 1994; a legislation that restricts outdoor music parties, defined in Section 63 (1) (b), as that which incorporates "sounds wholly or predominantly characterised by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats" ([Criminal Justice and Public Order Act c.33 1994](#)).

When we consider this scene, with reference to Ingold, 'landscape' as distinct from 'environment' provides a different entry into the envining field of relations. In Chapter Eleven of *The Perception of the Environment* (2000), entitled 'The Temporality of the Landscape', Ingold works with Bruegel's *The Harvesters* (1565) to consider the taskscape as that which is in perpetual process. This painting of the Netherlands depicts a landscape of hills and a valley, where the movement of people is marked out by paths and tracks, signifying patterns of activity; inscriptions of arrivals and departures, the placeholder of a tree marking out moments for gathering in concert with temporal rhythms and cycles of growth. Production and consumption are laid out in the activity of binding wheat into sheaf; a continuous process signifying the culture of dwelling in a place. In the distance stands a stone church, the "unfolding of a total system of relations with its human buildings, as well as with other components of its environment, from the moment when the first stone was laid" ([Ingold 2000](#), p. 206). Finally, the painting shows how people appear to inhabit "an exclusively *human* world of meanings and intentions, of beliefs and values" ([Ingold 2000](#), p. 207) which cannot be seen from outside the surroundings. The forms of the landscape are always in movement as part of a "polyrhythmic composition of processes whose pulse varies from the erratic flutter of leaves to the measured drift and clash of tectonic plates" ([Reason 1987](#), p. 40). This scene of 'envining' articulates the temporality of the landscape and the totality of the organism-environment.

To consider the temporal rhythms at work in and through the archival imagery of Castlemorton Common Festival, as a distinct place-based making activity, requires that we consider this cultural event as a kind of 'polyphonic' moment of assemblage, where harmony and dissonance were created together randomly through unintended acts of coordination and divergence. Blurry YouTube archival footage allows us to witness movements of people trekking through fields, climbing hills, erecting tents and campsites, marking out lines through a landscape. Bodies in rhythm foregrounded against the iconographic background logo of Spiral Tribe. We see a gathering of thousands; a dwelling place being set up and relations distributed through it. This envining activity is a process of sociality which generates new cultural formations. In *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (2015), Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing writes:

Assemblages don't just gather lifeways; they make them. Thinking through assemblage urges us to ask: How do gatherings sometimes become "happenings," that is, greater than the sum of their parts? If history without progress is indeterminate and multidirectional, might assemblages show us its possibilities? ([Tsing 2015](#), p. 23)

Perhaps the gulf between concrete and abstract value determinants (between the particular and the general, or indeed, between those that issue acts of judgment and those that speculate on the place for conditions of possibility for criticality to emerge) keeps cultural critique at bay in the spheres and

networks of a cultural ecology. Acts of environing, as we have been showing through our examples, are necessary assemblages of differing value-formations. We are no longer situated in a context where there is a clear divide between ‘this’ and ‘that’, but rather part of an entanglement that requires an environing approach to critical consciousness for our times. Perhaps place-based making of and for these formations is part of the process of cultural critique.

9. Example 4: *Temporary Contemporary* and Concluding Observations

This final example serves to situate our intentions for using the term ‘environing’ as a conceptual tool for thinking about the pairing of ‘cultural ecology’ and ‘cultural critique’. The previous three examples have considered how environing is at work in different contexts. With the first example we explored how environing technologies are present in the activities of MACAO. These include shaping, sensing, and writing as specific strategies deployed in the occupation and re-use of vacant buildings. We argued that with this distinct occupation of space, environing helped to generate an ecology of shared values by actors in a network of distributed power. In the second example we considered how environing may be part of the decolonizing methodologies (in Demos’ sense) embedded in creative ecologies. By exposing the interdependencies and vulnerabilities between human and non-human relations within an ecosystem, we discussed how an eco-aesthetic strategy critically negotiates ecological contexts, through representational acts which redistribute knowledge and power relations. Environing in this context gives visibility to the decolonizing assembly of voices within an eco-aesthetic strategy. Our final example addressed environing in the context of place-based making, with reference to Deller’s account of the free party movement and the rise of dance culture in the 1980s and 1990s. We considered environing as part of the practices of cultural critique, as shown through Deller’s practice of analyzing the cultural forms of this historical moment in an educational context. In turn, we extended this reading into the ‘taskcape’ of Ingold’s thinking, by arguing how, for example, Breugal’s painting *The Harvesters* compares with the place-based making activity of travelers at the Castlemorton Common Festival, or indeed, of dance culture and its occupancy of vacant buildings. Here, we argued that the redistribution of power manifests in environing acts of reading cultural forms of the past, to further speculate on the meaning-making activities of these forms, including their resistances to dominant economic, political, social, and aesthetic values within a given ecosystem in favor of an emergent, generative, spontaneous, and entangled ecology of relations.

Our concluding example is situated within a local and live context for us as researchers. In 2018, *Temporary Contemporary* was launched inside Huddersfield Indoor Market; a grade II listed building in the center of Huddersfield town. The project began as a piece of live action research, in partnership with the School of Art, Design and Architecture at the University of Huddersfield and the Creative Development team at Kirklees Council, both located in Huddersfield, West Yorkshire. The project’s mission is to provide a platform for original and inspirational exhibitions, performances, and research and to begin a conversation on the possibility and potential of cultural activity within the context of a failing high street and a declining market. For Kirklees Council, *Temporary Contemporary* was an opportunity to stimulate arts and visual culture activities in vacant spaces. Contributions to the first year of programming (the academic year 2018–2019), included the work of university lecturers, artists, local artisan producers, musicians, students, and members of the general public. Beneath the mushroom columns of the market’s modern architecture, the initiative functions as a cultural hub and test bed for collaboration and situated curatorial practice. It operates as a catalyst for culture in Huddersfield, by prompting conversations about place-based cultural development, public engagement, and mixed ecologies of culture. Our shared interest and commitment to working beyond the limits of our respective institutions, as researchers, academics, civil servants, and members of local and regional communities (artistic and otherwise), grows out of our interest in culture—how it is made, received, argued about, and situated in place-based making activities. Our collaboration, which extends to anyone involved in *Temporary Contemporary*, is a mixed ecology. Some of us live locally, in places like Mirfield, have grown up in the area in villages, such as Holmfirth, commute from cities like

Leeds, or countries like Italy. We are a live environment: Our activity is subject to time pressures, continuous change, and managing the expectations and demands of different stake-holder interests. In this respect, our purpose for writing about 'cultural ecology' and 'cultural critique' has evolved out of the lessons we are continuously learning in and through our partnership, including how we might better critically negotiate our localized approach to culture and cultural activity in and through discourses, knowledges, and practices of cultural production and cultural experience.

This extends to a consideration of the ways in which creativity and the so-called creative class may contribute to urban regeneration processes which have cultural production embedded within them (Canniffe 2017). For example, the urban studies theorist Florida (2002) defined the 'creative class' as composed of "people [who] engage in creative problem solving, drawing on complex bodies of knowledge to solve specific problems" (2004, p. 69), whereas Charles Landry, author of *The Creative City: A Toolkit for Urban Innovators* (Landry 2000) emphasized the significant role of art-based projects that may be delivered by individuals as well as organizations or public bodies. The critique of the notion of the creative city (or town in our context) can be organized around three main concepts (Delsante 2017; Pratt 2008; Marcuse 2003): The relation to processes of urban development and transformation; the role of culture and how it is embedded into the process of transformation; and how it is assessed more generally in relation to the outcomes of a creative city(town)-making process. In the context of urban development, part of the criticism relates to the fact that the concept of the creative city is usually interpreted as an "all-purpose fix-it tool" (Pratt 2015). Miles (2013) criticizes the simplistic assumption that 'public good and private interest' align. Most urban transformations are based on a 'narrow repertoire' of strategies and 'recurrent themes' that put them on the trajectory of being quickly 'routinized' (Peck 2005, p. 752). Peck (2005), among others, sees it as a framework used to support neo-liberal practices and real estate development. According to this position, culture is instrumental to broader processes which are not challenged or put into question. Moreover, the focus may well be directed towards the consumption of culture rather than on its production, and on cultural industries rather than on people. Cities and towns, on the contrary, should be seen as places for genuine cultural exchange (Pratt 2015).

This is where place-based cultural development approaches have the potential to facilitate cultural critique within a cultural ecology. As a local authority, Kirklees Council has adopted a place-based approach that has filtered through its services, from community hubs, place-based citizen engagement, and a place-based cultural development methodology. For example, in the regional context of Kirklees (Yorkshire, UK), the soft Pennine water and location historically led to the growth of the textiles industry, to which the area is still known today. These geographical and industry foundations certainly inform the types of creativity and expression produced in craft, design, innovation, and art. Kirklees Council recognizes textiles and music as key priorities, based on the creative expression of existing communities, economies, and people, and is built on the various scales of enviroing across a district of towns and villages, both rural and urban. Working closely with the University of Huddersfield in drawing on research from a variety of different disciplinary perspectives, new forms of cultural activity and engagement have evolved out of collaboration with a variety of stake-holder positions. In the context of visual culture, however, the priority is less determined as its value is still in-formation within this cultural ecology. This does not mean it does not have significance, but rather, that its forms are less tangible and visible. This provides space for negotiating the mechanisms of a cultural development methodology particularly in relation to new formations of value within an emerging cultural infrastructure. Therefore, visual culture is vital when we consider the enviroing of spaces within the locality, with the capacity and capability to act as an alternative lens and set of differing viewpoints. With this comes the necessary spacing for critique and discussion on the wider regeneration of Huddersfield town.

From this relationship, we can see how the *Temporary Contemporary* initiative, borne out of the collaboration of two large institutions, has led to a change in mind-set about space and the built environment in Huddersfield. Not only has the perception of the indoor market shifted from being

seen as a building in a managed decline to now a building with potential, it is also being identified as a site for cultural activity in the future of the town through its new master plan, The Blueprint. Further to this, a greater understanding of how such active creative spaces can contribute to wider place-based making has led to an approach whereby Local Authority owned units are being let out to artist groups and organizations on a temporary and meanwhile use. The critique of cultural policy and approach through visual culture based on our live action research and curated activity, has provided a safe space to explore ideas around transient places and acts of environing. The impact of this work has manifested itself in Local Authority cultural policy, requiring several departments to consider how vacant spaces are containers for multiple values, not just economic. The council's support for such initiatives is both a financial commitment in providing temporary rent-free spaces and in-kind support. There is recognition that cultural activities do not necessarily have to lead to economic return. There is a greater value at work in the development of a cultural ecology for communities and networks to emerge and deliver on the ambitions of the cultural heart of the town.

Of course, all of this includes thoughtful actions, where mixed ecologies of cultural activity can work to produce new assemblages of distributed power and meaning making. This is why we have sought to engage with the cultural policy contexts within which our action research is situated and of course implicated. Our focus has been to identify how cultural critique is an important tool in the live environments and ecologies of place-based making. This extends to the ways in which discourses, generated from place studies to eco-regionalisms, urban to art criticisms, might be brought into an environing assemblage of ideas. Such an approach allows us to consider ecological thinking as a new mode of cultural critique for our times, and by extension, further expand on how environing activities can facilitate "the conditions under which critical judgements might be made" (Elkins 2008, p. 308). In this respect, we may need to keep asking what conceptual formations we should create to better leverage the situated knowledges around us, to in turn, better inform arts and cultural policy change. The examples presented in this paper are part of this critical negotiation with differing perspectives in the formations of a mixed cultural ecology.

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